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'Widening Access' to higher education: the reproduction of university hierarchies through policy enactment

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ABSTRACT

Patterns of participation in higher education (HE) in the UK, as elsewhere, have been marked by social inequalities for decades. UK Governments have responded with a plethora of policies and agendas aimed at addressing this broad social issue. However, little is known about how higher education institutions (HEIs) interpret and 'enact' these policies in relation to institution-specific contexts. Drawing on concepts from policy sociology this paper examines how HEIs in one nation state, Wales, enact its Government's policy on 'widening access' to higher education. Interviews with a range of 'policy actors' along with analyses of institutional 'widening access' policy documents, reveal divergences between HEIs in how this policy agenda is interpreted and delivered. These differences reflect institution-specific contexts – not least their internal politics and assumptions about the type of students they admit, but also their interests and priorities in relation to their positions within a global, marketised, HE system. The implications of this for the reproduction of university hierarchies in the UK, as well as social inequalities more generally are brought to the fore.

'Widening Access' to higher education policy in Wales

'Widening access' has been a central agenda within higher education (HE) policy in recent decades in the UK as elsewhere (Bowes et al. 2013; Croxford et al. 2014). In the UK, this agenda has been predicated on the notion that some social groups (defined, for example, in terms of gender, ethnic background or 'less advantaged' social and economic circumstances) have been under-represented in HE and that this under-representation is, in some sense, 'unfair' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) 2011; Milburn 2012; Welsh Assembly Government 2009). Indeed, whilst patterns of participation in HE have increased substantially over the past half century in the UK, young people from the most socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and from Black and Asian ethnic groups remain significantly less likely to secure entry to HE, and to high ranking higher education institutions (HEI) in particular (Boliver 2013; Chowdry et al. 2013). As such, the implied notion of 'fair access' has been extended to embrace a concern over patterns of entry to different types of

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HEIs (BIS 2011). Correspondingly, a number of policies, targeted at various strategic levels (national, regional, institutional), have been developed that aim to deliver this 'widening access' agenda. HEIs across the UK have been positioned as key players in the delivery of widening access policy and have come under increasing pressure to adopt strategies for improving rates of participation amongst under-represented groups (McCaig and Adnett 2009; Milburn 2012).

The delivery of a 'widening access' agenda has, however, been complicated by devolution within the UK. Following the instigation of parliamentary devolution in 1999, responsibility for HE policy has been devolved across the four jurisdictions of the UK (Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England). This has had multifarious complex effects on HE policy, including differentiation in the approaches taken towards key areas of policy between the home nations (Gallacher and Raffe 2012; Rees 2005), illustrated most clearly in policies on student finance (see Gallacher and Raffe 2012). Widening access policies developed in Wales have, however, had a great deal in common with those in England and other home nation states, albeit with subtle differences of emphasis in different contexts (authors, forthcoming). This largely reflects, not only the nature of the Welsh devolution settlement, but also the close integration of the HE system in Wales with that in England (through, for example, student flows across the border) (Rees and Taylor 2006) which ensures that what is done in England has major implications for Wales (and indeed other jurisdictions in the UK). For instance, the marketisation of the HE sector and student recruitment policies, which have been spearheaded in England by the Westminster government, have had major impact across the UK as a whole (Gallacher and Raffe 2012).

We will argue, therefore, that similarities between England and Wales, and indeed, other nation states, means that the analyses of approaches to widening access adopted by HEIs in Wales can be extrapolated (albeit cautiously) more widely to understand the process of policy enactment and its implications in other parts of the UK and elsewhere. There are a number of reasons for this. Bowes et al. (2013, 2) highlighted in their international comparison of HE systems in six countries that there are very many similarities in the way in which education systems are organised and the factors which predict educational attainment and facilitate progression on to HE, despite structural, socio-cultural and economic differences between nations. However, perhaps even more importantly, all universities in Wales, like others across the globe, have been subject to the growing prominence of market-led policies which Croxford and Raffe (2015) argue has reinforced hierarchies within the HE sector. Universities have, therefore, had to deal with the pressing impact of league tables and other ranking systems on their strategic decision-making. As Hazelkorn (2007) has argued, as pressure on universities to position for status within university rankings has increased, competition for students, faculty, finance and researchers between higher education institutions, nationally and internationally, has intensified. How this culture of competition and stratification intersect with other policies which have quite different aspirations – to widen access, which are then 'enacted' by HEIs, has however, to date, been little examined. The analysis that follows will address this significant lacuna.

