

**WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN
HIGHER EDUCATION:
AN EXAMINATION OF INSTITUTIONAL
RESPONSES**

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Abstract

During the past 40 years higher education has moved from an elite to a mass system. Despite this expansion, the working class remain under-represented in HE. They are also disproportionately represented in less prestigious institutions and on lower status courses. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that students from lower SEGs have greater difficulty adapting to university life because of a mismatch between their cultural capital and the middle class culture they encounter in HE. In addition, empirical studies indicate that working class students have less success in the graduate labour market than their middle class peers. As a result of such concerns widening participation has become a key focus of government policy.

This research traces government policy on widening participation from Robbins (1963) through Dearing (1997) and to The Future of Higher Education (2003) and the passing of the Higher Education Act in 2004. It then examines how policy migrates from the macro to the HEI level, and then from senior to middle management. The study analyses the way policy is interpreted and developed at each stage of the policy migration process. In particular, the research uses documentary evidence and interviews with key institutional policy makers to try and gain a better understanding of the rationale behind HEI policy on widening participation.

The research demonstrates how institutional policy on widening participation develops out of a complex combination of economic and political influences, mediated by the values, beliefs and objectives (i.e. the culture) of HEIs. Whilst all institutions face the same economic and political environment, they have different organisational cultures and resources (financial, human, capital, etc.). The implication of this is that institutional responses to widening participation vary. However, the study concludes by identifying a number of general concerns that are felt to be worthy of further consideration by policy makers.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Widening participation encompasses issues such as ethnicity, gender, age and disability. Yet it is poor rates of participation amongst working class students that ‘is the most persistent failing of the post-compulsory education system in the UK’ (Thomas, 2001a, p. 67). In this country only 13 per cent of young people from unskilled manual backgrounds enter higher education (HE) compared to 70 per cent from professional families (Hayton and Paczuska, 2002a). The under-representation of students from lower socio-economic groups¹ is not, however, just a characteristic of the UK, but is a problem that exists throughout Europe and the rest of the world (Osborne, 2003).

The current Labour Government’s objective is ‘to increase participation in higher education towards 50 per cent of those aged 18-30 by the end of the decade’ (HEFCE, 2003a, p. 59). This includes the aim of increasing the participation rates of students from lower SEGs (Ainley *et al.*, 2002; Brown, 2002; Blanden and Machin, 2004). For example, Brown (2002, p. 75) points out that:

Ministers have practically fallen over themselves to emphasise that this expansion must and will be achieved by increasing the involvement in higher education of people from groups currently under-represented, particularly students in social classes III_m, IV and V.

This is encapsulated in the comments of the current Secretary of State for Education, Charles Clarke, who said ‘that if he had to choose between fulfilling the 50% target for participation and getting ‘a much better class basis’ amongst those currently enrolling ‘I would choose the latter’ (BBC News, 18 December, 2002)’ (Blanden and Machin, 2004, p. 231).

The Government's medium and long-term proposals for higher education are set out in the white paper 'The Future of Higher Education'.² In the chapter entitled 'Fair Access', the opening paragraph states:

Education must be a force for opportunity and social justice, not for the entrenchment of privilege. We must make certain that the opportunities that higher education brings are available to all those who have the potential to benefit from them, regardless of their background. This is not just about preventing active discrimination; it is about working actively to make sure that potential is recognised and fostered wherever it is found (DfES, 2003a, p. 67).

Therefore, whilst the Labour Government has continued the previous Conservative administration's emphasis on the economic rationale for increasing participation in HE (see Ward and Steel, 1999; Thomas, 2001a), it also explicitly refers to social justice and *widening*, rather than just increasing, participation. One factor influencing this may be the European Union's concern for social inclusion (Popkewitz and Lindblad, 2000). However, Halsey and Leslie (2003) point out that the European Union is hardly mentioned in the 'Future of HE'. Indeed, it is suggested by Harman (2004) that Australian, rather than European higher education policy, is more influential. This is seen, for example, in the Labour Government's decision to introduce a deferred tuition payment system similar to that currently operating in Australia.

