Widening Access or Narrowing Student Choice? The Re-emergence of Elitism in the UK Higher Education System

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Abstract

Higher education systems in many parts of the world have struggled to reconcile falling state support with widening access and increasing participation of previously excluded groups. Evidence from the UK higher education system suggests that this tension has led to the re-emergence of a bifurcation of the education system along social class lines. The paper explores the experience of the different categories of UK-university as they manage the changed socio-economic environment in which they operate. Contrary to the aims of much EU policy and the various structural changes introduced within the higher education sector since the 1960s, lessons from the UK experience suggest that a form of elitism has re-emerged in the provision of certain subjects. We show how a combination of market forces, government policy and other developments in the UK higher education landscape may lead to the withdrawal of the key subjects for many vulnerable groups. We look at economics provision across the UK to show how a silent process of differentiation and stratification may take place and that this may be to the detriment of national policies on social inclusion in higher education.

Introduction

Like many EU countries the UK has undergone major structural change to its system of higher education provision. While the nature of the driver for change within individual countries is unique, the main collective force for change is the desire to improve the international competitiveness of the EU region. The desire at the EU level is to replicate the perceived dynamics of the US system of higher education, which is deemed to have furnished impressive economic and innovative performance. Trow (2000) casts doubts on the robustness of the resultant European model of the university and its ability to meet the challenges associated with globalisation due to an innate lack of flexibility of governance. Critically for Trow, and others, European models of Higher Education are characterised by high levels of government involvement, unlike in the US where market forces play a much larger role (Huisman, Meek and Wood 2007). The reliance on markets as an arbiter of US higher education provision reflects the significant structural change at two key junctures in its past[1] when it was necessary to rapidly expand higher education provision and the legacy of this change is deemed to have bestowed the competitive advantage of flexibility and adaptability on US universities. As Trow (2000) notes, the structural changes reflected wider societal change within the US (e.g. abolition of slavery) and consequently the ability of US universities to act autonomously in terms of provision and enrolment. The result is that the US is traditionally seen as more responsive to changes in the market for education and is able to pioneer new access arrangements such as credit transfer and articulation with high schools.

To emulate the success of the US higher education system and to meet the increased challenges of globalisation, the role of European universities has been gradually changing over the past 30 years. To better reflect the US model a conscious effort has been made to combine the traditional university missions of research and teaching with a new, third mission. EU universities now have an explicit mission of socio-economic engagement (Nelles and Vorley 2010) aimed at unlocking the knowledge within universities through a partnership between government, industry and Higher Education (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 2000). This utilitarian vision of the university mission has been heavily supported by national (Mawson 2007) and supranational bodies, especially within the EU (EU 2006, EU 2008) and further afield (OECD 2007). The move to a more utilitarian approach was an EU-wide phenomenon with the creation of the European Higher Education Area and compatible overarching frameworks for qualifications that were part of the Bologna process instigated in 2000, although Teichler (2008) questions how successful this has been. Adding to the momentum towards a utilitarian approach to the Higher Education sector, the 2007 Lisbon Declaration of the European Universities' Association recognised the concerns of universities by stating the need for university autonomy but deferred to the 'managerial and economic priorities' of governments (Anderson 2010). Traditional university activities of research, teaching and knowledge transfer activities are

[1] Two key junctures were the end of the civil war and the early part of the twentieth century.

deemed to become more effective at the socio-economic level if universities are encouraged to engage in each sector of the triple helix model: the knowledge society, economic competitiveness and social cohesion. Explicitly, the overall aim of EU higher education policy is to make the European university system a model of best practice by ensuring that there are sufficient resources, effective networks and increased outreach and international appeal of European universities (The Role of the Universities in the Europe of Knowledge COM 2003/58).

In the UK there has been a gradual move towards a triple-helix-type model for higher education In 1963 the Robbins Report (Committee on Higher Education 1963) paved the way for the creation of the third mission by recognizing the need to overcome the damaging effects of an overly-differentiated provision of post-school education by creating so-called chartered universities (i.e. new non-traditional universities). In 1992 the Further and Higher Education Act recognised the need to widen further socio-economic engagement in higher education by removing the distinction between universities and polytechnics/colleges. As a consequence, the UK Higher Education sector has become an intricate pattern of institutions able to perform the functions of a university, Tight (2011) with the result that the UK a more diverse Higher Education system than many European countries (Huisman, Meek and Wood 2007). While education is a devolved responsibility in Scotland, the Robbins and Dearing changes were fully adopted. This top-down approach to higher education reform resulted in a small country (Scotland) having nineteen university-type institutions (Universities Scotland 2012) and appearing to offer US-style flexibility and improved student choice. Allied to these changes there was a further weakening of the demarcation between higher education and further education through a series of articulation agreements between some universities and the further colleges. The result is that in Scotland 17 per cent of higher education-level students attend programmes delivered at Further Education institutions (Mullen 2010) leading to further education becoming more like US community colleges rather than old style technical colleges (Gallacher 2006). For the purposes of this paper it is the nature of the articulation between further education colleges and the universities that is the main area of contention when looking at issues of social inclusion.

