

Higher Education Close Up 5: Think Pieces

This is one of four 'think pieces' offered by the Keynote Speakers at the HECU5 conference, which is to be held at Lancaster University 20-22nd July 2010. The theme of the conference is Questioning Theory-Method Relations in Higher Education Research and these pieces are intended to act as the starting point for a conversation about research into higher education, which conference participants can continue by submitting a proposal to present a paper or a symposium at the conference. Further details can be found on the conference website:

<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/events/hecu5/index.htm>

Researching Absences and Silences in Higher Education

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Desire, Desiccation and Distributive Justice.

Higher education is caught between hypermodernism and archaism. There are new constituencies, literacies and modalities of communication. Borders are dissolving and academic (hyper)mobility is promoted (Kenway *et al.*, 2004). However, the hyper-modernisation of liquified globalisation is underpinned by the stasis, archaism and desiccation of unequal employment and participation practices (Morley *et al.*, 2008; Morley and Lugg, 2009). Difference is contradictorily conceptualised both in terms of disparagement and desire and transformation has been driven by neo-liberalism rather than by academic imaginaries.

The generative potential of the global seems to be monological and unidirectional. While parochialism can equal cognitive dispossession, higher education policy and research and indeed social theory tend to be dominated by the (parochialised) messaging systems of the global North (Connell, 2007). There are questions about whether knowledge is being democratised, or simply de-territorialised, with the result of nationalised and hegemonic knowledge and knowledge systems in a globalised world. De Sousa Santos (1995, 1999) argues that we need to start listening to the South, and that we need to develop a sociology of absences. The North/South power imbalance, as a condensed signifier, can relate to geopolitical and symbolic domains and refer to a range of silences and exclusions.

An absence in the global policy imaginary for widening participation is intersectionality between different structures of inequality (UNESCO, 1998, 2009a). Gains in one social category can mask losses in others *e.g.* gender and social class. Disconnects and discomforts are widespread and hierarchies of oppression emerge in relation to social inclusion. Structured redistributive measures including affirmative action and quota systems are fragile and vulnerable to backlash with accusations of social engineering and reverse discrimination (Lihamba *et al.*, 2006; Baez, 2003). Stale, tired vocabularies are marshalled to recycle prejudice. For example, equality is frequently discursively located in opposition to excellence, with new constituencies positioned as threats to quality and standards (Pattern, 1993).

When previously under-represented groups *e.g.* women, succeed in decoding the mysteries of access to higher education, there are moral panics over feminisation and calls for reallocation of equality resources to men (see Leathwood and Read, 2008).

There are fears of imbalance, contamination and domination by socially disadvantaged groups, suggesting that there should be a ceiling on their participation, and that their place is in the minority. When the symbolic order appears destabilised, policy debates utilise normative vocabularies and commonsense, binaried understandings of gender to justify repositioning dominant groups as victims (HEPI, 2009). While global policies on gender mainstreaming exist (Morley, 2007a), it is 'treated as an open signifier that can be filled with both feminist and non-feminist content' (Lombardo and Meier, 2006: 151). It is questionable whether it has recodified academic cultures. Higher education products and processes are still seen by many as gender neutral, with gender equality conceptualised simply as quantitative change (HEPI, 2009).

Working class and poor students are frequently represented in terms of remediation and deficit, representing a form of risk and loss for higher education institutions (Archer *et al.*, 2003). In times of economic recession and crisis discourse, the Confederation of British Industries advises the UK Labour Government to raise tuition fees and suspend its widening participation measures (Curtis, 2009:2). It also seems that employers continue to favour graduates from elite universities where working class students are still woefully under-represented (Lauder and Brown, 2009; Morley, 2007b).

Swelling the Sector

All the time the global sector is expanding. Student enrolment worldwide rose from 13 million in 1960 to 137.8 million in 2005, with an overall global participation rate of 24 percent. This is unevenly distributed across regions and drops to 5 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2009b). African higher education is now firmly under the gaze of the international agencies. The 2009 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education examined the challenges and opportunities for the revitalization of African higher education (UNESCO, 2009a). Even the World Bank is worried about attracting ‘a flood of students into increasingly dysfunctional institutions’ (World Bank, 2009:143).

In a putative globalised knowledge economy, there are questions about how raising participation rates in higher education can contribute to societies’ economic and social development and reduce poverty (Commission for Africa, 2005; World Bank, 2002, 2009). Poverty reduction is the overarching concept that guides international commitments to development of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs set out to halve world poverty by 2015. Whereas previously, higher education was positioned as a luxury product by the World Bank (Robertson, 2009), from 1994, it became part of the new global economic imaginary (World Bank 1994). However, international discourse often emphasises wealth creation rather than wealth redistribution. In some of the world’s poorest countries, higher education continues to contribute more to elite formation than to poverty reduction (Morley and Lussier, 2009).

