

WHO HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BENEFIT FROM HIGHER EDUCATION?

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Abstract

Higher Education is framed as something that should benefit the many opposed to the few. This is emphasised in policy that supports the belief that everyone who has the potential to benefit from Higher Education should be able to (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014a). This notion of 'potential' however is adopted in varying ways across institutions.

This paper draws on a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of two access agreements from two institutions (one pre-1992 and one post-1992) situated within the same city. Whilst there were many differences within these agreements, this paper focuses on the notion of potential and who is targeted for these interventions. Examining this in the context of recent evidence on student attainment trajectories within compulsory education, this paper will explore how errant assumptions relating to how to identify potential may contribute to reproductions of inequality opposed to widening participation within Higher Education.

Introduction

Since the introduction of tuition fees for undergraduate students, all Higher Education institutions charging fees above a set level (currently £6,000) have had to develop strategies and initiatives to ensure these fees do not act as a barrier to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This has made widening participation activity a main stay of the work of all universities. Who is deemed at the suitable targets for this work and the extent to which wider society benefits from it is, however, variable. This paper explores one of the ways in which widening participation practices are shaped by understandings of who is eligible to benefit from this type of work, the notion of 'potential' and the demarcation of who potential students might be. This paper will explore how two universities use their varied interpretations of widening participation to shape who the beneficiaries of their work are through the analysis of two policy documents from two contrasting institutions in the same city. This analysis is situated as part of a wider doctoral study examining difference in widening participation practices across universities.

Essentially, this paper focuses on a pilot study for part of my doctoral research examining differences in widening participation practices. Since the introduction of fees for undergraduate students, universities have been required to put measures in place to ensure that – and I quote:

all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have equal opportunity to participate and succeed, on a course and in an institution that best fit their potential, needs and ambitions for employment or further study (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014a)

The reporting of these plans is done in a formal way through access agreements which are monitored and approved by the Office for Fair Access. Whilst this body defines the national strategy, offers guidance and can request amendments to

submitted agreements; institutions are given a certain level of autonomy in deciding how to allocate resources to support these aims. Broadly, these agreements are accepted without modification. In the year this study focuses upon – namely 2015/6 agreements, only 33 out of 162 institutions were requested to make amendments to their agreements (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014b). It should be noted that in the more recent submission, those covering the 2016/7 academic year that 103 out of 183 institutions were asked to revise their initial submissions so some progress is being made in terms of the level of challenge to what institutions are producing (OFFA, 2015).

Recent work by Claire Graham (2012) looking at prospectus and marketing material seemed to find an increasing homogeneity in approaches across institutions. This, however, did not resonate with my own experience working within the field so I chose to look at two institutions more closely; One a pre-1992 institution and one a post-1992 institution. I made the decision to focus on access agreements as unlike marketing and promotional materials, these documents offer a rationale for and more detailed outlines of what is being put in place to support under-represented groups to show they are addressing the targets of a national policy. This is unlike the public facing materials examined by Claire Graham whose purpose is to in effect sell the university to potential students. In doing so, this analysis will seek to move beyond the rhetoric of marketing into statements of value and details of work being done. This will enable us to see the ways in which policy does, or does not demonstrate a similar level of convergence.

Sample

These two institutions are geographically similar, being located within the same city in the north of England which has been anonymised and will be referred to throughout the paper as Norton. Old Norton being the pre-1992 institution and New Norton the post-1992 institution. These two institutions are very different in their history and nature. To go into too much detail would remove their anonymity however. One has a long history as a university and is a member of the Russell group, the self-titled 'elites of the field of higher education' and the other was designated a university more recently following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act having previously been a polytechnic.

Whilst I would not claim that the findings within this paper are echoed in all pre-1992 and post-1992 universities, this paper will begin to examine the similarities and differences in discourses and practices within these institutions. This exploration of similarities and differences will be extended through my doctoral research which will be examining a larger sample of institutions spanning the whole of England.