RATIONALE AND FOCUS OF THE RESEARCH

The continued under-representation of students from working class backgrounds in higher education, combined with the Labour Government's commitment to widening participation, provides the underlying rationale for conducting this research. The study will critically examine how higher education institutions (HEIs)³ are responding to government policy to increase participation amongst those from lower social classes. Therefore, the focus is on institutional policy responses.

Policy

The term 'policy' refers to the written and verbal statements that provide a guide and set the boundaries within which institutional practice takes place (Harrison, 1999). According to Cole (1996) policy statements indicate 'just what the organisation will, and will not, do in pursuance of its *overall* purpose and objectives' (p. 134, italics in original). Cole (1996) also suggests that policy statements reflect an organisation's culture and belief system. Similarly, Ranson (1996) claims that policies 'are the operational statements of values – statements of prescriptive intent' (p. 265). He goes on to write that they:

have a distinctive and formal purpose for organisations and governments in codifying and publicising the values that are to inform future practice and thus encapsulate prescriptions for reform. Policies as Ball (1990) emphasises, project images of the ideal (*ibid.*, p. 265).

A number of writers have commented on the challenge of turning institutional policy into practice (Mills and Molloy, 1989; Williams, 1997b; Trowler, 1997; Thompson, 1997; Smith, 2000; Palfreyman, 2001). For example, Mills and Molloy (1989) emphasise how organisational sub-cultures affect the implementation of access and admissions policies. Likewise, both Thompson (1997) and Smith (2000) argue that attempts to embed institutional policy can run into problems when it is at odds with departmental cultures. Whilst Trowler (1997) discusses how HEIs find it difficult to fully operationalise policy because staff are able to find ways of pursuing their own objectives within the constraints of the control infrastructure introduced by management.

This study is not, however, concerned with the operational effectiveness of widening participation policies and the 'gap' between policy (either government or institutional) and practice. There already exists a substantial literature in this area, which often concentrates on particular micro-level aspects of widening participation policy, e.g. admissions (Williams, 1997a; Thompson, 1997; Tinklin, 2000; McLaren, 2001; Fenwick, 2002; Paczuska, 2002), student retention (Paul, 2001; Yorke, 2001; Farley,

2002; Thomas, 2002; Willmot and Lloyd, 2002; Hatt, 2003; Yorke and Thomas, 2003), student support (MacDonald and Stratta, 2001; Smith, 2002; Thomas *et al.*, 2003), pedagogy (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1994; Bourdieu *et al.* 1994; Vincent, 1994; HEFCE, 2002c) and partnerships between HEIs, colleges and schools (Harding, 2002; Lawley, 2002). It is not the intention of this study to replicate this research, or attempt to compare the effectiveness of different widening participation policies. Instead, this thesis will focus on the rationale behind HEI widening participation policies. A key feature of this research is the assumption that values play a major part in determining institutional responses to widening participation. This is why the definition of policy discussed above emphasises the role of values in policy formulation.

Policy migration

It might be expected that the formulation of government policy on widening participation involves a 'rational approach' (see Cooke and Slack, 1991; Harrison, 1999) or is based on a 'rational-purposive model' (see Trowler, 2002) where goals are articulated, information collected, then different policy options generated and evaluated, before decisions are arrived at. In practice, however, information is gathered haphazardly and policy is formulated in way that can be described as ad hoc, piecemeal and 'messy', rather than systematic or strategic (Ball, 1998; Pratt, 1999; Kogan, 2002; Miller *et al.*, 2002; Trowler, 2002). For example, Ball (1998, p. 126) describes the process as:

a matter of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from elsewhere, drawing upon and amending locally tried and tested approaches, cannibalising theories, research, trends and fashions and not infrequently flailing around for anything at all that looks as though it might work.

The process of government policy making also involves negotiation between different interest groups. Therefore, policy arises out of a complex political process involving power struggles within government, within the political party that has formed the

government, and with external groups representing the interests of their members. Moreover, macro-policy does not then simply transfer into organisational policy, but follows a 'trajectory' or 'migrates' through both space and time (see Raab, 1994; Ball, 1997, 1998; Kenway and Willis, 1998; Nixon *et al.*, 2002a, 2002b; Trowler, 2003). For example, widening participation policy migrates from government and through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) before arriving at HEIs.