The Welsh Government's approach to 'widening access' to HE in Wales

The centrality and significance of the 'widening access' agenda in higher education policy in Wales was rehearsed by the Welsh Assembly Government 2009 HE strategy, entitled 'For Our Future: The twenty-first Century higher education strategy and plan for Wales'.[1]

This strategy positioned widening access to HE as an important means through which the Welsh Government's dual priorities of economic development and social justice would be met. Tasked with delivering this agenda, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) developed its 'Strategic Approach and Plan for Widening Access to Higher Education' (referred to as the 'Approach' for brevity from here on) in which it set out its priorities for widening access to HE in Wales. The HEFCW envisaged a particular approach to widening access in which an 'all-age' agenda was central. This was articulated through an emphasis on 'flexible learning opportunities' (Approach, 5) including part-time and work-place opportunities for study and on 'clearer progression pathways to higher education … in place from school, community, workplace and further education' (Approach, 11). It alluded to the role of pre-degree qualifications such as Foundation Degrees (FDs), work-place opportunities for study as well as community settings or further education (FE) colleges in supporting progression to HE level study. Since these modes of study (flexible, part-time) and levels and places of study (i.e. Foundation Degrees, delivered in community settings or FE colleges) typically attract mature learners (Colleges Wales 2016) they were central motifs through which the HEFCW's 'all-age' agenda was articulated.

Whilst the 'widening access' agenda has been central within HEFCW's policy texts in recent years, it has been less than prescriptive about how HEIs in Wales should deliver it. This reflects the relative autonomy which HEIs enjoy over their curricula, staffing, strategic directions and freedom to seek out diverse forms of funding (Welsh Assembly Government 2009). However, since universities in Wales, as in the UK more widely, operate within a political context which defines their boundaries of autonomy (Tapper and Salter 1995) and are positioned prominently in delivering government agendas (Welsh Assembly Government 2009), there are important questions about how HEIs interpret, translate and 'enact' Government widening access policy. If we are to understand the role that HEIs play in addressing unequal rates of participation in HE in Wales and the UK more widely (Boliver 2013; Harrison and Hatt 2010; WISERD 2015), then examining their enactment of 'widening access' policy on the ground is a crucial place to start.

Policy enactment

A plethora of studies has documented the complexity of both the policy-making process (Gornitzka, Kogan, and Amaral 2005; Reynolds and Saunders 1987; Trowler 2002) and its translation and implementation by educational institutions (Ball 1994; Ball et al. 2011; Braun et al. 2011). Much of this work has emphasised the importance of contextual factors in framing the negotiation, interpretation and translation of policy from 'the bottom-up' (Ball 1994; Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012; Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010; Braun et al. 2011; Morgan-Klein and Murphy 2002; Sin 2014; Singh, Thomas, and Harris 2013). Trowler (2002) for example, described the implementation of formal policy as contextually contingent, taking different forms in different higher education institutions and departments. Illustrating this, Morgan-Klein and Murphy (2002) reveal how local contexts and institutional concerns mutate widening access policies in Scotland into recruitment practices as they are implemented by universities. At the HE level, processes of interpretation and translation within institutional contexts are further complicated by the relative autonomy which HEIs enjoy in relation to government policies. Indeed, it is precisely this autonomy, combined with the descriptive rather than prescriptive nature of the Welsh Government

and HEFCW's widening access policies, which provides unique opportunity for examining how institution-specific factors frame and shape the enactment of policy on the ground.

These considerations provide the impetus for this paper. Echoing Braun, Maguire, and Ball (2010) and Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012), we move beyond viewing policy as a taken-for-granted process of implementation or 'delivery' and instead understand it to involve a process of interpretation, translation and recontextualization within and by institutions which have nuanced local contexts and diffuse sets of discourses (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012; Ball et al. 2011; Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010). The paper aims to elucidate the role of institution-specific contexts in the interpretation, translation and 'enactment' of widening access policy. These contexts include universities' ethos, mission and material conditions (including their buildings and budgets), as well as their positions in a global, marketised and hierarchically differentiated HE system which shape their interests and priorities in relation to student recruitment. Universities in Wales, like those in England and elsewhere, are positioned within wider hierarchical structures which define the HE system. Despite the dismantling of the binary divide between polytechnics and universities in 1992 following the passing of the Further and Higher Education Act which enabled polytechnics to seek university status (Boliver 2013; Croxford and Raffe 2015), status differences between the 'old' (pre-1992) universities and 'new' (post-92) universities continue (Boliver 2013; Croxford and Raffe 2015). The 'older' universities have tended to remain more research intensive, to operate more selective processes of student recruitment and have occupied more prestigious positions within university league tables. There are also hierarchies *within* the 'old system' with the Russell Group of 17 Universities dominating league tables. All of this equates to a highly differentiated, hierarchical HE system in Wales and the UK more generally (Boliver 2013; Croxford and Raffe 2015). This is the context in which widening access policy is 'enacted' (Ball et al. 2011; Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010; Singh, Thomas, and Harris 2013) by HEIs in Wales, and it provides an important lens for our analysis. In examining how policy actors located in HEIs 'enact' widening access policy, we aim to provide a more detailed understanding of how policy enactment occurs within the physical and discursive contexts which characterise educational institutions (Ball et al. 2011; Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010; Singh, Thomas, and Harris 2013).