Methodological approach

I chose to use Critical Discourse Analysis to examine these access agreements as this methodology allows an exploration of not just what is said, but the way it is said. Furthermore, it enables an examination of issues of social justice and power and these are issues central to my research (Fairclough, 2003). Critical Discourse Analysis exists within a realist ontology as it sees the discourses within text as part of the mechanisms that shape the available actions of individuals within the social

world, something which aligns with my current observations and experiences. Fairclough talks about how ‘language constitutes and is constitutive’ (p.92) and this is particularly relevant in terms of access agreements which are rewritten annually in light of national guidance, local experiences and negotiation with future institutional strategic priorities.

Fairclough outlines the way in which ‘critical discourse analysis can draw upon a wide range of approaches to analysing texts’ (2003, p.6) and within extensive documents such as access agreements which run to 20 or more pages in many instances, the type of analysis that is feasible becomes constrained. Accordingly, this paper will focus on one theme that emerged from the discourses used and framed by each institution in their access agreements, that of ‘potential’. The documents were coded for a wide range of textual features including intertextuality, semantics, lexis, legitimation and assumption. Through coding these elements, codes related to content also emerged from the data and it is one of these that this paper will focus upon; the lexical framing of potential.

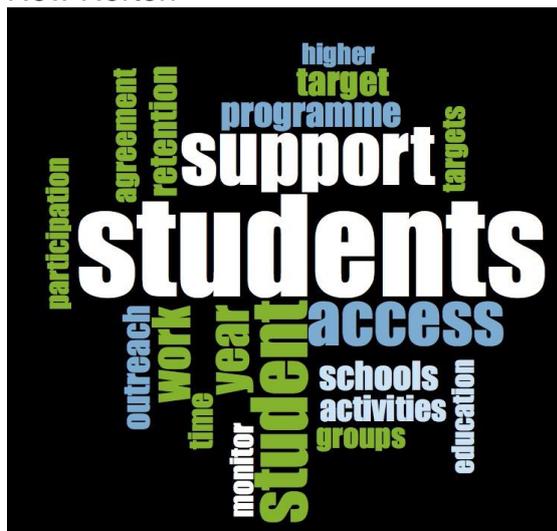
How are they similar?

At face value, both universities seem to address issues highlighted within the national policy which states:

Widening participation to higher education is about ensuring that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can access higher education, get the support they need to succeed in their studies, and progress to further study and/or employment suited to their qualifications and potential. (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014a, p. 3)

The way in which they do this and the facts and language they use to present them is, however, very different.

New Norton



Old Norton

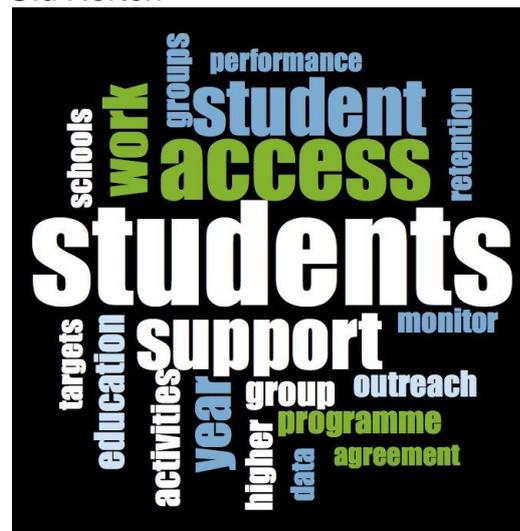


fig.1. relative word frequency within both access agreements

When the documents are analysed simply in terms of word frequency, it can be seen that there is much in common between both institutions. As was seen in the previous extract from the National Strategy for Access and Student Success, words such as access and support are central to what is being said and there are many other common issues being addressed such as retention and outreach. The difference, however, is in how they are being framed and utilized within the discourses presented in the documents.

How do they differ?