HEFCE, overseen by the Department of Education and Skills (DfES), is responsible for funding higher education. In theory the function of HEFCE is to implement government policy. In practice, however, HEFCE interprets policy; it also determines policy within the parameters set by government; and it has an influence over the detail of policy (see for example Lewis, 2002). HEFCE also works with HEIs, which means policy does not simply migrate downwards from the government through HEFCE to be implemented by HEIs. This is because universities and colleges of HE interpret policy themselves and also 'speak back', to those 'higher-up' in the process. In this respect, HEFCE makes explicit reference to the way in which it uses the widening participation statements of colleges and universities and seminars involving HEIs to identify 'examples of different approaches and of good practice, which may be helpful to institutions as they develop their [widening participation] strategies' (HEFCE, 2001b, para.1).

At each stage in the process of migration, policy is modified (Williams, 1997b; Eggins, 1999). As it passes down the 'implementation staircase' policy makers may interpret or change policy in an attempt to meet 'local' objectives (Cyert and March, 2002). In addition, policies formulated at the highest levels are always incomplete (Ball, 1994b) so more detail can be added to policy as it migrates downwards. Therefore, a model of policy migration that is hierarchical and linear, and based on the notion that policy formulation and implementation can be easily separated, can be rejected as overly simplistic (see Fitz, 1994; Trowler, 2002). In practice, policy formulation and implementation overlap (and influence each other) in a dialectical process involving different participants (Fitz, 1994). Trowler (2002) goes further and argues that in practice 'there is only a limited distinction between policy-making and policy implementation' (p. 2).

Johnes (1999) also points to the complexity of resource allocation within HEIs and how our knowledge of the process 'remains rather sketchy' (p. 520). This complexity arises because HEIs are 'a conglomerate of knowledge factions, interests and activities' (Barnet, 2000, p. 48) that compete for resources (see Cyert and March, 1992; Ball, 1997). Silver (2003) suggests that HEIs can be described in terms of 'organised anarchy', which means that it is almost impossible to identify a 'shared way of thinking' (p. 166). However, behavioural theories of the firm which focus on internal decision-making processes (see Simon, 1955, 1959; Cyert and March, 1992) may provide some useful insights into HEI policy making. In this tradition, Ball (1997) refers to the way satisficing behaviour may enable different policy objectives to be reconciled.

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

This thesis begins by providing the contextual, theoretical and empirical framework for the remainder of the study. Chapter 2 examines the changing nature of English higher education focusing on the massification of HE; the development of quasi-markets, centralised control and managerialism; and the ending of the binary system. The chapter only considers the English system of higher education because the institutions' selected are all from this country. Chapter 2 provides statistical data on participation in higher education by social class. It also examines the experience of working class students in higher education and the graduate labour market. The usefulness of this data is evaluated and the value of social class as a conceptual tool (for both researchers and policy makers) is also discussed. Finally, the causes of working class disadvantage in higher education are analysed. Whilst the importance of part-time students, and the argument that they have been neglected in the current debate on widening participation is recognised, there is need to draw parameters around the research. Therefore, because the 'Future of HE' concentrates on young full-time students they are the focus of this research.

The thesis then turns to the empirical stage of the research. By examining the publicly documented widening participation policies of universities and colleges of HE, and interviewing key institutional policy-makers, this research will seek to obtain an insight

into the processes and rationale informing HEI policy on widening participation. Chapter 3 provides the rationale for the methodological approach adopted. This chapter discusses how decisions at each stage of the research process have been taken. By adopting a reflexive approach it will demonstrate how my values have played an important role in determining the decisions I have made. In doing this I am aware of the danger of using a confessional approach as a 'rhetorical claim to authenticity' (Seale, 1999, p. 177). Nevertheless, I feel that the advantages of attempting to provide the reader with an insight into the rationale behind methodological decisions outweigh any potential problems.

In order to try and understand the rationale behind institutional policy on widening participation it is necessary to obtain an appreciation of how government and HEFCE policy has evolved. Chapter 4 provides a review of government/HEFCE policy on widening participation policies, especially relating to social class. This chapter traces government policy on widening participation from Robbins (1963) through Dearing (1997) to the 'Future of HE' (2003) and the passing of the Higher Education Act (2004). Chapter 4 also provides some insights into the response of HEIs.