Widening participation is unproblematically constructed as a social good. It has become a formulaic or techno-rational prescription for economic and social development, and for adding capital to members of marginalised groups. Participation is now as much a duty as a right (Biesta, 2006). Widening participation can be a force for democratisation. It can also map onto elite practices and contribute to further differentiation of social groups. It is often claimed that those with social capital are able to decode and access new educational opportunities (Crozier *et al.*, 2008; Heath *et al.*, 2008; Reay *et al.*, 2005). Those without it can remain untouched by initiatives to facilitate their entry into the privileges that higher education can offer. There is an affinity between capital and the capacity to aspire to higher education (Appadurai, 2004; David, 2009).

Interrogating and Intersecting Inequalities

My current research project on widening participation in higher education in Ghana and Tanzania (<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/wphegt/>) has quantitative and qualitative data to indicate that poverty continues to structure access opportunities to higher education. This mixed methods study involved life history interviews with 200 students: 119 students in public universities and 81 in private universities, from different programmes and diverse backgrounds including mature, poor and disabled students. Students were asked about their experiences of primary, secondary and higher education, their motivations, transitions, support, decision-making, and first impressions of higher education. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 172 academic staff and 28 policymakers. They were asked about policies, interventions, strategies and challenges for widening participation, and the part that their universities had played in working towards the MDGs.

Additionally, Equity Scorecards were constructed from raw data to examine advantage and disadvantage simultaneously. Equity Scorecards were chosen as a mechanism for conveying complex data to multiple constituencies. They interrogate changing configurations of inequality along multiple dimensions, including disciplinary and institutional location (Bensimon, 2004; Bensimon and Polkinghorne, 2003). Equity Scorecards promote democratic dialogues, by engaging staff and students in a process that is customised to the institutional context. They also stimulate institutions to collect new data and make better use of existing data for more equitable outcomes. By including disaggregated data on programmes of study and structures of inequality, Equity Scorecards help evaluate the effectiveness of existing policy interventions to promote inclusion in the case study institutions. Social inequalities are deconstructed with statistical evidence provided for different categories.

In my study, intersections have been measured between social variables *e.g.* gender, socio-economic status (based on deprived schools' / regions' indicators), and age, in relation to educational processes: access, retention and achievement in two public and two private universities, and four programmes of study in each university. Equity Scorecards have revealed intersections between gender, socio-economic background and age. These latter two variables were included as gender gains can frequently mask more persistent inequalities that relate to poverty and age-related norms in participation rates (Morley *et al.*, 2006).

Equity Scorecards have provided evidence that contradicts national and organisational policy aspirations and interventions to widen participation. They expose a disconnect between the structural and the discursive, as they contradict much of what the staff and policymakers say in terms of policy successes. Findings suggest reproduction, rather than transformation of privilege. For example, when structures of inequality are intersected, poor and older women are absent from the majority of programmes. Quotas for mature and poor students are not being filled. Academic choice literacy is still gendered and classed, with ongoing tensions in the disciplinary positionings of women and men, elite and poor students (Lapping, 2006). When students from deprived backgrounds do enter higher education in both African countries, women, poorer and older students are less likely to enter Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) courses. Interview data with students indicate the symbolic dangers of transgressing gendered norms in disciplinary locations (Morley and Lugg, 2009). Education courses tend to provide routes into higher education for older and socially disadvantaged students. Affirmative action programmes in Tanzania for women in Engineering have increased the numbers of women in general, but not of poorer or older women. The success of some gender equality and access programmes means that some university programmes are now filling up with 'doctors' daughters rather than doctors' sons' (Williams, quoted in Eagleton, 2008).

Current participation patterns are reinforcing status distinctions, with relational effects between social identity, discipline and institution. Marginalised groups, in my study, tend to enter, or be allowed into disciplines with lower exchange values in the labour market, and to lower status, private universities. However, in terms of completion and achievement, variability relates more to programmes of study than to student identities. Once in, there is no significant difference between completion rates for men and women, and no significant difference between the achievement of marginalised and non-marginalised groups. These findings suggest that educating the poor is not such a high risk activity after all!

Concluding Comments

Higher education is a site for cultural practice, identity formation, knowledge formation and dissemination, and symbolic control. It provides opportunities to escape poverty while poverty continues to structure opportunities for participation. Globalisation is producing new power geometries and geographies of knowledge, but some exclusions and injurious norms persist. Globally, the higher education sector has become associated with the hyper modernisation of the knowledge economy. We need new conceptual vocabularies and reinvigorated courage to challenge the social stasis and archaism that still haunt the sector.

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