Is there evidence of widening access?

Scottish policies designed to widen access to higher education to previously excluded groups has been a success. In 2009, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) introduced the ‘Framework for Equality, Access and Inclusion’ which set out and summarised the actions of the various stakeholders at national, regional and local level tasked with assisting in widening access but particularly to improve access to higher education. Data appears to confirm this policy has been successful, with around 20 per cent of entrants to undergraduate study entering universities through the articulation route

whereby students study Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework[2] (SCQF) Level 7[3] (Higher National Certificate) and Level 8 (Higher National Diploma) at a further education college before continuing to Level 9 (degree) at a degree awarding institution (Universities Scotland). SCQF Levels 7 and 8 define the first two rungs on the Scottish higher education ladder and by offering Levels 7 and 8 further education institutions play an important role in the pursuit of wider access. Figures show that in 2010-11, 185,290 Scottish students studied at Scottish higher education institutions while a further 37,220 students attended further education colleges to study for Higher National Certificates (17,968) and Higher National Diplomas (19,252). Thus around 17 per cent of students at Levels 7 and 8 attended a further education institution. (The figure for higher education is around 20 per cent higher if non-Scottish students are included but it is difficult to get a precise picture due to the way the data are gathered (Croxford, Howieson and Steele 2011However, as will become clear, taking the further education route to Levels 7 and 8 before attempting to complete a degree at university means that much of the richness of higher education landscape will be denied to those on this route. In addition, it is the socially excluded who traditionally take this route and therefore have a much more limited higher education horizon that those accessing higher education with school-based qualifications.

Impact of policy

While access to higher education has undoubtedly been widened, the real issue when discussing social inclusion is whether all groups have the same access to the whole higher education landscape. The nature of the issue is more subtle than gross numbers of the socially excluded actually attending university. There is a silent dynamic at work that operates on the demand for higher education and on the supply of higher education which leads to a bifurcation of the sector to the detriment of disadvantaged groups. The result is a higher education system characterised by product differentiation among universities and access stratification on socio-economic class grounds among students (Gallagher 2006). While the emergence of differentiation and stratification in the UK higher education sector has been established (see for example Gallagher 2006, Croxford and Patterson 2006) but what have not been identified before are the details of the silent dynamic at work. We present evidence that may be of interest to universities in other countries on the details of the silent dynamic and

[2] The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership promotes lifelong learning in Scotland.

[3] For a detailed explanation of the academic framework and the respective positions of HNC and HND level qualifications in the Scottish higher education framework see: http://www.scqf.org.uk/content/files/SCQF_Level_Descriptors_for_website_-_Feb_2010(2).pdf

how it appears to work against the aims of policies designed to alleviate social exclusion.

The relevance of widening access policies to the provision of university programmes is that if population groups previously under-represented in higher education have aptitudes and programme preferences that are systematically different from those of the groups that have traditionally populated the UK higher education system, and students entering universities through access programmes tend to study at certain types of institutions, then the pattern of demand faced by new universities will change and will also be different from the pattern of demand faced by old universities, with some programmes being a lot easier to fill than others. It is clear that students from lower socio-economic classes are much more likely to attend new universities and, to the extent that not having traditional academic qualifications will be reflected in different university programme preferences, will want to study other subjects.

As the discussion so far indicates, the number of students attending higher education has increased and the role of the further education sector has helped provide a pathway for many students new to higher education. However, a major imperfection in the UK system means that 'some students are disadvantaged at school compared to pupils at private schools and cannot get to the university they deserve' (Simister 2011:135). Gallacher (2006) shows how a dual process involving social stratification and differentiation by higher education institutions appears to militate against the erosion of this imperfect system preventing the establishment of a more meritocratic system. We now look at the experience of a subject, which has traditionally been viewed as one of the more difficult subjects and one requiring relatively high entry qualifications.

The emergence of differentiation in economics provision in Scottish higher education and the role of university autonomy

Recent research by the authors into the current state of economics degrees within the UK found that something quite profound has happened and that this had wider societal implications: economics had become an elite subject whose provision is restricted to a few elite universities. To help explain this it is possible to view economics provision as having two distinct elements, teaching (named economics degrees) and research. Analysis of the data reveals that old universities were much more likely to offer an undergraduate degree in economics than new universities and the difference is prominent. Indeed, the best predictor of whether a university offered an economics exit title was almost certainly whether it was categorised as old or new. The data set includes 65 new and 54 old universities. Approximately three quarters (48 out of 66) of the universities offering single programmes in economics, business economics or financial economics were old. In contrast, three quarters of new universities did not offer an economics exit award in 2011-2012.