Chapter's 5 and 6 shift the attention from government policy to how policy is interpreted at the institutional level. Chapter 5 focuses on the factors influencing strategic level policy. It concentrates on key institutional documents such as mission statements, strategic plans, corporate planning statements and widening participation strategies. This chapter also relies heavily on interviews with senior managers such as vice-chancellors, principals and pro-vice-chancellors. Chapter 6 is more reliant on information obtained from interviews with middle-managers, such as Heads of Widening Participation, Student Services and Careers, in order to examine the institutional policy migration process from senior to middle management. This chapter also provides a more detailed analysis of the type of widening participation policies being implemented and the rationale behind them. Chapter 6 utilises the concept of the 'student life cycle' to provide a framework for examining what different institutions are doing in relation to widening participation.

The concluding chapter provides a summary of the findings and highlights key factors that are felt to be particularly significant for HEIs and macro policy-makers. Educational research has been criticised for being irrelevant to practitioners and policy-makers (see Wellington, 2000, pp. 166-183 for a review). By presenting an analysis into how key policy-makers at the institutional level respond to government policy on widening participation, this research aims to provide insights that might be useful to policy-makers. As Morgan-Klein and Murphy (2002) argue, 'understanding institutional motivations is a crucial first step in designing effective policy' (p. 76). It is, however, impossible to predict the value of research and therefore I would agree with Paechter (2003, p.116) who argues that:

we should focus on conducting good research in the field of education and trust to its utility. We are not always able to predict which areas will be the most fertile for investigation, nor which studies will have the most long-term impact. However, I think that anything that tells us more about the world of education (very broadly conceived) will be useful at some point. As long as we ensure that we carry out our work as well as it is possible to do so, with due regard to an underpinning moral imperative, rigour, transparency, connection to theory and research ethics, we will be contributing to knowledge in the field of education. This should be our purpose.

NOTES

1. The different ways in which social class/socio-economic groups can be defined is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. It is worth pointing out at this stage, however, that socio-economic groups (SEGs) utilise the following categories:

I Professional and managerial

II Intermediate

IIIN Skilled non-manual

IIIM Skilled manual

IV Semi-skilled

V Unskilled

SEG's IIIM, IV and V are often referred to as *lower* SEGs.

2. For the remainder of the thesis this document will be referred to as the 'Future of HE'.

3. It is acknowledged that the further education (FE) sector makes an important contribution to the provision of higher education. It is, however, necessary to set boundaries around this research in order to make it manageable. Accordingly, this study will focus on HEIs, i.e. universities and colleges of higher education.

CHAPTER 2

HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE CLASS FACTOR

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides the contextual, theoretical and empirical framework for this study. The chapter is divided into three parts. First, the changing nature of higher education is examined. Second, the influence of social class and its value as a conceptual tool is analysed in relation to higher education and the graduate labour market. Third, the factors influencing working class disadvantage in education and the labour market are examined.

HIGHER EDUCATION

In order to understand the response of HEIs to the widening participation agenda, it is necessary to examine the economic, social, political and historical context within which universities and colleges of HE function. The three key influences: the massification of HE; the creation of quasi-markets, centralised control and the rise of managerialism; and the ending of the binary system, are discussed below.

The massification of higher education

In 1960 there were less than 200,000 full-time students in the UK (Dearing, 1997). There followed a period of substantial growth in the late 1960s and another from 1988 to 1993 (*ibid.*). It was this latter period of growth that was the most significant. As HEFCE (2001a, para. 4) points out:

The six years from 1988-89 to 1993-94 saw a very rapid growth in student numbers. The most significant element was the increase in the full-time participation of 18-21 year-olds, which grew from 15 per cent in 1988-89 to 30 per cent in 1993-94 as measured by the Government's Age Participation Index (API).¹

This increase in student numbers transformed higher education from an 'elite' to a 'mass' system (Coffield and Williamson, 1997). The concept of an 'elite-mass paradigm shift' was developed by Trow (1973) in response to the substantial growth in American higher education and has now become 'the standard account of how higher education systems develop' (Scott, 1995, p. 1). Higher education passes from an 'elite' to a 'mass' system when the API exceeds 15 per cent (Trowler, 2003). Therefore, English higher education became a mass system in 1988 (*ibid.*). However, Davies *et al.* (1997, p. 1) contend that Trow's concept of massification involves not just an increase in the API, but also wider access and a 'more heterogeneous student body'. As such, a number of writers (e.g. Woodrow, 1999; Scott, 2001) have argued that terms such as 'mass' are misleading because of the unequal socio-economic profile of students in higher education.