Methods

The study

Our analyses draw on data collected as part of a wider Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and HEFCW funded study, undertaken between 2013 and 2015, which examined universities approaches to widening access to HE in Wales. In this paper, we focus attention on the eight HEIs (excluding the Open University (OU)[2] in Wales) which existed at the time of the research (2013–2015). Whilst the focus of our analysis is on HEIs, we draw largely upon the voices of individuals, including widening access practitioners and heads of admissions, to illuminate how HEIs 'enact' widening access policy. We acknowledge that this adds another 'layer' to the policy process, as these individuals are tasked with translating and interpreting their own institutions' policies. Nonetheless, since these 'policy actors' (Braun et al. 2011) work within institutions with distinct cultures, heritages, and positions within wider structural and hierarchical relations within the HE sector, their

voices provide invaluable windows for examining how institutional factors contextualise the enactment of Welsh Government widening access policy by HEIs.

Data collection

The data derive primarily from semi-structured interviews carried out with 13 widening access 'practitioners' who were directly involved in the delivery of 'widening access' policy on a day-to-day basis in these eight universities in Wales. For the most part, a single practitioner was interviewed from each institution, but where a university had more than one key widening access practitioner/manager, interviews were conducted with more than one individual. (Four institutions had more than one key widening access practitioner at the time of the research). We have used the broad title 'widening access officer' (WAO) to describe staff who were directly involved in delivering programmes/courses such as outreach programmes in their institutions, and the term 'widening access manager' (WAM) to describe staff who had managerial responsibilities over small teams of widening access officers and managing the strategic direction of 'widening access' aims and objectivity in their university. We have also stated where people were managers or directors of widening access/participation centres within their universities. These centres typically provide both accredited and non-accredited programmes, many of which directly support progression to degree level study and typically attract mature/non-traditional learners. Beyond these broad categories we have refrained from providing more precise information regarding widening access practitioners' job titles because doing so would threaten the anonymity of individual participants and the universities in which they worked. This is a particular concern given the small number of HEIs and therefore widening access practitioners in Wales. Interviews with widening access practitioners explored a range of topics, including widening access practitioners' approaches to delivering widening access in their HEI, the target groups they worked with, and their approaches to evaluating widening access programmes or interventions.

In addition, data is drawn from interviews conducted with five Heads or Deputy Heads of Admissions at these universities. Admissions staff are important 'policy actors', and whilst the data drawn on here is modest it was hugely valuable for illustrating the coherence between institutional priorities in relation to student recruitment and selection, and approaches to widening access. These interviews also provide insight into how widening access policy is interpreted and enacted at this level, namely in the decisions made about applicants. Interviews with Heads/Deputy Heads of Admissions explored approaches to making decisions about applicants in relationship with institutional agendas relating to widening access. Interviews were conducted in a location on the campus of the university in which these practitioners worked, and lasted between 30 min and an hour.

Institutional widening access policy is also documented in texts, including widening access strategies.[3] Thus, we also draw on excerpts of data derived from the analysis of institutions' 2011/2012 to 2013/2014 Widening Access strategies. Each HEI in Wales, at the time of the research, had to produce a biennial widening access strategy, which are publicly available online and document each HEI's approach to widening access, including their objectives and targets in relation to widening access. These documents are therefore important sources of data for examining how HEIs in Wales approach widening access.

