

Widening participation in higher education: an examination of the factors influencing institutional policy

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This article examines the factors influencing the development of widening participation policy in 16 higher education institutions (HEIs). It utilises documentary research, followed by interviews with key policy makers in three of the institutions: an ‘old’ university, a ‘new’ university and a college of higher education. The paper demonstrates that HEIs have some agency, but this is bounded by the need to take account of the external environment within which they operate. The article argues against overly simplistic assumptions about the rationale underpinning HEI policy on widening participation. Instead it contends that policy develops out of a complex combination of economic and political influences, mediated by the organisational culture of HEIs. As such, both agency and structure influence the policy-making process. The paper discusses the complexities involved in the development of HEI policy on widening participation. It also highlights some of the problems involved in disentangling institutional rhetoric or ‘spin’ from the values that actually underpin institutional policy. The paper concludes by arguing for more institutional autonomy in the determination of widening participation policy.

Introduction

The desire to widen participation in higher education, particularly amongst students from lower socio-economic groups (SEGs), remains an important policy objective for the current Labour Government (Blanden & Machin, 2004). This is reflected in the Government’s recent white paper, ‘The Future of Higher Education’ which states:

Education must be a force for opportunity and social justice, not for the entrenchment of privilege. We must make certain that the opportunities that higher education brings are available to all those who have the potential to benefit from them, regardless of their background. This is not just about preventing active discrimination; it is about working

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actively to make sure that potential is recognised and fostered wherever it is found (DfES, 2003, p. 67).

Since their election in 1997 the Labour Government, in conjunction with the Higher Education Funding Councils, have developed more sophisticated widening participation policies that influence all stages of the student life cycle and not just the early stages, e.g. admissions and aspiration raising (see for example HEFCE, 2001a). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are encouraged to introduce strategies to widening participation mainly through funding, but also through political pressure. This paper examines how HEIs are responding to government policy to increase participation amongst those from lower social classes. The paper is not concerned with the operational effectiveness or nature of institutional widening participation policy, but will focus on the factors influencing the formulation of policy.

Research methodology

It is necessary to set boundaries around research in order to make it manageable. This study, therefore, concentrates on English universities and colleges of higher education. In order to provide anonymity institutions are identified by numbers (1–16) and people are referred to by their job title. In addition, the gender of those interviewed is not provided and details about institutions and individuals are kept to a minimum. This approach may of course jeopardise the ability of other researchers to compare their research with this study (Schofield, 1993; Robinson & Norris, 2001). However, the need to hide the identity of HEIs, and the individuals within these institutions, takes precedence over the requirement to provide detailed information.

The research involved three stages. First, an initial examination of the widening participation policies of 16 HEIs was undertaken. This part of the research utilised documentary research and included an examination of institutional documents such as mission statements, strategic plans, corporate planning statements and widening participation strategies. The second stage of the research again relied upon documentary evidence, but it involved a more detailed analysis of the widening participation policies of six HEIs. In the final stage of the research, interviews with key policy makers in three HEIs were undertaken. The interviews were with senior managers (e.g. Vice-chancellors, Principals and Pro-vice-chancellors) and middle managers (e.g. Heads of Widening Participation, Student Services and Careers).

The interviews provided information on the rationale behind policy. Furthermore, they allowed the content of documents to be discussed in more detail, especially where the person being interviewed was involved in the writing of documents. The interviews also enabled the views of different policy makers within an HEI to be compared. This approach might be seen as a form of triangulation with different sources of data being used to determine 'the truth' (Silverman, 2001). Yet from the interpretivist position adopted in this research, triangulation is more accurately conceived as a means of obtaining different perspectives (*ibid.*).

The interviews were taped which enabled direct quotations to be used in the writing up of this research. There is a difference between the spoken and written word and transferring the former to the latter sometimes makes the meaning less clear. Nevertheless, words have been written down in the way they were spoken because to do otherwise would misrepresent those being interviewed and may inadvertently change their meaning. When necessary, parentheses have, however, been used to include non-spoken words to help clarify what was said. Also, capitals have been used to represent emphasis in terms of volume or pitch.