It is also argued, that even with massification, the culture of higher education remains predicated on an elite model based on personalised forms of pedagogy and pastoral care (Scott, 1995, 2001; Coffield and Williamson, 1997). Scott (1995, p. 23), for example, contends that, 'despite the quantitative indicators, which suggest that British higher education is now a mass system, in qualitative terms it still feels like an élite system'. However, it is suggested that whilst academics may instinctively pursue an elite model, increased student numbers and declining resources per student (see Halsey, 2000b; Parry, 2001; DfES, 2003a) have forced many HEIs, particularly the new universities, to adopt a more impersonal approach to higher education (Paczuska, 2002; Trowler, 2003).

It was the new universities that responded the most enthusiastically to incentives to expand and as a result they accounted for a high proportion of the increase in student numbers during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Pratt, 1999). However, data collected for the Dearing inquiry indicates that by 1991 the former polytechnics were recruiting a

lower proportion of working class students than ever before (Ross, 2003b). This, as Robertson and Hillman (1997) in Report 6 for the Dearing Inquiry point out, puts a serious question mark over the ability of new universities to widen participation:

Despite their roots in many inner cities, and their traditions of catering for locally-based and 'second chance' students (Pratt, 1997), the achievements of the 1992 universities lend little support to the view that these institutions can be left to get on with the job of widening participation ... (para. 1.16).

From the mid 1990s the growth in higher education slowed down. The increase in student numbers from 1996-97 to 2000-01 in HEIs and HEFCE funded FE colleges in England was only 6 per cent (HEFCE, 2001a, para. 5). This compares to the 54 per cent increase in student numbers in HEI's in Great Britain between 1988-89 and 1993-94 (*ibid.*). According to HEFCE (2001a) one factor contributing to this slow down in the growth of HE was the failure of vocationally qualified Level 3 students (i.e. those holding BTEC National Diploma and Advanced GNVQ qualifications) to significantly increase their participation in higher education. Some commentators have also suggested that significant levels of graduate underemployment may have had a dampening effect on growth (e.g. Alpin *et al.*, 1998; Battu *et al.*, 1999). However, determining what constitutes a 'graduate level job' is fraught with problems, because the nature (if not the name) of occupations can be transformed by new technology and changing working practices (see for example Hogarth *et al.*, 1997). Moreover, there has been a decline in manufacturing and a shift to service sector employment resulting in an increase in non-manual occupations (Gallie, 2000). Whilst some of these jobs are unskilled or semi-skilled, or have become so with the impact of technology (Pakulski and Waters, 1996), there is evidence to suggest that overall skill levels have increased within these types of occupation (Gallie, 2000). There has also been a growth in technical, professional and managerial jobs (Pakulski and Waters, 1996; Gallie, 2000; Egerton and Savage, 2000). It can be argued that these factors have combined to raise the demand for graduates in the labour market. This suggests that it is supply rather than demand side factors that may account for the slow down in the growth of students in higher education.

Quasi-markets, centralised control and the rise of ‘managerialism’

According to Scott (2001, p. 190) the universities were, until the 1970s, ‘self governing ... [and] still insulated from the political and market pressures which were to overwhelm higher education a decade later’. HEIs organised their ‘own affairs unrestricted by, and unaccountable to, any outside body’ (Salter and Tapper, 2002, p. 247). In the 1980s and 1990s higher education was subject to a series of reforms aimed at ensuring HEIs made an effective contribution to the economic welfare of the country (see Parry, 2001; Salter and Tapper, 2002). Underpinning these reforms was the neo-liberal ‘emphasis on ‘individual freedom’ [and the] reconstruction of the ‘public’ as consumers, and the public sector as public enterprises engaged in providing services to meet individual consumer/customer/client needs’ (Prichard, 2000, p. 48). This meant that HEIs were subjected to a more competitive environment and made increasingly accountable.