Given the small number of HEIs in Wales, special care has been taken to preserve their anonymity. They will, therefore, be referred to as either 'research intensive' or 'teaching

intensive' HEIs throughout in order to protect the identity of individual institutions. In this paper there are four 'research intensive' HEIs and four 'teaching intensive' HEIs. On the whole, the research intensive universities are the oldest universities in Wales; all four of them were established in the mid-late nineteenth Century or the early twentieth Century. These universities have historically occupied more prestigious positions in university league tables and have had stronger research environments and higher entry requirements. By contrast, the teaching intensive universities are more varied in terms of their duration of time as universities; three out of four of them were newly established as universities following the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. One of these institutions is the product of a merger between multiple institutions, one of which became a university in the early 1970s. Teaching intensive HEIs have tended to occupy lower positions in university league tables, have less intense research environments and lower entry requirements.[4] Thus, whilst this binary categorisation of research and teaching universities conceals the more nuanced distinctions between them, it is useful for capturing broad differences in their culture, ethos, status, student bodies and interests within a marketised and highly differentiated HE system. As we shall see, these are important contexts in which policy enactment takes place.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted on the documents and interview transcripts, guided by the following questions: how do HEI's approach widening access? What are the pertinent mechanisms (besides financial support[5]) for supporting entry to groups under-represented in HE? To what extent do the approaches adopted reflect the situational, material, historical contexts of each HEI? Analysis involved attaching codes derived from the documents and interview transcripts to sections of data in the documents. Codes were derived from the data, and data was coded and categorised according to connections, links and consistencies between them in relation to their meaning. The wider literature provided a focus for the analysis and the identification of themes within the data. In this paper we discuss two of the most pertinent themes identified in the interviews and widening access strategies through this process; 'widening access through pre-entry activity' and 'widening access through the HE experience'. The first of these themes included two sub-themes; widening access through raising aspirations and secondly, widening access through progression to HE programmes. The second theme, defined by reference to the HE experience as a mechanism of widening access, was characterised by an emphasis on both the modes of curricula delivery (such as part-time options and HE delivered through FE colleges) and the curricula itself (such as the provision of Foundation Degrees (FD)). With reference to this data we show how the situated and material contexts (Braun et al. 2011), including HEIs' interests and priorities in relation to their positions within wider university hierarchies, have an important bearing on the particular configuration of emphasis placed on each of these themes, and therefore on the enactment of Welsh Government's widening access policy.

HEIs' enactment of HEFCW's 'Approach' to widening access to HE

Widening access through pre-entry activity

This theme, defined by references to 'out-reach' activities, emerged as a significant mechanism for addressing the issue of social inequalities in participation, and was an approach adopted by all HEIs. It included an emphasis on delivering outreach programmes which aim

to provide advice, information or guidance or 'raise aspirations' through university taster sessions, summer schools or workshops typically targeted at individuals from under-represented groups such as those living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas or areas with low rates of HE participation. Indeed, the emphasis on raising aspirations was particularly prominent in practitioners' reflections on their work, as illustrated in the following widening access officer's reflections on his work with adults in local communities:

> My role is to be on the ground and trying to engage community groups and try to facilitate and coordinate learning opportunities for those communities, raise their aspirations and hopefully make them think about higher education at some point in the future … the idea behind the programme is very much to raise people's aspiration. (WAO, teaching intensive HEI, A[6])

The following excerpt from a research-intensive university's widening access strategy also illustrates the emphasis on 'out-reach' work aimed as 'raising aspirations':

> We will stimulate interest and knowledge of higher education by increasing our outreach activities over the planning period by 25% … to build on the extensive activity we undertake with younger school children to encourage them to aspire to higher education in general rather than to [Redwood University][7] specifically. (Widening access strategy, research-intensive HEI, B)

Whilst a narrative of 'raising aspirations' through outreach work was a salient approach to widening access across all HEIs, there were, however, subtle differences between them in the emphasis placed on targeting children or young people through programmes aimed at raising aspiration, as opposed to adults and mature learners. This Head of Widening Access discussed how she routinely worked with children and young people in programmes aimed at raising aspirations, changing perceptions about university and providing advice or guidance in order to encourage participation in HE:

> I mean we're funded by the HEFCW so it's about raising aspiration, even in primary age children, that higher education should be for them. (Head of Widening Access centre, research intensive HEI, C)

By contrast, other HEIs placed greater emphasis on either raising aspirations or awareness of HE amongst adults, or on delivering programmes which support entry to HE (for example, through the provision of accredited courses like Access[8] courses and non-accredited bite-size courses which give potential students an experience of HE). This kind of provision typically attracted adult and mature learners without traditional qualifications such as A-levels. The widening access strategy of one teaching intensive HEI stated its aim:

> To develop a wide range of non-accredited taster classes linked to the [university] curriculum, and deliver these at outreach centers in [local communities]. (Widening access strategy, teaching intensive HEI, A)

Similarly, the following widening access practitioner located at another HEI, emphasised the work done with adults and mature learners through programmes designed to promote progression to HE:

