Widening Participation in Higher Education: where are we now?

Professor Stephen McNair, University of Surrey

The fact that widening participation in higher education is a major policy priority at present will be no surprise to this audience, although the recent evaluation of HEFCE's work on this topic revealed that a sizable proportion of academics across the system are unaware of it! What I intend to do in this paper is to provide a little history, to explain how we come to be where we are, some comments on how widening participation is now being conceptualised, and some thoughts about emerging issues.

Why widen participation?

Firstly, I would like to remind us of why this is an issue at all. There is good reason to believe that the economic success of the UK depends on the development of high skills, high value added economy, and this in turn calls for a higher proportion of the population educated to high levels. To achieve this we might merely seek to increase the numbers of people entering the system, without attending to issues of equity, if the scale of inequity in the current situation were not so stark. The children of parents in socio economic groups I and II stand a 4 in 5 chance of entering HE, while the children of parents in groups IV and V have a 1 in 5 chance of doing so. Whatever one believes about the distribution of intellectual ability across social classes it is unlikely to be reflected in these figures. This represents a spectacular, and morally indefensible, inequity: since participation in HE confers a very substantial lifetime earnings advantage on graduates Furthermore, it means that the pool of young people in the higher social classes who are capable of benefiting from HE and who are not already doing so is very small, and shrinking. Expansion on the scale proposed by the Government is unlikely unless we can tap into the potential of the lower socio-economic groups. However, we have a problem that there does not appear to be a pool of unmet demand for participation from these groups, which makes aspiration raising and collaborative working between HE institutions, schools and Colleges an increasing priority.

Historical background

Widening participation has a long history, but its focus has changed over time. Currently there are a number of key concerns. The first is social class, which is the dimension where current performance is most clearly inequitable. In recent years there has also been a focus on low participation neighbourhoods, which rose to prominence with the improvement of data collection, so that it became possible to identify which postcodes were not producing HE entrants. Geodemographic data of this sort has been used to target recruitment, but there have been problems with the drawing of boundaries, since areas are not always socially homogenous. A third concern is with recruitment from state schools and colleges, where a small number of institutions recruit relatively few entrants. HEFCE's strategy of attaching a premium

to encourage such institutions to recruit from the State sector ("aspiration funding") has led to strong resentment from many other institutions, and is to be abolished.

These three (social class, low participation neighbourhoods and state schools), are the priority groups identified in the HEFCE Performance Indicators, which have now been published for three consecutive years. But they are not the only areas of concern. Disabled students are, in general, underrepresented in HE (and dyslexia accounts for a large proportion of those who are registered as disabled), and the figures are not entirely reliable, since some students are reluctant to disclose disability (for fear of discrimination in admissions processes), which has led to underreporting. Disability has also been treated very differently in policy terms from other areas of widening participation, with a much stronger emphasis on making appropriate provision for those who have entered, than with recruiting in the first place. Ethnicity was a major concern in the 1980s, but has declined in prominence as it became clear that ethnic minorities in general are overrepresented in HE: the ethnic representation problem being with specific minorities like Afro Caribbean young males and Bangladeshi women. Indeed there has been increasing concern with the exclusion of young white males, perhaps the most excluded of ethnic groups. For ethnic minorities the issue is as much discrimination in the graduate labour market as entry to HE itself. Finally, gender was a major concern in the 1970s and 1980s, but by the early 1990s women had become a majority of entrants overall, and the issue now receives much less attention, and is seen as a matter of the distribution of women across subjects, rather than total numbers.