Stake (1995, p. 4) makes the point that case study research is ‘not sampling research’. He also argues that the most important criteria for the choice of cases should be that they represent the best opportunity for developing an understanding of the issues being studied. At each stage of this research cases were therefore selected on the basis of what could be learnt from them. There was also an attempt to try and obtain a cross-section of different types and sizes of HEI. Therefore, the three institutions visited included a college of HE, a new university and an old university. They also varied in size from an institution with less than 5000 students to one with about 30,000 students.

Policy migration

The English higher education system is characterised by centralised control (Parry, 2001). Yet there is still room for policy to be reinterpreted and built upon as it migrates from government, through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and into HEIs. At each stage in the process of migration, policy is modified in an attempt to meet ‘local’ objectives (Williams, 1997b; Eggins, 1999; Cyert & March, 2002; Trowler, 1998, 2003). This means there is still scope for agency at the HEI level—a view supported by the senior managers interviewed for this study. For example, the pro-vice-chancellor (PVC) of a Russell Group university said, ‘You can take widening participation very seriously or not nearly so seriously. So there is a definite choice, yes, no question about that’.

However, as the interviews progressed institutional policy makers at both senior and middle-management levels conceded that they had to operate within the parameters set by government and HEFCE. Therefore, economic and political factors were seen as setting the boundaries around HEI policy on widening participation. These influences were, however, mediated by the institution’s culture (see Figure 1). Culture can be defined as ‘the set of key values, beliefs, understandings and norms shared by members of an organization’ (Daft, 2000, p. 86). These shared values are important because once they are established they help to ‘define what are acceptable, natural [and] desirable’ to an organisation (Bate, 2002, p. 204). Therefore, organisational culture is an important influence on institutional policy. This means that although HEIs operate in the same economic and political environment, institutional differences in organisational culture mean that different policy responses emerge.

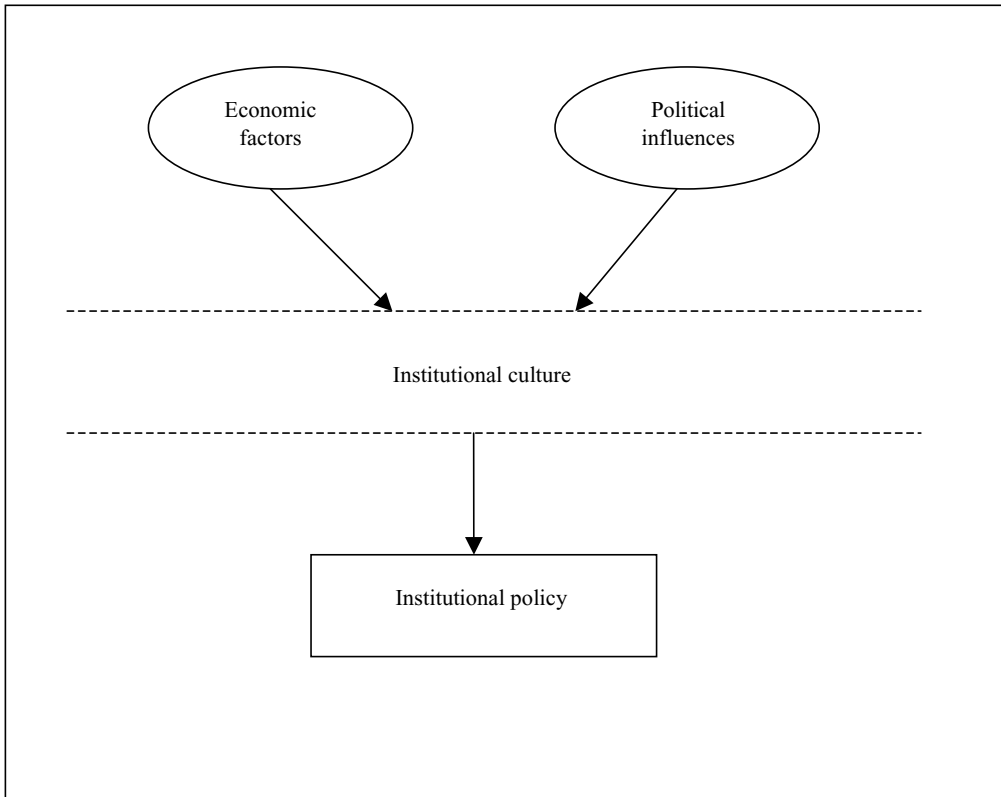


Figure 1. The influence of economic, political and cultural factors on institutional widening participation policy

The effect of culture on the strategic importance of policies to widen participation was referred to by a number of policy makers in this study. In particular, the influence of an HEI's history, geographical location and the values of its senior managers were emphasised. For example, the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-11 said widening participation was a high priority because of the university's polytechnic history. The institution's close proximity to areas of economic deprivation also meant the university had a tradition of working on issues of social inclusion.