> … The two partner colleges we have now, so that's [Seashore College] and [Garth College]. I pick up the 'Access' students and the colleges and do progression workshops with them and any other non-traditional student that might be within that FE cohort, that's a developing area of work. (WAM, teaching intensive HEI, E)

The particular configuration of emphasis on delivering programmes targeted either at children and young people on the one hand, or adults and mature learners on the other, reflected nuanced institution-specific contexts, including institutions' historical positions

within university hierarchies and their concomitant priorities and agendas in relation to these. Both research and teaching intensive HEIs delivered pre-entry programmes such as Access courses aimed at adults, and courses aimed at 'raising aspirations' amongst young people from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds. However, the emphasis on them was subtly different, with the latter being particularly pertinent amongst the more research intensive HEIs, reflecting the dominance of young under-graduate students within their student bodies. Delivering programmes aimed at 'raising aspirations' enabled research intensive HEIs to appeal to a meritocratic ideal which stipulates that if you are good enough you can gain entry whatever your background (McCaig and Adnett 2009), consistent with their concerns with the competitive selection of high attaining applicants and their relatively high entry requirements. The following practitioner's emphasis on 'raising aspirations' and recruiting 'high calibre students' reflected the university's enduring concerns with status and reputation:

> I'm in charge of making sure the things that we do are targeted towards getting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or backgrounds of non-tradition going to HE in to the university. But it's not just bums on seats recruitment, it's about raising aspiration as well so the goal is to try and link it all together. So we're linked in with the undergraduate recruitment department so that we can see that widening access, aspiration raising ties in very nicely with recruitment and bums on seats admissions. (WAO, research intensive HEI, B)

This same practitioner goes on to say:

> You know, we're always, we're always trying to encourage them [the recruitment team] to recruit the highest calibre students because that's what we want to do and that's what undergraduate recruitment is all about.

The 'situated context' (Braun et al. 2011), made up of both this HEI's distinct position as research intensive within a marketised HE system, and the preponderance of young people within its student body, clearly influence and shape the interpretation and enactment of widening access policy. The historic preoccupation with recruiting a largely young, 'able' student body was also reflected in the words of another widening access manager also located in a research intensive HEI:

> I suppose if when you are working with primary schools it is sort of a long way off to go to higher education. It is still about convincing or showing them that the university is not a place on the hill that they can't go into and there's lots of stuff going on and just even those first steps kind of … I don't think you can set aspiration at early enough age really. (WAM, research intensive HEI, D)

Unlike some of the more teaching intensive HEIs which recruit a more diverse student cohort, this university has traditionally recruited a relatively young and high attaining student body, and has occupied relatively prominent positions in university league tables. Reflecting this, raising aspirations amongst (high attaining) but non-traditional young people was a key feature of its approach to widening access.

By contrast, pre-degree level programmes (such as Access courses, and those delivered in the community) which either provide potential students with a 'taste' of HE level study or support progression to degree level programmes, tend to target adult non-traditional leaners. Whilst this kind of provision was a feature of research intensive HEIs, it tended to be compartmentalised and delivered within a separate (physical) space on the university campus (such as 'life-long learning' or 'widening participation' centres) rather than being delivered in the mainstream part of the university as part of its wider curricula. This manager

of a widening participation centre located within a research intensive university, reflected on the types of programmes the centre delivered:

> So programmes like our ['Routes'] programme is non-accredited, so it instils confidence, study skills, IT skills it prepares them for the step up into accredited levels of study but the ['Routes'] programme, the prep for BA English programme and our Foundation Certificate are all designed to afford progression towards either accredited programmes or more particularly towards the part-time degree. (WAM, research intensive HEI, F)

The physical separation of sites on the university campus which deliver programmes and courses which tend to attract mature leaners not only reflects this university's agendas and missions, but also plays a role in constructing its image and reputation as high status: full-time degree programmes are prominent while lower status programmes (part-time, pre-degree level qualifications) are (physically) marginalised. One 'widening access' manager located at another research intensive university commented on the separation of this sort of provision (i.e. part-time, pre-degree 'Access' programmes). Speaking from the position as a widening access practitioner in the main part of the university this practitioner stated:

> That's [provision of pre-degree access programmes] our partner people really, in the [Life-Long Learning Centre]. We tend to not go down that road so much in our mainstream undergraduate recruitment because we are, our, our target group is you know, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen year olds coming straight from school that tends to be, we don't work so much with part-time and mature students, [Life-Long Learning] do that. I know they've got different projects in place to do that. (WAM, research intensive HEI, B)

The above university's historical position as research intensive and high status was reflected in the preoccupation with selecting (high attaining) young applicants and therefore on targeting young people in their widening access outreach work. This emphasis meant that programmes which typically support entry to a broader student cohort, including mature non-traditional students, were rendered less significant in their approach to widening access to HE. We can see here that when policy is enacted by policy actors, it bears the imprint of the contexts in which it is enacted, be they cultural, natural, institutional or departmental (Sin 2014). The above cases vividly reveal how historical institutional contexts, including the predominance of a young student body with relatively high entry rates and qualifications, strongly influence, if not determine, how widening access policy is interpreted and enacted by institutions, as revealed in the reflections on those tasked with delivering widening access policy within their HEIs.