The vocabulary of widening participation has also changed over time, reflecting changing priorities and understanding of the problems (and of course, one should be aware of parallel debates and developments going on in FE and adult education, where these issues have a longer history). During the 1980s the key term was "access", reflecting the concern of adult educators, working outside HE or on its margins, with securing entry for mature students, and women returners in particular. This was the great era of the access course, focusing on improving their preparation for entry, with the creation of the national mechanisms for recognition of access courses, and credit accumulation and transfer schemes at sub-degree level to make entry easier. In the late 1980s the emphasis shifted. Government, concerned at emerging evidence from sources like the OECD about the relative underqualification of the UK workforce, intervened, notably with the decision of Kenneth Baker, as Secretary of State, to launch the major expansion which was felt in the early 1990s. The emphasis here was simply on increasing volume, rather than changing the social composition of entrants. Most recently, HEFCE has argued (in its recent paper on *Supply and Demand for Higher Education*) that diversity of entrants is essential to achieve the volume targets, since the rising participation rates of young people from traditional backgrounds means that there are virtually no qualified non-entrants, and the traditional pool of mature returners has been similarly exhausted, as a result of the expansion of youth access in the 1980s and 1990s linked to the natural ageing processes of the population. Although the evidence of saturation of the adult and part-time market has been challenged, notably by the Open University, who argue that part-time and work based learning is expanding more rapidly than young entry, the thrust of current national policy remains strongly with widening the social class base of young entrants.

The dominant feature of all these developments was, however, the need to motivate more people to aspire to HE entry, and to prepare them for it. However, the term

2

"access" itself embodies a particular perception: that access is a matter of helping individuals to prepare to enter the doors to existing provision. In the 1990s the debate began to take a different focus, which was to question what HE was providing for its new and wider group of recruits. The "widening participation" discourse which replaced "access" took as its starting point not the needs of the institution for more students, but of the new students for more appropriate learning. It moved the discourse from "non-traditional" (always a misnomer in many of the new Universities) to "underrepresented", shifting the onus for change to the Universities themselves. At the same time we saw the rise of "social exclusion" as a theme, firstly in European policy circles, and the rapidly growing in UK discourse. The common theme was the need to change institutions to make them more inclusive, rather than to change individuals to fit a traditional, and arguably outmoded, model of higher education.

Current conceptions of widening participation

As a result of this emerging shift in the relationship between participation and the services which higher education institutions provide, the national Action on Access partnership, funded by HEFCE to support the development of widening participation across the system, has developed a useful five stage model of the student life cycle.

The first stage is aspiration raising, which recognises the fact that the barriers to participation often lie at much earlier stages in the education process (in fact, recent research for the DfES suggests that the strongest factors which determine who participates in higher education have their roots in early childhood and in social class). Action to address this question calls for close working relationships between higher education institutions and schools and colleges as well as the organising of initiatives like summer schools, taster sessions and visits. Some institutions have adopted more exotic initiatives like interactive websites and junior membership of the University. Such activities encourage young people to see higher education as a legitimate and natural objective and provide an opportunity to become familiar with the higher education environment, both in terms of ways of thinking and working and of physical familiarity.

The second stage is pre-entry support, providing additional opportunities to prepare for higher education. this can range from a full-blown access course to short preparatory programmes designed to fill specific gaps in pre-entry education. It can also include opportunities to become familiar with issues like student finance and accommodation. The third stage takes us into the higher education experience itself. The evidence on participation and premature withdrawal is that most students who fail to complete degree programmes leave very early, having failed to cope with the transition stage. Institutions are gradually developing systems to identify such students and ensure that tutorial and other support is in place at that stage. The fourth stage is the "moving through". Although the chances of early drop-out are much reduced after the first semester, risks still remain and institutions are slowly beginning to identify strategies for helping the students most at risk to overcome these. The issues here are social as well as academic, since it is commonly a failure to establish a personal affiliation within the institution, whether it be to a discipline, a social or recreational group, which leads to alienation and withdrawal. However, there are some particular difficulties about phases three and four, since privacy and data protection constraints can make it difficult for institutions to identify those students most in need of support.

The final stage, and one which has been a relatively neglected until recently, is employability. When the issue first became evident it was with students from ethnic-minorities. Institutions which had become quite successful at recruiting from those ethnic minorities under-represented in higher education began to find that their graduates were being discriminated against in the labour market. Similar experiences have been faced in the past by women and disabled graduates and institutions are gradually putting processes in place to help overcome this. However, this requires the closer working relationship between the university and the Employer community and has been common in many institutions.