It is not, however, just the ex-polytechnics that are driven by such values. The Head of Widening Participation at HEI-10, a Russell Group university, stressed the significance of having a vice-chancellor who is committed to widening participation:

He talks about social inclusion and widening participation. He came from the top and verbalised it and he got rid of about three or four key players in senior management who were the blocks for my work. So I think leading from the top is absolutely crucial.

A PVC at the same university also argued that they take widening participation very seriously because:

There is a sort of natural cultural affinity with the idea of it being in [name of area] and our staff are comfortable with it. A lot of the activity stretches back piecemeal to well before the government's formulated policy.

However, this PVC admits that economic and political influences have the effect of limiting the extent to which widening participation policies can be pursued. Interviews with other institutional policy makers also reveal that they felt constrained by government and HEFCE. The government, mainly through legislation and control over funding, exerts a considerable influence over HEI policy (Fitz, 1994). Therefore, the parameters within which institutional policy can be developed are set at the macro-level.

These economic and political influences are now discussed in more depth.

Economic influences on policy

Higher education is characterised by increased competition for students and funding. As a consequence, it is argued that the decision to adopt widening participation policies may be motivated by the economic returns accruing to such activities (see for example Ward & Steel, 1999; Thanki & Osborne, 2000; Morgan-Klein & Murphy, 2002), especially amongst institutions that are unable to access significant levels of research funding (Osborne, 2003; Thomas *et al.*, 2003). This would suggest there is likely to be differentiated levels of commitment to widening participation by type of HEI (Osborne, 2003). However, an analysis of institutional widening participation strategies for this study suggests that different types of institution, including elite universities, articulate an economic rationale for adopting widening participation policies. For example, HEI-10, a Russell Group university, stresses the importance of attracting non-traditional students:

The university cannot afford to ignore good potential students who fall outside its 'traditional' student recruitment markets. The market for affluent, full-time young, high A-level scoring school leavers is virtually saturated with participation rates in excess of 80%; this leaves little scope for growth in the numbers of these students. By contrast less than 20% of young people from social groups C2, D and E go to university and if fee legislation is to bring about even a degree of localisation of higher education participation, then we must ... take the opportunity to address this situation (Widening Participation Strategy, 2001, p. 2).

The institution's Widening Participation Strategy goes on to argue that this is why widening participation must be part of the university's 'mainstream activity' (*ibid.*, p. 2).

An examination of the widening participation policies of the HEIs in this study also indicates that their policies cover broadly similar areas. The senior and middle managers interviewed suggest that a key influence is the way the funding regime directs money, and therefore policy, into particular areas of widening participation. For example, from the end of the 1990s onwards HEFCE directed funds to those HEIs recruiting an increasing number of students from 'underparticipating areas' (HEFCE, 1999b, 2001a). There were also special funding initiatives for collaborative projects that developed strategies to increase participation in higher education (HEFCE, 1999a, 1999b,

2000). More recently a concern about the need to support achievement and success once students are in higher education has resulted in HEFCE directing funding, not just to recruitment, but to student retention (HEFCE, 2003).

It was also felt by those interviewed that the homogeneity in institutional widening participation policy arises because HEFCE encourages collaboration through special funding initiatives (see for example HEFCE, 2000). This means that HEIs are not only developing policy together (which inevitably leads to the adoption of the same policies), but they also have a greater awareness of what each other is doing. This enables them to more easily copy each others' widening participation policies. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), organisations operating in the same market or 'field' often adopt imitative behaviour as a way of combating uncertainty. Similar comments are made by Cyert and March (2002) who discuss how the uncertainty created by competitive markets leads to the adoption of industry (or sector) wide conventional practices.

