CHAPTER 6

Widening Participation in English Universities

Accessing Social Justice?

Sarah Pickard

Introduction

The landscape of higher education in England has undergone considerable changes since the 1960s and in particular over the past two decades. Above all, like elsewhere in the world, the country has witnessed the move from higher education being only for the “elite,” to it being for the masses (Trow 2010; Tight 2009; Tapper 2007). In this way, the number and proportion of young people remaining in post-compulsory education and going onto higher education have increased substantially in recent years. Part of this growth can be explained by evolutions in the local and global job markets, as well as the economic context. The shift towards a more highly skilled labour market, combined with apprehension as regards increasing youth unemployment, have encouraged more young people to go on to higher education. At the same time, British Governments have actively sought to expand the proportion of the population going into higher education.

Indeed, over the past twenty years, a plethora of official reports, policy documents, schemes and laws has emerged in England on the importance of expanding universities. The core motivation has been centred on the necessity of producing more graduates who are adequately equipped for the contemporary world of work, in order to boost the “knowledge economy” (Blair 2000) and enhance economic competitiveness in conjunction with the rise of neoliberal politics (Rhoades and Slaughter 2004; Ball 2008). This political thinking as regards the pragmatic objective of universities appeared in key official reports, policy documents and laws (e.g. DfEE 1992; Dearing 1997) in England before such a view was widely expressed in Europe following the Bologna Declaration of 1999 (EC 1999). Thus, the political emphasis shifted from the

---

1 This chapter deals only with universities in England, rather than in the UK as a whole, due to decentralisation of higher education responsibilities to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland following the 1998 Acts of Parliament on devolution. In England, there are many types of public higher education (HE) and further education (FE) academic institutions that award first degrees, but in this chapter, only those with university status are discussed.
role of university learning being primarily for personal intellectual and cultural betterment, to it being more for the economic and financial gain.

The second main political impetus behind expansion of universities has been the endeavour to obtain the democratisation of degrees and social justice, which came to the fore in the early 1960s with the publication of the Robbins Report: Higher Education (Robbins 1963). Since the late 1990s, the focus has been on widening participation (Heath, Fuller and Johnston 2011, 2), i.e. encouraging and enabling university access to hitherto under-represented groups, a theme which has featured prominently in numerous official reports and statutes (DfEE 1992; DfES 2004b; Dearing 1997; Schwartz 2004; Browne 2010).

This chapter seeks to ascertain whether widening participation and social justice policies have been successful in increasing the number and proportion of university students from under-represented groups also called ‘non-traditional’ entrants, at state-funded English universities in the twenty-first century. First, the landscape of universities is outlined. Second, recent governmental access and admissions policies aimed at widening participation are examined. This is followed by a discussion (from a social reproduction perspective) centred on evaluating the fairness and success of widening participation policies of the university system in relation to under-represented groups.

The Student Landscape

There are over 90 public universities in England, emanating from four different periods in history. The first to be established were the “ancient universities,” Oxbridge: Oxford and (1249) and Cambridge (1284). Universities created at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century are often called “red brick” or “civic universities,” such as the University of Manchester. During the 1960s, many “plate glass” universities were built to accommodate the increasing number of students going on to higher education. These are mostly campuses built outside of towns, for example, the University of East Anglia. Lastly, following the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, 35 polytechnics and other higher educational establishments were upgraded and converted in “new universities,” e.g. the University of Central Lancashire and De Montfort University.

There is a pronounced hierarchy and stratification within English universities (Cheung and Egerton 2010) with a clear correlation between their longevity and their prestige. Today, this prestige is mainly defined in terms of excellence regarding scientific output, as well as the quality of teaching and the student experience. Most universities belong to one of four “mission groups” – collections of higher education institutions that organise together along a shared mission to influence public policy (NUS 2012). First, the Russell