HEFCE's interventions

What then has been the role of the Funding Council? HEFCE has been committed to widening participation for some years, although its interventions have not always been very well co-ordinated or coherent. The Council have now recognised this and are planning to simplify and rationalise the various interventions. These have included premium weightings to recognise the additional costs associated with particular kinds of students: for part time and mature students; project funding, to support specific initiatives to pilot a new services and develop approaches; the funding of additional student numbers, to encourage institutions to diversify their recruitment profile; the funding of partnerships with further education institutions and schools. One major thrust in the last three years has been the development of institutional strategies. The requirement to produce an institutional strategy and action plan has been progressively introduced, reflecting the view that all institutions should regard widening participation as a part of their purpose but that this should be integrated in to the working of the institution in ways which recognise its unique identity and context Ministers have recently indicated an intention to make the submission of a satisfactory strategy for an action plan a condition of all teaching funding (not only for widening participation related funds).

In the last year or so HEFCE has come to recognise the confusion caused by a these multiple approaches, confirmed by a recent evaluation which they have commissioned, and they are now committed to adopting a more streamlined and strategic approach. The key elements of this structure and the underpinning principles on now fairly clear. First, the Government's commitment to ensuring that 50 per cent of all people should have some experience of higher education before the age of 30 is firm and continuing, although precisely what this means remains unclear. Cynics suggest that at some point it will be necessary to fudge the definition of "Higher Education". A more positive view would suggest that this reflects a proper reconfiguring of our understanding of higher-education and its purposes for reasons which are social and economic, rather than merely directed at ministerial manifesto commitments. Secondly, it is likely that the strategic emphasis will continue and be strengthened. Institutions will be encouraged to embed their approaches to widening participation in their overall approach to admission and diversity. Institutions will be expected to be able to explain their mission and how that mission reflects government priorities and is going to be operationalised. A further, and perhaps more contentious direction is the strengthening of planning in some form. We have seen, in the creation of the Learning and Skills Councils, a desire by Government to plan further education provision more coherently in response to economic and social needs, especially at local and regional level. This approach sits uneasily alongside the much less directive higher education model but it seems likely that at some point these two models will

converge. Fourthly, it is likely that we are seeing a serious reconfiguration of the boundaries between further and higher education. We already have more students on higher education programmes in further education colleges than were in the whole higher education system at the time of the Robbins Report. The launch of Foundation Degrees is a further step towards the delivery of higher education through such colleges. Finally we are likely to see a refining of performance indicators. The indicators which HEFCE first published in 2000 have considerable limitations as measures of institutional performance in this field, and a great deal of work has been going on within the Council to improve these and to avoid institutions being trapped into "post- code chasing".

The emerging strategy

I would suggest then that there will be three dimensions to the new strategy. The first of these will be the requirement for institutional strategies and plans. This is already in place but the regime is likely to become firmer, if not more prescriptive. Regional consultants will be expected to examine institutional strategies and plans more rigorously, and the work of the last three years, especially through the Action on Access partnership makes it possible apply a much more critical eye to what were once rather vague institutional proposals. The second strand will be the "Partnerships for Progression" initiative. This is, crucially, a partnership between HEFCE and LSC whose purpose is to plan and develop widening participation strategies and activities at regional level. The intention is to avoid a situation in which every institution is competing for the same "widening participation students", and to secure maximum benefits from activities carried out in a given region or subregion. The unresolved question remains how to make a commitment to widening participation compatible with the competing commitment to institutional diversity. Although these two are not incompatible, and there is no evidence that success in RAE is incompatible with success at widening participation, the view that widening participation is really the specialist field of some kinds of institution and staff remains deeply embedded in the system and culture. The third strand of the new strategy will be some form of consolidation of the formula funding levers, designed to cover the additional costs of working with a wider student group, rather than as a direct incentive to do so. The Audit Commission and the Parliamentary Select Committee have both suggested that the level of current premia need to be raised, and it seems likely that we will see this happen on a modest scale.