When they are trying to secure funds HEIs are also subject to the same advice from HEFCE about what is regarded as 'good practice' (e.g. HEFCE, 2001a). For example, HEFCE emphasises the need for institutional widening participation policies to adopt a more 'holistic approach to the issue of student access, progress and success by focusing on the student life-cycle' (HEFCE, 2001b, para. 47). The policy makers in this study felt that they had to respond positively to what HEFCE regarded as 'good practice' in order to secure funding. Again, this results in HEIs adopting similar policy initiatives.

The idea that economic forces are the prime motivator for widening participation is also supported by the notion that universities and colleges of HE have undergone a significant culture change with universities reconstructed as 'businesses' and run as if they are private sector institutions (see Prichard, 2000). It is argued that if HEIs resemble business organisations then senior managers are equivalent to company chief executives and directors (see Kogan, 2002; Sanders, 2004). This was supported by the VC of HEI-11 who said that vice-chancellors are now 'like the chief executives of medium to large companies. Yes, that is what it is—it's being a chief executive of a 150, 160 million pound business'.

Such arguments have led a number of writers to conclude that educational institutions are now prioritising strategies that maximise economic gain (see Ball, 1997; Morgan-Klein & Murphy, 2002; Osborne, 2003). For example, Osborne (2003, p. 48) states 'a strong economic rationale associated with competition for students, institutional survival and reduction of unit costs underpins many forms of provision, and this rather than equity often guides practices'. There is some support in this study for the view that economic objectives dominate HEI strategy. For example, institutional documents often refer to the competitive environment they are operating within and the need to generate income. Therefore, HEI-14's Strategic Framework 2001/02 refers to how:

Growth in student numbers has been the cornerstone of conventional planning to achieve income growth but with the core full-time graduate market nearing saturation, and a low marginal rate of funding, a different strategy is called for. The University must look to

areas that are less constrained or that promise a better rate of return, such as overseas and postgraduate student income and commercial activities (p. 5).

Also, in HEI-16's University Plan (2003–08) the rationale for developing foundation degrees is based on economic grounds rather than widening participation:

Recent research has demonstrated that the young full-time undergraduate market will demonstrate only modest growth over the planning period. We will need to retain our share of the market through increasingly targeted recruitment whilst seeking new areas of growth such as Foundation Degrees (p. 6).

In the interviews, responses from senior managers are also littered with 'the language of the business world' (Williams, 1997a, p. 35). Senior managers also seem to be encouraging entrepreneurialism within their HEIs as a way of competing in an HE environment characterised by competition and scarce financial resources. This means that academic departments and support services are having to be increasingly concerned with generating income as well as controlling costs (see for example Hoggett, 1996; Prichard, 2000). As Prichard (2000, p. 57) points out:

The 'enterprising manager' is constructed between the income and expenditure of a particular cost centre. This positioning requires the post-holder to take responsibility for securing, and preferably generating, a level of resource—for example, by increasing effort, reducing teacher contact hours, or finding alternative income sources.

There appear, therefore, to be strong arguments in favour of conceptualising HEIs as businesses, with senior managers acting more like chief executives and directors, and middle managers taking on a more entrepreneurial role. However, the PVC of HEI-10 pointed out that the chief executive and directors of a company are concerned with making profits for their shareholders, whereas HEIs operate under a completely different philosophy. S/he also disagreed with the business analogy because of the academic role adopted by senior managers:

No, we're not the same as directors, not in a place like this where all the pro-vice-chancellors are actually academics. We're all research active. In fact we tend to be from strong research areas otherwise we would lose that sense of speaking for, as well as to, the community that we're working for. All PVC-ships are for a fixed term—there are no executive pro-vice-chancellors. And the Vice-chancellor as a chief executive is a false analogy too I would say. The governance arrangements are different, the mission is different because we haven't got any shareholders, everything goes back into the university ... I feel like a senior academic.

Therefore, this PVC maintained a dual role as academic and senior manager which s/he felt acted as a restraint on the development of an overly managerialist role. The Principal of HEI-3 also felt that the values s/he brought to the job were very different to those of a chief executive. Moreover, the VC of HEI-11, who had at first articulated a belief that vice-chancellors were comparable to chief executives (see quote above), later talked about his/her educational values and commitment to social inclusion in a way that did not fully support this analogy.

