Discourses of 'Fair Access' in English higher education: what do institutional statements tell us about university stratification and market positioning?

Conference or Workshop Item

OFFICIAL DISCOURSES OF 'FAIR ACCESS': WHAT DO INSTITUTIONAL STATEMENTS TELL US ABOUT UNIVERSITY STRATIFICATION, DIFFERENTIATION AND MARKET POSITIONING?

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The Dilemma of English Higher Education

- Broadening the social base of the undergraduate population

- Competing in the national and global marketplace

OFFA and the Government

Your independence and freedom to challenge institutions where necessary are an important safeguard and public assurance...

... I would expect that you would expect the most, in terms of outreach and financial support, from institutions whose records suggest that they have further to go in securing a diverse student body.

(Charles Clarke 2004)

...we want to encourage you and the higher education sector to focus more sharply on the outcomes of outreach and other access activities rather than the inputs and processes. In particular, the Government believes that progress over the past few years in securing fair access to the most selective universities has been inadequate and that much more determined action now needs to be taken'.

(Cable and Willetts 2011)

Past research on OFFA and Access Agreements

McCaig and Adnett (2009), Thomas et al (2010), Adnett et al (2011)

- Little evidence of systematic targeting for WP
- Distinction between 'recruiting' and selecting' universities on WP performance
- OFFA reluctance to challenge poor performance on WP

Our research

- Analysis of OFFA Access agreements and university publicity
- 8 universities in one English region:
- Two ‘Russell Group’
- One ‘Non-aligned’
- Three ‘Million Plus’
- Two ‘Guild Group’

Questions

- How are universities publicly responding to changing government policy on fees and admissions?
- How are universities from different mission groups defining and operationalising widening participation and fair access?
- What differences and similarities can be discerned between ‘recruiting’ and ‘selecting’ universities or universities in different mission groups?
- How are ‘outreach’, ’targeting’ ‘retention’ and ‘employability’ activities being utilised by universities in relation to widening participation.

The Universities:
Performance in respect of under-represented groups

Source: HESA; Participation of under-represented groups in higher education: young and full-time first degree entrants 2009/10

	Low Participation Neighbourhood	**Socio Economic groups 4-6**	**State school**
UK average	10.3	30	88.8
Russell 1	5.5	18.8	74.7
Russell 2	6.1	21	77.6
Non-aligned	8.5	37.2	90.6
Million Plus 1	11	37.7	96.8
Million Plus 2	14.5	42.1	97.2
Million Plus 3	22.4	48.5	98.8
Guild 1	20	46.6	99.4
Guild 2	13.4	38.5	96.3

Findings 1

Profiling Access: different rankings, different messages

Russell Group

- OFFA profiles position them as separate from the rest – in spite of poor WP performance
- Public profiles stress exclusivity and ‘the brightest and the best’

Non-aligned & Million Plus

- Ambivalence in OFFA/public profiling

Guild Group

- Consistency as ‘WP universities’ in OFFA/public profiling

Findings 2

Financial support for widening participation: Scholarships, bursaries and fee waivers

- Combination of direction and discretion
- ‘own-branding’ of Scholarships
- Scholarships as marketing tool
- Scholarships outside the NSP remit (e.g. For retention and completion)
- Lack of clarity and transparency
- Little distinction between ‘eligibility’ and ‘prospects of success’

Findings 3

Activities to widen access

- Variation/ lack of clarity in information provided to OFFA – make comparison/monitoring impossible
- Relative lack of targeting
- ‘Steady as she goes’ approach
- Substitution for withdrawn *Aimhigher* funding – fee payers bearing the cost of government cutbacks
- Russell Groups positioning as ‘leaders’ in widening participation

Conclusions

- Cautious, qualified and ambivalent responses from universities – reflecting policy uncertainty and confusion
- Mission group differences - clearest between the Russell Group and the rest
- Widening participation language as a marketing tool
- OFFA failing to police Access Agreements
- Government retreat from ‘determined action’ on widening participation
- The future of OFFA?

Some questions for discussion and sharing

- Our paper focuses on England, what can you tell us about what's done elsewhere?
- What do you know about your own institution's perceptions of student aspirations (as revealed in its public documents)
- What do these documents say about your own institution's aspirations?
- Where now for OFFA? The implications for Widening Participation