Some policy dilemmas

Finally there are a number of policy issues which we need to address. One is the tension between widening and increasing participation. If HEFCE's analysis is to be believed, these two have to be compatible because there are simply not enough traditional young people available to fill the vacant places. However, institutional diversity debates remains: if we wish to increase numbers of students from under represented groups there is an argument for concentrating the work in those institutions with the strong and established track record, rather than trying to bully reluctant institutions with little experience into tackling the issue. However, for many this is a moral issue: no higher education institution should be allowed to evade responsibility for a major social priority, and to do so would be to allow the development of a second tier higher education system for people with "non-traditional" qualifications and backgrounds. One dimension of this may be a

reconfiguration of the notion of "tertiary education". There is nothing inevitable about the distinctions which we currently draw in this country between further and higher-education either conceptually or institutionally and we may see the boundaries eroded or reshaped in radical ways. We can also ready see such developments emerging in some regions with partnerships and mergers between institutions across the boundaries.

We will, I believe, see increasing refinement of the measures of performance in higher education system to recognise the complexity of the widening participation agenda and the need to recognise increasingly subtle kinds of institutional mission. Alongside this I think, and certainly hope, that we will see improvements in the quality and consistency of data gathering. The quality of data has improved greatly in recent years, as a result of the work of HESA and HEFCE, but there is more to be done, especially in relation to part time students, whose participation is often rather erratically recorded. We will also have an increase in attention to vocational relevance and linkages. The emergence of the foundation degree is one clear example of this but it is likely that closer involvement in work based learning, which offers its own widening participation dimensions and a greater emphasis on CPD will be more prominent. Disability, which has sat on the margins of the widening participation agenda in recent years is also likely to move towards the centre, as the Disability Discrimination Act begins to exert pressure.

There are other issues which we may need to explore. There is the need to develop a curriculum well suited to a new and changing student cohort, and particularly to be sufficiently flexible to cope with the needs of a more diverse, and perhaps intermittently studying student body. Certainly at present the student retention figures for some of the institutions most successful at widening participation suggest that there is an unresolved problem here. There is also a growing thrust in government policy to emphasise learner voices in the shaping of the education system. The LSC has already put in place Student Satisfaction survey work which is likely to have an impact on how curriculum is designed and services provided in the FE sector. Similar emphases can be seen in fields like neighbourhood renewal and the Local Learning Partnerships, for whom articulating learner voices is a major priority. It would be surprising if higher education remained immune to such pressures, and the tradition of formal consultation through student unions is likely to be superseded by something rather more radical. We will see a further refinements of geodemographic data to enable us to identified more specifically which communities and groups are excluded from higher education and to make targeting, especially at the level of pre-entry and aspiration raising more effective. The issues of supply and demand will be explored further, to try to clarify exactly how far the demand for higher education is really in balance with supply (the underlying implication of the Supply and Demand Paper).

Above all, of course, is the long awaited review of student funding. There is increasingly clear evidence that current funding arrangements cause confusion and inefficiency, and that they actively discourage participation by the very groups targeted by Government. Whatever settlement emerges in the White Paper will have to grasp this thorny question.

Conclusion

These are, I believe, some of the issues and trends which will affect how we tackle widening participation over the next decade. There is no doubt that the issue will

remain high HE on the policy agenda and will have an impact, not only on marginal and preparatory services but on the shape of mainstream HE at both institutional and system wide levels. The evaluation of HEFCE's widening participation initiatives, which involved a major survey of some 700 academics across 60 institutions, suggests that this will not be fundamentally unwelcome among academics who recognise the injustice of the present situation, the economic and institutional need to tap a large untouched market, and the institutional urgency to fill student places. For a range of reasons, good and bad, we will be seeing more of widening participation.