

Educational Policies that Address Social Inequality

United Kingdom case study report 4 Widening Participation in Higher Education Initiative

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Widening Participation in Higher Education Initiative

Rationale and Aims

The Widening Participation (WP) in Higher Education initiative relates both to the social justice and economic agenda of the Government. In terms of social justice, the under-representation of 'poorer social groups' has been identified as an issue: while these groups comprise about 50 percent of the UK workforce, they represent only 30 percent of the student population in Higher Education (Kemp, 2007). The business case for WP suggests that the level of qualifications of the UK workforce needs to be increased if the UK wants to remain competitive in a global economy.

The ambition of the Government is to increase the proportion of students age 18-30 going into Higher Education to 50 percent and to widen the participation of those from groups which have been until now under-represented (mainly students from a working-class background as well as disabled students and students from some minority groups).

Description, Implementation and Financial aspects

This initiative started in 1999, with the introduction by Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) of a mainstream WP allocation at the time. The action is mainly organised by HEFCE, which funds the AimHigher programme and make financial payments to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). HEIs take a key lead in its implementation and Action on Access is the national coordination team for widening participation in higher education.

According to the HEFCE review (2006), funding for WP is shared between three different financial streams: widening access, improved retention and improving support for disabled students. In 2005-06, HEFCE allocated £51 million to HEIs for widening access, with an additional £102 million allocated to Aimhigher partnerships by HEFCE and the DfES. WP funding includes the £12 million distributed to higher education providers in 2005-06 to meet the needs of disabled students, and £221 million for improving retention. This represents a total of £386 million (HEFCE, *ibid.*). According to this report, a further £40 million will be provided to support widening access for part-time learners and an additional £12 million will be allocated for improving retention of full-time students from 2006-07.

More recently, the Government reaffirmed that widening participation was high on the political agenda by announcing a number of (controversial) measures in the 2003 Higher Education White Paper. These include changes in and extended support to students (upfront fees replaced by income contingent loans, changes in the rules allocating grants and bursaries-possibly the most controversial measures as it was associated with the introduction of the so called top up fees, largely expected to have negative effects in terms of widening participation), improvement of application and admission processes to cope with a wider mix of qualifications and backgrounds, as well as a number of interventions focusing on 14-19 education, employers, the transition from vocational to Higher education, etc. Some of these actions have taken place under the flagship of the Aim Higher initiative. Both 14-19 year olds and older students are targeted through these sets of specific but various activities.

Evaluations, Outcomes and Recommendations

Some policies have been extensively evaluated, such as 'Aim Higher'. In its review (2006), HEFCE mentions a survey of HEIs in relation to their Widening Participation agenda which found out that most HEIs have a WP strategy. Among the minority which did not, some thought they did not need one as their WP strategy was embedded in the overall university strategy.

However, it is not always clear how efficient these strategies are and how the more under-represented groups are actually the ones targeted by these initiatives: '[while] there is evidence of real progress in embedding WP as part of the core mission of all higher education institutions (HEIs) and that this commitment should be carefully reinforced and nurtured... There are lessons about the way WP activity is organised and delivered and, in particular, how it is targeted' (3). The HEFCE report also expresses some concerns about the apparent stalling in widening participation.

Researchers have criticised the ambiguity and contradiction of the government's widening participation initiative, which on the one hand introduces measures aiming to facilitate the access of students from under-represented groups to Higher Education, and on the other hand introduces factors likely to have contrary effects (such as the top-up fees, the introduction of which sparked a row between the Government and students' and academic unions). Some research has also criticised the theoretical foundations behind the WP policies. Mainly, these have been criticised for drawing on a deficit model, in which some groups are constructed as 'lacking' aspirations (Archer *et al.* 2003). The barriers to participation would have been conceptualised in a simplistic way, without taking into account issues at a more discursive level (Kemp 2007).

The authors of the HEFCE report (2006) highlight that a sustained effort over the long term is even more important than the level of funding to widen participation. It also emphasises that the commitment of HEIs to WP, the embedding of WP in the culture, missions and management should remain a high priority objective. WP practice for Aimhigher and HEIs should also be developed to 'move away from discrete interventions to sustained, planned, predictable and integrated contributions to work with the wider learning community' (82).

References

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