The autonomy of HEIs was first eroded by the changing role of the University Grants Committee, which by the time of its abolition - it was succeeded by the Universities Funding Council (UFC) - had ‘ceased to be a buffer between government and universities and instead had come to be regarded as an instrument of the state’ (Scott, 2001, p. 188). In contrast, the polytechnics, under the control of the local authorities and answerable to the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), had always been more tightly regulated. With the ending of the binary system in 1992 and the creation of a single funding agency (HEFCE) these two sectors, and their different cultures, were brought together. During the same period the Conservative Government created, as they had in a range of state welfare services (Loxley and Thomas, 2001), a ‘quasi-market’ environment where HEIs competed against each other for scarce resources (Groves *et al.*, 1997).

HEFCE continued the UFC’s function as an ‘instrument of the state’ (Scott, 2001, p. 188), its role being to ‘implement the government’s predetermined objectives through second-order policies’ (Scott, 1995, p. 27). However, after the Higher Education Act of 1992 and the creation of HEFCE, higher education was more closely regulated (Parry, 2001). The autonomy of HEIs was reduced by increasing external accountability and

control through teaching quality assessments, the audit of institutional systems for quality assurance and the evaluation of research activity (Robertson, 1997; Groves *et al.*, 1997; Parry, 2001; O'Neill, 2002). Therefore, whilst the government did not direct HEIs, it exerted considerable control, or 'steering at a distance' (Ball, 1997), through funding and the requirement for universities and colleges to demonstrate they are providing 'value for money' (Layer, 2002). This as led to UK higher education being described as 'highly managed' (Scott, 2001, p. 196), 'centralist' and 'objectives-led' (Davies and Glaister, 1996, p. 269) and more highly regulated than other countries (Coaldrake, 2000).

This all took place in an environment characterised by increased competition between HEIs for scarce resources. However, rather than making HEIs responsible to the public this 'audit culture' (Salter and Tapper, 2002) has, according to O'Neill (2002), made universities and colleges accountable 'to regulators, to departments of government, to funders, to legal standards' (p. 53). O'Neill (2002) contends that this forces HEIs to pursue multiple (and often mutually exclusive) objectives, giving the example of the contradiction between the aims of increased participation and the maintenance of academic standards.

Within institutions there was also a parallel move to what Henkel (1997, p. 137) refers to as 'centralised decentralisation'. This seemingly contradictory concept has 'become an established part of the new organizational literature' (Hoggett, 1996, p. 18). It involves the devolvement of responsibility, but accompanied by the setting up of centralised senior management teams supported by cross institutional units (Scott, 1995; Henkel, 1997; Kogan, 2002) and tighter management controls through the creation of cost centres and performance targets (Holley and Oliver, 2000; Kogan, 2002). This was commented upon by a vice-chancellor in this research who made the point that their institution has academic decentralisation but 'what they [the departments] don't have is financial autonomy; and we also keep a very very tight reign on standards'. There are therefore elements of both autonomy and regulation (Hoggett, 1996), but crucially the centre determines the decisions they want to retain and also what systems of control are put in place (Newman, 2002).

Public sector organisations, such as universities, have according to Prichard (2000) also been ‘re-imagined and reconstructed as ‘businesses’’ (p. 48). As a result, we have seen the rise of ‘new public management’ (NPM) (Hood, 1991), with HEIs adopting private sector management techniques (Deem, 1998). These have been initiated in an attempt to solve the problem of overly bureaucratic state institutions (Newman, 2002), unable to respond effectively to the external pressures created by increasing accountability and control and a more competitive environment for funding (Scott, 1995; Salter and Tapper, 2002). According to Prichard (2000), the aim was to ‘transform the [HE] sector *as if* it had been privatized’ (p. 48, italics in original), and to encourage practices that ‘mirror’ those of business. Whilst NPM manifests itself in different forms, one of its key underlying principles (imported from the private sector) is to mobilise a consensus around objectives that are regarded as critical to organisational survival and success (Newman, 2002). Within HEIs this has, however, proved difficult to achieve because academics are still able to retain a degree of autonomy which enables them to pursue their own objectives (see for example Trowler, 1997, 1998).