It is interesting to note that middle management did not seem to regard their senior managers as preoccupied with pursuing economic goals. For example, the Head of

Student Services at HEI-11 did not believe that senior management were focused on financial issues because ‘half the members of our Directorate are Deans of Faculty and because there is so much devolution here a lot of them are very involved, if you like, in individual student cases. So they do see the human side of it’. Again, senior management seem to be maintaining an academic role.

It is also pertinent to note that whilst most middle managers seem to accept they have an entrepreneurial role, they were quick to delineate the extent to which they were going to be ‘enterprising managers’. According to these middle managers obtaining external funding is a labour-intensive and time-consuming process and neither they, nor their staff, have the time to investigate and draw up the detailed bids required. For example, the Director of Aim Higher based in HEI-10 said s/he knew there were funds available but ‘at the present time I just haven’t had the time to actually try and identify it’. In contrast, the Head of Widening Participation in the same institution was content with his/her current level of funding:

I don’t get huge amounts of money from the institution, but what I do get, they don’t take overheads from me, and also I’m not desperate for the money these days because I don’t want a bigger team to be quite honest.

This manager therefore appears to be exhibiting satisficing behaviour because they are content with the amount of work their unit is currently carrying out on widening participation. S/he is also exhibiting ‘local rationality’ (Cyert & March, 2002, p. 65), where managers pursue objectives that are rational for them, but not necessarily, for the institution as a whole.

Other managers simply distanced themselves from the entrepreneurial function and positioned themselves in the more traditional role of managing a cost centre. For instance, the Head of Student Services at HEI-11 juxtaposed a discussion of how student services had unsuccessfully bid for external funding with how effective others in the institution were at this type of activity. They went on to say that if the institution wanted student services to do more on widening participation additional resources would have to be provided.

Therefore, economic forces might be pushing institutions towards operating more like businesses. Yet the values that pre-existed the increasingly competitive environment that HEIs now find themselves in appear to militate against a significant cultural shift. This does not mean that economic forces are unimportant. It does, however, mean that the response of institutions to widening participation cannot be explained only in economic terms. In reality, the reaction of HEIs to economic forces seems to be far more complex with economic rationales articulated alongside and interconnected with political and social objectives. The need to respond to economic forces elicited three (not necessarily mutually exclusive) responses. Each of these is detailed below.

‘We do what we can’

During the interviews for this study senior policy makers often emphasised that they were ‘doing what they can’, but the cost of widening participation outweighed the

economic benefits. It is difficult to know the extent to which this is true, but there is evidence that attempts to widen participation are being hindered by a failure to compensate HEIs adequately for the additional costs involved in recruiting and supporting non-traditional students (see for example NAO, 2002; HEFCE, 2004). Therefore, the culture of an HEI may predispose it to prioritising widening participation, but their ability to do this might be constrained by the need to maintain the economic viability of an institution. For example, the PVC of HEI-10 commented on how it was sometimes difficult to justify allocating money to widening participation in an environment of increased competition for resources. The VC of HEI-11 articulated how the institution continued, whatever the outcome of funding bids to HEFCE and other bodies, to put money into widening participation activities. However, this VC also emphasised the importance of having a 'sound' financial base before the university could commit itself to such activities:

You can't do what you want to do unless you are sound financially and we've NEVER EVER turned in a bottom red line. You know we've always made a surplus, only a small surplus, between one and two per cent normally ... [refers to more figures] and that gives us the confidence and the strength to be able to do what we want to do.

'Hedging their bets'

The uncertainty of the higher education environment encourages institutions to 'hedge their bets' (Mackay *et al.*, 1995). As Davies and Glaister (1996) argue, HEIs may be reluctant to focus on a particular aspect of the HE market 'in case it proves less tenable than their traditional "universal" higher education role. To claim a special position in regard to one part of the market may result in unacceptable losses from other parts' (p. 292). This uncertainty leads to institutions keeping all their potential income streams open, which includes obtaining money from widening participation activities.