Widening access through the HE 'experience'

In contrast to an emphasis on delivering outreach programmes at the pre-entry stage was a second theme which emphasised the HE 'experience' as an important mechanism for addressing social inequalities in HE participation. Here, it was the mode of delivery of HE, (including flexible learning opportunities, part-time, work-based or college based learning) and the HE curriculum itself (including Foundation Degrees, Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HND)), which were positioned as important mechanisms of widening access. The latter is quite distinct from the sorts of programmes delivered at the pre-entry stage discussed above which are specifically designed as tools for 'widening access' to HE. By contrast, the sorts of programmes discussed here, such as FDs, HNCs and HNDs are under-graduate HE level qualifications in their own right. They

have a strong vocational focus and provide entry to employment as well as progression to degree level study.

All of the HEIs delivered 'flexible learning opportunities' (such as part-time opportunities) and a curriculum which supported progression to degree level study. However, the extent, breadth and centrality of this approach as a mechanism for addressing social inequalities in access to HE differed massively between them. At teaching-intensive universities, flexible learning opportunities (including part-time and bite-sized options) as well as programmes designed to support progression to HE (such as FDs) were central features of their provision within the institution. This widening access manager's emphasis on FE partners, part-time options and the provision of vocational HE level programmes attracting largely mature learners reflects the character of its student body in which mature and part-time learners feature prominently:

> Through our FE partners we offer more students learning through part-time roles than we do full-time in the FE partner colleges so we have large foundation degree programmes in business and management, in the creative industries, in health and social care which are entirely part-time. (WAM, teaching intensive HEI, G)

In teaching intensive universities such as this one, particular pedagogical and curriculum features (such as part-time study, provision of pre-degree programmes like FDs, and accrediting HE level programmes in partner FE colleges) were not only important aspects of their approach to widening access, but were embedded features of their provision, reflecting their historical agendas and ethos. The above university's heritage as a technical institute and training college serving adults at the beginning of the twentieth Century has left an enduring imprint on its pedagogical and curriculum features. As such, the distinction between these features and its approach to widening access were blurred, as strategies which support access to non-traditional students such as part-time, flexible modes of study, programmes delivered in the community, were already embedded in the university's provision. This is illustrated in the following practitioner's excerpt when she alludes to the distinctiveness in her universities' approach to widening access; its emphasis on programmes targeted at adults in community venues:

> I don't know of anywhere else that is delivering in over twenty-five different community venues, it has a partnership with adult community learning, so from level one right through to level four so we're part of the [Woodshire Adult Community Learning]. (WAM, teaching intensive HEI, G)

The sorts of programmes this widening access manager mentions were seen as significant means through which to support entry to under-represented groups, namely, mature non-traditional HE participants. This teaching intensive HEI has a student body comprised of relatively large numbers of mature students, and of students drawn from its local area through its partnerships with local colleges. Its historical location and ethos therefore provided the context for the interpretation and enactment of widening access policy. Indeed, in the more teaching intensive HEIs, links with local FE colleges (which have historically been important arenas for delivering pre-degree level HE programmes in the UK), were significant means through which to support entry to under-represented groups, as the following widening access strategy implies:

> The University's partnership with FE colleges has enabled the joint development of a number of new programmes to be offered at FE colleges … There are now opportunities for seamless

transition between the FE Colleges and HE for students, as well as the sharing of expertise between staff. (Widening Access Strategy, teaching intensive HEI, E)

Evident here is what Morgan-Klein and Murphy (2002) refer to as the 'entanglement' of agendas and concerns in relation to student recruitment with discourses of widening access. This was reflected in the emphasis placed on flexible modes of study and particular forms of curricula such as Foundations Degrees. These emphases are coherent with both social justice agendas and institutional concerns with recruitment and institutional survival as they are consistent with the recruitment of a diverse student body, including mature and part-time students. This entanglement was particularly pronounced amongst the more teaching intensive universities. Here, the entwining of concerns and priorities in relation to recruitment, with discourses of access, helps construct the image of the institution as one in which widening access to particular student groups forms a significant feature of its agenda. Policy enactment is, therefore, not only informed by institutional contexts, but is also intimately bound with the construction of institutional narratives about how an institution works and what it does (Ball et al. 2011; Braun et al. 2011).