In terms of named degree programmes and research, economics has disappeared in all post-1992 institutions in Scotland. So-called Chartered universities (those established under Robbins in 1963) while still offering economic degree programmes have to some extent retreated from economics research defined as entry in the Economics and Econometrics Unit of Assessment of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Only the four ancient universities maintain the duality of economics provision and economics research as defined above. This is an important point as this duality maintains the elitism of these universities and hence the future employment prospects of their students. The consequence of structural change in higher education is quite clear: economics has become an 'elite' subject increasingly the preserve of the ancient universities who draw their students mostly from the most advantaged sectors of society. Shattock (2001) identifies a set of themes that support this structural divide between what he calls the 'old' universities and the post-1992 institutions with one outcome being the retreat of some subjects from the latter group. Such research supports the notion of a process of rationalisation, whereby some institutions abandon certain subject areas and our research confirms that in Scotland this process has impacted on economics provision. A similar pattern emerges for the UK as a whole, with the best predictor of whether a university offers an economics title being whether it is old or new, with 75 per cent of old institutions offering economics degrees in contrast to only 25 per cent of post-1992 institutions.

Lessons for others

A key lesson for universities in other countries is the role played by universities in this process of rationalisation. In Scotland as in the rest of the UK, universities enjoy a high degree of autonomy in terms of deciding what provision they will offer prospective students. The continuing autonomy of universities appears to have resulted in a degree of rationalisation of economics beyond what any government would have seriously been able to propose without a major campaign of resistance by the economics profession. It is this autonomy which has enabled the re-emergence of a differentiated higher education landscape that was supposed to have been removed in the UK by the structural changes of 1963 and 1992 The interesting aspect is the emergence of clear differences in the extent of economics provision along the structural divide: all ancient and two chartered universities (Dundee and Stirling) had economics programmes and economics research, two of the chartered universities had economics programmes but no economics entry in the research assessment exercise (Strathclyde and Heriot-Watt) and finally all of the post-1992 institutions had no economics programmes and no economics research.

As mentioned earlier, the key issue is not access to higher education (access has been widened) but the gap between the most advantaged and the least advantaged in gaining admission to the ancient and chartered universities. Because many post-1992 institutions have abandoned key subject areas it is to be that expected job prospects

and access to the professions will be constrained. Scotland is not alone in this as a similar picture seems to emerge from England. According to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), while there have been substantial increases in participation in higher education among the least advantaged 40 per cent of young people over the last fifteen years, the participation rate among the same group of young people at the top third of universities has remained virtually unchanged over the same period (Office for Fair Access 2010). Moreover, the most advantaged twenty per cent of young people were around six times more likely than the least advantaged group to attend in the mid-1990s and this increased to around seven times by the mid-2000s. Thus, the evidence suggests that strategies to improve access have only been partially successful as equality in participation has not being achieved. This is our main thesis: that access to higher education has improved but it is not equal access to all subjects; for many students from disadvantaged backgrounds the door to economics remains almost closed. This raises some serious issues for policymakers.

Changes described in this paper would also seem to reflect a change in the nature of higher education, particularly in the new universities, where the emphasis is on training people for work rather than providing an education per se. In other words, the utilitarian approach favoured by Dearing has some unexpected results. With increased specialisation in the sector overall, the task of educating students in the traditional manner and subjects has to a much greater extent been allocated to the old universities. The recent criticisms from employer organisations appear to suggest that the new universities are not always being successful in their allotted role (CBI/NUS, 2011). If market rates of pay are a reflection, at least in part, of worker productivity, the fact that economics graduates earn relatively high levels of remuneration (Chevalier, 2011) suggests, all else being equal, that the study of economics raises to a greater extent than some other subjects the ability of individuals to contribute to economic growth and to enjoy the rewards from doing so. If members to lower socio-economic groups are unable to access the subject due to it being withdrawn from the sorts of universities that these sorts of people typically attend, this will risk damaging their career prospects. It is not possible to quantify the number of people who may select ‘second best’ subjects or who may decide not to go to university at all as a result of their preferred option not being available but it is potentially a serious loss. In a sense the market might be failing to allocate enough resources to the study of economics and this may be grounds for government providing some sort of subsidy for the study of economics in the new universities.

However, market forces, government policy and other changes in the UK higher education landscape would appear to have conspired to set the UK higher education system on a path that has reduced the opportunity for people from lower socio-economic groups to participate in the public debate on this vital issue. The reason for this is that if access to old and new universities is stratified along social class grounds (and there is a lot of evidence to suggest that this is the case - see for example, Gallacher, 2006 and Boliver, 2011) and if new universities are increasingly removing

economics degree programmes (and the evidence presented above shows that this is increasingly the case) then students from lower socio-economic groups will have less access to the study of economics at an advanced level. The resultant weakening in the voice of these groups may have skewed the national debate on the crisis in unexpected and undesirable ways. This is something which universities in other parts of the world need to be aware.

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