The unpredictability of the higher education sector and the financial consequences of adopting the 'wrong' strategy was referred to by the VC of HEI-11. S/he explained how changing the criteria for research funding following the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) affected their institution:

It was a very disappointing outcome for us, we had done very well in terms of the grading. We'd more than exceeded our expectations ... but we lost 25 per cent of the funding more or less overnight. They changed the goal posts and suddenly they decided that fours weren't going to be funded. We wanted to make that break through so that we got adequate research funding and suddenly we'd achieved what we wanted to do in terms of outcomes and lost—we went down from over 4 million to around 3 million—and the following year we lost another 10 per cent even though, you know, our grades were going up and up.

It is therefore unsurprising to find that HEIs do not wish to differentiate themselves from other institutions by focusing on a particular strategy such as widening participation. Neither do they want to ignore any aspect of the portfolio of work HEIs are involved in, just in case the government decides to make this a priority. As a result,

HEIs are forced to ‘hedge their bets’. This might be one reason why every strategic plan of the 16 HEIs in this research identified widening participation as a key component of their strategy.

Double coding

In this study the rationale put forward by HEIs for adopting widening participation policies often attempted to combine economic and social/educational objectives using a ‘not only but also’ approach (Gewirtz *et al.*, 2004, p. 327). This is similar to New Labour’s tactic of ‘double coding’ where policies that may be assumed to be in conflict are presented as complementary (*ibid.*). Therefore, HEIs admitted that their widening participation policies helped them to ensure they have sufficient student numbers, but they also fulfilled the objective of widening participation.

A classic example of double coding can also be seen in the response of HEIs to variable tuition fees. The majority of institutions backed the government’s proposals to introduce variable tuition fees. For example, 74 university heads placed an advert in *The Guardian* urging MPs to vote for the second reading of the Higher Education Bill (see *The Guardian*, 27 January 2004, p. 8). It would seem that the desire for increased financial resources outweighed concerns about the potential effect on the HE participation rates of students from lower SEGs. This led Ryan (2004) to comment on how the debate over top-up fees provided a ‘spectacle of self-interest’ (p. 17). However, policy makers in this study articulated the view that whilst variable fees would help HEIs financially they would not, because of the support package available to students from low-income families, seriously affect attempts to widen participation. For example, a member of the SMG at HEI-3 said:

It won’t necessarily act as a disincentive to the market because obviously there are, you know, there’s means tests and all sorts of things in place. And normally, I think only a third of our students pay any sort of fee at all—so I think there’s enough safety mechanisms in the system ... I have quite genuinely come to terms with this top up fees thing now that I can see the criteria and the means testing that’s in place, I’m not as bothered.

It might be argued that ‘double coding’ is nothing more than rhetoric or ‘spin’. For example, Morgan-Klein and Murphy (2002, pp. 69–70) argue that:

professed aims such as social inclusion may mask or sit alongside more pragmatic concerns. Indeed, in the majority of our interviews, social justice concerns were often eclipsed by concerns with recruitment, marketing and institutional survival.

Indeed, some of the institutions in this study admitted that they had not explicitly set out to recruit students from lower SEGs. For example, the Principal of HEI-3 stated that his/her institution never set out to recruit particular ‘types’ of student. However, because of a focus on student potential rather than just academic qualifications, combined with the socio-economic characteristics of the local population, the college had ‘naturally’ recruited a high proportion of students from lower SEGs and low participation neighbourhoods.

Political influences on policy

HEIs function in a political environment and have become very aware of the effects of bad publicity. The adverse publicity surrounding the University of Bristol's attempt to widen participation by making lower offers to students from schools in disadvantaged areas illustrates this point in dramatic fashion (Gibbes, 2003). In this section I will discuss the attempt by HEIs to put a positive 'spin' on their widening participation strategies and also how this sometimes occurs because of the need to counteract stereotypes about their institution.

'Spin'

Institutional policy makers are likely to be very sophisticated and adept at providing accounts that are politically acceptable (Ozga & Gewirtz, 1994). It would, indeed, be naïve to believe that the statements made by policy makers in interviews and documents did not take account of external opinion. This may of course be the real motivation behind HEI attempts at 'double coding'. For example, vice-chancellors may argue the case for variable fees, not because they believe the package of support for low-income students will be effective, but because they want the extra revenue that fees will bring. The problem, of course, is that as an interviewer, I have no way of being able to tell what they actually believe.