This institutional narrative is also articulated through admissions procedures and recruitment strategies. In the following interview, a Head of Admissions at a teaching intensive HEI rehearses a narrative in which a particular type of student, and a particular mode of provision (part-time study), is prominent. This narrative is consistent with the approach to widening access at the university in which there was substantial emphasis on targeting mature learners through the provision of flexible pathways to HE and the provision of part-time modes of study. Such practices which provide the vehicle for implementing widening access policy, including recruiting mature and part-time learners, are then, integrally bound with institutional concerns and priorities regarding student recruitment:

> 64 per cent of our students came from Wales, 18 per cent from England … . so yes, part-time recruitment is a big part of what we do. But again, that's the very nature of the vocational element of the institution that we recognise that so many of our applicants, over 50 per cent, are aged 21 and over. (Head of Admissions, teaching intensive HEI, G)

Policy enactment is thus a process of creative, sophisticated interpretation (Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010), located in and shaped by particular contexts including universities' priorities and interests in relation to their position within a marketised HE system, and their manifest historical cultures and ethos. This Head of Admissions worked at the same teaching intensive university as the widening access practitioner discussed earlier whose institutional heritage as a technical college which recruited adult learners locally has left an enduring imprint on its approach to widening access and student recruitment. By contrast, another Head of Admissions, this time located in a research intensive HEI, alluded to the limited provision of part-time opportunities for study at his university, reflecting its relatively young student body and its preoccupation with providing conventional full-time under-graduate degrees:

> It's very limited to be honest, most of our postgraduate programmes would be available on a part-time basis, we also have the facility for students to study our degree programmes on a part-time basis. But they're not, we don't have a very large take up because the timetable is unlikely to suit most people. (Head of Admissions, research intensive HEI, F)

Again, we see how institutional contexts, including institutional concerns over status in relation to their positions within a hierarchically organised HE system, frame the interpretation and recontexualisation of widening access policy, and their approaches to widening access.

This in turn helps discursively construct the institution, in the case of the above university, as a research intensive, 'high status' institution.

Discussion

We have cast our lens on the approaches adopted by HEIs in Wales to addressing social inequalities in HE participation within the context of a marketised, increasingly competitive, stratified HE sector. There was a great deal of similarity between HEIs in terms of their approaches to addressing issues of access and social inequality, (illustrated, for example, in the substantial emphasis on programmes aimed at 'raising aspirations'). This reflects a globalised HE system in which all HEIs are positioned and which to some extent, has homogenised their approaches to widening access. However, our analysis revealed subtle variations between HEIs, not least in their emphases on approaches which typically attract mature as opposed to young learners. The particular configuration of emphasis placed on each distinct approach is not arbitrary. It reflects historic differences between HEIs in their cultures, ethos and student bodies and institutional interests and priorities in relation to their positions within a hierarchically differentiated market-driven HE system.

The intimate relation between widening access agendas and institutional interests and concerns over status within a hierarchically differentiated market-driven HE system was evident in the emphasis placed on outreach programmes aimed at raising aspirations targeted at young people. This emphasis was particularly prominent amongst the research intensive HEIs. Of course, the extent to which institutional concerns over status are mutually exclusive with the aims of widening participation is unclear. Approaches adopted by research intensive HEIs to widening access (including aspiration raising programmes) may play a beneficial role in supporting access to previously socially excluded groups, namely young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, as previous research suggests (Lasselle, Keir, and Smith 2009). On the other hand, practices which promote recruitment (including flexible modes of study, part-time study and partnerships with colleges) may also play an important role in supporting access to groups traditionally under-represented in HE. Indeed, evidence suggests that newer universities play an important role in addressing Welsh Government's agendas for widening access (StatsWales 2015).

The position of individual HEIs within a hierarchically differentiated and marketised HE system in the UK (Croxford and Raffe 2015) are, therefore, brought powerfully to bear on the subtle but distinct re-shaping of widening access policy by individual HEIs in Wales. Widening access policy in Wales, as elsewhere, is deeply 'entangled' (Morgan-Klein and Murphy's 2002) with institutional priorities and concerns in relation to either selection or recruitment of potential students as it is 'enacted' by HEIs. These contrasting aims (to recruit or select) may not necessarily contradict the aims of widening participation. Yet, the configuration of emphasis on approaches which are coherent with either aim may have implications for the types of students targeted and those they eventually admit, and the level and modes of HE (i.e. full or part-time, pre-degree or honours degree) into which they encourage participation. In our study, we catch glimpses of this in the emphasis placed either on raising aspirations and awareness of HE amongst young people in order to facilitate their progression on to a conventional form of HE, namely full-time under-graduate degree programmes, or by contrast, on recruitment strategies supporting entry to different forms of HE and here it is mature students who are brought to the fore.