Both institutions seem to frame these agreements in different ways through their usage of words, vocabulary choices, justifications for their choices and sources of legitimation they draw upon. Within the text of New Norton’s access agreement, there is certainly reference to targeting in terms of disadvantage but there is no distinction between who can be targeted within those schools or areas. This is in stark contrast to Old Norton who build an image of ‘potential’, framing and shaping who they see as the deserving targets of these sort of interventions. Words such as ‘talented’, ‘most able’, and a framing of potential through attainment all shape who they see as ‘deserving’. It is important to reflect upon how this might affect young people in the same schools and communities who are not deemed to have this potential.

Financial	Ability	School type
Low socio-economic groups	Outstanding students based on their educational potential and merit	State Schools
Most disadvantaged	Pupil attainment and eligibility for Free School meals (FSM)	
Low income	Most talented students	
	Talented pre-16	
	Most-able disadvantaged	

fig.2 – language used to frame targets by Old Norton

Focusing on this notion of ability, in what could be considered a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1992), those students framed as not being the most-able or most-talented are unable to benefit from the work done by Old Norton. The institution may argue here that data shows that they are less likely to reach the entry requirements for their institution but this is infact often a fallacy.

Recent work by Sammons et al. (2014) and recently published research by the Education datalab (2015) debunks this myth, showing that often progress is anything but linear. Sammons and colleagues found that between Key stage 2 and Key stage 3, pre-school and primary school measures did not predict the amount of academic progress students made in English and Maths during their five years in secondary school. This correlates with the recent research by the Education datalab who analysed progress across all four key stages and found a heterogeneous range of progress trajectories which therefore puts into question previous attainment as a measure of future potential.

It could therefore be argued that potential is not only being constructed in terms of academic attainment. It is possible that there is something else going on here. To take up an argument framed by Bourdieu in *The State Nobility*:

In selecting students it designates as most gifted, that is, the most positively disposed toward it (the most docile, in the truest sense of the term), and the most generously endowed with the properties it recognizes, the elite school reinforces these predispositions through the consecration that it bestows simply by separating its students from the rest. (Bourdieu, 1996 p.102)

Therefore, widening participation within Old Norton is selecting students with potential based on its own assumptions of what a potential student looks like. This early attainment is something that is often less prevalent in areas of deprivation and therefore the demarcation of potential is focusing on a select group of students who meet markers of deprivation but who have also made a good early start. As work into the strategies adopted by white middle-class parents around schooling by Reay et al. (2013) found, this may unduly benefit middle class parents who 'play the game' through tactical school selection.

Whilst I would not argue that these students should not benefit from this work; In fact I would argue that all students should have access to work to support understanding of what university is and whether it is the right choice for each individual. However, what does need to be examined is the effect that non-selection for these interventions has on students who may have a slower initial start to making progress academically. By branding these students as unworthy of these interventions. This is potentially very harmful for these young people as where they do not possess a detailed knowledge of Higher Education, they may conflate this judgment with them not being suitable for University at all.

Conclusions

The varied constructions of potential could of course simply come down to differing understandings of what university is for. Is it a positional good to be bestowed on an elite and to be seen as a marker of distinctions or is it an opportunity for personal growth? Should student's trajectories be shaped by early attainment or decided through performance within higher education? The spread of outcomes in terms of performance within institutions with high entry criteria suggests that the grades attained at GCSE and A-level are not prescriptive of performance within higher education so their validity as a marker of potential could therefore be questioned.

It is clear that much work still needs to be done to explore these mechanisms of conceptualizing potential and the role it plays within widening participation. The next stage of this study aims to explore if this is an issue isolated to one institution or traverses across institutional boundaries. It will also explore how these policies are enacted by practitioners in ways in which these conceptions of potential may be reinforced or various subverted through practice.

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Biography

Jon is undertaking a part-time PhD at Staffordshire University. This focuses on the widening participation practices across different universities. Following several years as a secondary school teacher, he now works within a widening participation team as a practitioner. As such, his research explores the theory-practice divide from a sociological perspective.