There were, however, occasions when it was evident that policy makers were putting a positive spin on what they were doing. For example, one HEI made claims about their commitment to widening participation by referring to the number of staff they had involved in widening participation activities. I subsequently found out that these staff were not employed directly by the institution, but were on a HEFCE/LSC funded Aim Higher project. This study also revealed that HEIs are well aware of the need to generate positive publicity through 'commercial style' (Gewirtz *et al.*, 2004, p. 333) promotional activities. In addition, policy documents are well written and adopted the right 'type' of language. Institutions (particularly old universities) seem to have come a long way since research by Williams (1987) into institutional equal opportunities statements found:

The tone of the replies from many old universities was a mixture of indignation and incomprehension. The traditionalist academic discourse of merit as measured in a specific, 'quantifying' examination was seen as unproblematic and demonstrated a commitment to equity (quoted by Williams, 1997b, p. 89).

This research relates to the 1980s and it is suggested that institutional statements (mission, equal opportunity, strategy, etc.) may now provide little insight into the actual policies of HEIs because institutions have learnt to develop the 'right' form of words (Williams, 1997b; Patterson, 2001). For example, Patterson (2001) citing a study by Mackay *et al.* (1995) suggests that mission statements appear to be written to formula and vary little between institutions. Similarly, Williams (1997b) cites research by Smith *et al.* (1993) that analysed the strategic plans of 76 HEIs and found only small difference between them.

It is, however, also important to note that the promotion of widening participation may play a part in influencing policy (Gewirtz *et al.*, 2004). As the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-11 said, internal publicity on the intranet and in-house magazines help to raise the profile of widening participation, and makes it easier to persuade people in the institution to take it more seriously. Such activities help to build organisational assumptions and beliefs about 'who we are' and 'the way we do things around here' (Morgan, 1997, p. 178). Publicity and statements in policy documents may therefore influence the development of an institution's culture.

Counteracting stereotypes

One of the issues that arose during the interviews for this study was the way policy makers often stereotyped other institutions. For example, a member of the SMG at HEI-3 said that the new universities 'get the students in by lowering the entry requirements and then they don't support them and the students are LOST'. On the other hand, s/he felt that prestigious institutions are only involved in widening participation 'because they have to, and often with huge reluctance'. The Head of Widening Participation at HEI-10 said that at a local university (HEI-16) 'Eighty, ninety per cent of students are from low income working class backgrounds'. However, statistics indicate that only about one-third of the students at HEI-16 are from lower socio-economic groups. S/he also referred to the new universities 'getting students in and not caring if they fail or not'. This stereotyping also occurs in the academic literature and in newspapers where there is a tendency to make assumptions based on a simple dichotomy between new and old universities (with colleges of HE often ignored).

There may of course be some truth in these stereotypes, but their potential inaccuracy was driven home to me when a policy maker at a Russell Group university said that my own institution 'ran a nine to five curriculum'. Whilst there may be more class contact in a college of higher education compared to a Russell Group university it would, however, be wrong to characterise it as 'nine to five' teaching.

It is therefore not surprising that the image HEIs project in documents seems to reflect a desire to counteract stereotypical notions about their particular institution. Consequently, HEI-10 (a Russell Group university) emphasises the importance of teaching and its commitment to widening participation. In its prospectus it states that it is a 'leading research establishment with an international reputation' (p. 2), but it goes on to say:

If this reputation makes you think that only high-fliers and the chosen few are accepted for degree programmes, then you'd be wrong—our doors are open to students from all walks of life, whatever their age, background or country of origin ... we are committed to widening participation in higher education and to addressing the social inclusion agenda set by the government (Prospectus HEI-10, 2004, p. 7).

Indeed, this university regards itself as at the forefront of widening participation amongst Russell Group institutions, with their vice-chancellor arguing on their website that they are an 'access elite institution ... characterised by excellent research, low

student drop-out rates, high quality teaching and comparatively high proportions of students recruited from disadvantaged areas’.

Another old university, HEI-7, includes a statement about inclusion in its mission statement, but other documents point to this HEI’s commitment to improving its status as a research institution. As such, public statements and publicly available documents make very little reference to widening participation. This probably reflects its desire to match the research standing of Russell Group universities such as HEI-10.