The process of policy enactment doesn't simply have direct implications for the types of students targeted (and thus potentially admitted by universities); its implications are far more wide-reaching. Policy enactment is part of the discursive construction (and reproduction) of a hierarchically structured HEI system in the UK endorsed and encouraged by global 'league tables'. Provision of outreach work aimed at raising aspirations by research intensive HEIs helps reinforce their image as high ranking and meritocratic institutions (McCaig and Adnett 2009), thus helping to cement the HEI's image as high-status with a young student body and competitive admissions criteria. Since these approaches require little in the way of change on the part of the institution, the extent to which these approaches will bring about enduring and large-scale changes to inequitable patterns of participation in HE is questionable (Jones and Thomas 2005). Conversely, programmes which support pathways to HE which attract non-traditional (mature/adult) learners with non-traditional qualifications articulate an altogether different institutional narrative, one less preoccupied with status and whose student bodies are less dominated by young students. Whilst these universities might play an important role in addressing the Welsh Government's widening access agendas, they support access to a university experience which has traditionally been associated with less lucrative graduate employment opportunities and labour-market returns (Boliver 2013; Chevalier and Conlon 2003). Our evidence suggests that widening access policy enactment is crucially implicated in the (re)production (and self-perpetuation) of a hierarchically structured HE system in Wales and the UK more generally and of social inequalities more widely (Ball et al. 2001; Croxford and Raffe 2015; Forsyth and Furlong 2000).

Whilst the conclusions drawn here are modest, based on data from just eight universities in Wales, they are not insignificant. They have implications for HE systems elsewhere equally subject to market policies. If we were to examine different universities in other geographical locations we might well find different emphases and approaches to widening access, reflecting their nuanced situational contexts including their missions, concerns and priorities in relation to their positions within a hierarchical structured HE system. Yet it is precisely these same contexts which we would expect to frame the distinctive institutional-specific agendas and missions in which policy enactment takes place. As such, the implications of this study for understanding policy enactment in the UK, as well as internationally are profound. In the United States where the HE system is characterised by stark hierarchies and where market-led policies have been pursued particularly intensely (Dill 2003), questions of inclusion and exclusion have become central to questions of social justice. Widening access policies, as they are enacted in these contexts, may bear the imprint of market-orientated policies even more starkly, and therefore have pertinent implications for the types of students admitted to different HEIs (Stich 2012). Further research in these contexts would benefit from deep examination of the ways in which HEIs enact widening participation policies, a burgeoning policy emphasis in the United States in recent years (Hagedorn and Tierney 2002). The insights gathered here may do little more than prompt policy makers within Government and the University sector alike to consider afresh whether the various approaches to widening access documented in this research are compatible with the aim of social justice. This is a particularly pressing issue if these approaches support access for different student groups to different modes of HE which are associated with unequal labour market and life opportunities.

Notes

1. Since the publication of 'For Our Future', the Welsh Government has published its *Policy Statement on Higher Education* (2013). Our attention to 'For Our future' is necessary because the HEIs were guided by HEFCW's 'Approach,' published in 2010, which took direction from *For Our future* when the research was being conducted (2013–2014).
2. The Open University (OU) in Wales was excluded from the analysis because it has an altogether different mission, culture and admissions criteria to any of the other HEIs in Wales.
3. These are invariably referred to as the 'widening access and retention strategy' or the 'teaching and learning and widening access' strategy by institutions.
4. The categorisation of these institutions as either 'research intensive' or 'teaching intensive' is based on their position in University League tables in 2013 (The Complete University Guide 2013), when the research was conducted.
5. Whilst financial support was also a significant mechanism through which HEIs deliver 'widening access' it is not included in analysis because it did not feature in practitioners' accounts of their roles responsibilities in terms of widening access.
6. Each HEI has been given a letter to indicate the HEIs where excerpts came from.
7. Names of universities and people have been changed throughout in order to protect their identity. In addition, where specific widening access programmes are referred to by interviewees, these have been deleted or changed.
8. An 'Access' course is an accredited programme of study which preparers learners for HE level study.

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