HEI-10 and HEI-7 also seem to be conscious of a perception from those outside the institution that their universities are very middle class. In internal policy documents these two universities discuss the need to change the culture of their institutions so that they are seen as less elite and more inclusive. For example, in HEI-7’s Equal Opportunities Guide it states:

The University is committed to promoting equal opportunities and aims to create an environment where people are encouraged to realise their potential, whether as employees or students. One of the ways of working towards these aims is to foster a greater awareness of the role that language plays across all sectors of the university. Since this is an educational institution, we have responsibility to use language in which all members of the community feel included and to create a climate of equality, understanding and mutual respect.

In contrast, some of the less prestigious institutions such as colleges of HE focus on establishing their academic credibility (see Oplatka (2002) for similar comments about Israeli higher education). For example, HEI-4’s prospectus emphasises the college’s academic credentials by giving prominence to the college’s coat of arms on the front cover of its prospectus. It also makes a number of references to the institution being ‘long-established’ and states that it has ‘a history longer than that of most British universities’ (Prospectus HEI-4, 2004, p. 4). The prospectus also includes a list of the senior management team and their titles and qualifications.

Conclusion

This study utilised documentary evidence and interviews with key policy makers in HEIs in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the factors influencing the formulation of institutional policy on widening participation. The suggestion that HEIs are economically motivated and can be conceptualised as business enterprises was found to be overly simplistic. Similarly, attempts to link the nature of policy to the old–new university dichotomy is too reductionist. Consequently, an analysis of institutional responses to widening participation that takes into account economic forces, political factors and the mediating influence of organisational culture provides a better, if more complex, explanatory framework within which to work.

In carrying out this research I have been able to obtain some insights into the interplay of structure and agency in the formulation of policy. This study has demonstrated how an institution’s culture can predispose it to pursuing strategies to widen participation. On the other hand, an HEI’s culture may also make it inflexible and

resistant to change (Valentin, 2002). Interviews with policy makers also revealed that they feel constrained by government and HEFCE. The government, mainly through legislation and funding, exerts a considerable influence over HEI policy. Therefore, the parameters within which institutional policy can be developed are set at the macro-level. One problem identified by policy makers in this study is that government policy is not always clear and is subject to change. This results in institutions adopting a reactive approach, which means they attempt to second-guess government priorities rather than pursuing long-term plans that are congruent with their values. There is also a tendency for HEIs to 'hedge their bets' by pursuing a number of strategies in different policy areas. This 'scattershot' approach is regarded as less risky than focusing on a specific strategy. Institutions, nevertheless, retain some scope for reinterpreting government/HEFCE policy, and they are often adept at putting a positive spin on their widening participation policies in order to deflect political pressure to do more, or adopt strategies that may not be compatible with their underlying values.

It is important that those involved in developing policy at both the macro (i.e. Government/HEFCE) and institutional level take more account of the complexity involved in the policy making process. They need to appreciate the range of factors influencing policy as it migrates from government, through the funding councils, and to HEIs. In particular, macro policy makers should be aware of how the economic and political power they attempt to exert over HEIs is mediated by the culture of HEIs. This means the end result of policy is very difficult to predict. As such, attempts by the Government and the funding bodies to exercise a strong influence on HEI policy may be misconceived.

Since the 1970s UK higher education policy making has become increasingly centrally controlled. Accordingly, the higher education system is described as 'highly managed' (Scott, 2001, p. 196), 'centralist' and 'objectives-led' (Davies & Glaister, 1996, p. 269) and more highly regulated than other countries (Coaldrake, 2000). The government is unlikely to reverse this. It may, however, consider giving HEIs more autonomy in specific policy areas. The evidence suggests that policies to widen participation have not been particularly successful because those from lower social classes remain significantly under-represented in higher education (see Palfreyman, 2001; Trowler, 2003; Blanden & Machin, 2004). For example, 80 per cent of young people from professional backgrounds enter higher education compared to only 10 per cent of the least skilled (Trowler, 2003). Therefore, widening participation may be a policy area where a significant rethink could be justified. Giving HEIs more autonomy would allow universities and colleges of higher education to develop policies that extend beyond the parameters set by government and the funding bodies. It would therefore encourage creativity. Such an approach would also provide HEIs with the space to develop policies that are compatible with their values.

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