Ending of the ‘binary system’

In 1964, Anthony Crossland, then Secretary of State for Education and Science, announced the creation of 30 ‘public sector’ polytechnics to join the existing 44 universities in delivering higher education (Halsey, 2000b, p. 227). The polytechnics were formed between 1969 and 1973 (Davies *et al.*, 1997) out of a concern to address the higher educational requirements of a broader constituency (Coffield and Williamson, 1997) and meet the needs of industry (Ross, 2003b). The polytechnics were meant to ‘stand alongside the universities, not inferior, but different’ (Anthony Crossland, 1982 quoted by Ross, 2003b, p. 49). Whilst this created the so-called ‘binary system’, there remained a small but significant number of colleges and institutions of higher education, offering university validated degrees (Davies *et al.*, 1997).

The ending of the polytechnic-university binary system in 1992 supposedly created a single university sector. However, the continued existence of colleges of higher education meant the system was not truly unitary. Moreover, the transformation of

polytechnics into universities did not hide the fact that differences between the ex-polytechnics and the established universities remained. This led to them being labelled 'new' and 'old' universities. According to Scott (1995) this dichotomy masks the true level of heterogeneity within higher education. Similarly, Parry (2001) argues that:

While binary legacies continue to be reflected in different patterns of management and control in higher education, universities and colleges have become more diverse in their strategic objectives and directions (p. 131).

However, whilst higher education consists of diverse types of institution (in terms of size, type of programmes offered, student intake, funding, etc.), they all operate within the same political, economic and social environment. For example, all the HEIs in England are under political pressure to widen participation, they are funded through HEFCE and they all function within a society undergoing social change, such as increased individualism and the rise in consumerism. Nevertheless, because HEIs are diverse, these pressures and changes impact in complex ways that are likely to be manifested in more subtle forms of differentiation than can be characterised by a simple 'new' and 'old' university dichotomy. Moreover, accompanying this diversity has been increased stratification in terms of both institutional reputation and resources (Reay *et al.*, 2001; Brown, 2002).² Indeed, Pratt (1999) describes the unified system of HE as 'informally stratified, rather than diverse' (p. 267). One aspect of this research will be concerned with addressing the extent to which these diverse and stratified institutions differ in their response to the government's widening participation agenda. First, however, statistical data on participation in higher education by social class will be considered. The next section will analyse participation rates in higher education by social class, type of institution and course. In addition, the experience working class students have of higher education and the labour market will be examined. The value of these statistics and the usefulness of social class as a conceptual tool will also be discussed.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CLASS

Participation in higher education by social class

As discussed in the previous section, there has been a substantial expansion in the number of students entering higher education. This growth included students from lower social classes, whose participation has increased in both numbers and as a proportion of the 18 year-old cohort (Robertson and Hillman, 1997; Farwell, 2002). Table 2.1 (below) shows that the participation rate for the lower social classes (i.e. IIIIM, IV and V) increased more than four-fold, whilst the rate for higher social classes nearly doubled.

Table 2.1 Age participation index by socio-economic group (1960-1995)

<i>% of 18 year old cohort entering higher education</i>						
<i>SEG</i>	1960	1970	1980	1985	1990	1995
I,II,IIIN	26.7	32.4	33.1	35.2	36.7	45.0
IIIM,V,V	3.6	5.1	6.5	8.3	10.3	15.1
API (UK)	5.4	8.4	12.4	13.7	19.3	32.0

Source: Adapted from Robertson and Hillman (1997, Table 1.1).

Despite this, working class students still represent a minority of the students studying for a degree. This can be seen in Table 2.2 where those from lower social classes account for approximately a quarter of the students accepted on to a degree. Moreover, the ratio of higher to lower social class students has remained fairly constant at around 3:1 (Robertson and Hillman, 1997). Using the figures in Table 2.2 the ratio currently stands at 2.8:1.³

Table 2.2 Social class: degree accepts for England (2000)

Social class⁴	Number	Percentage
I Professional	31,190	15.21%
II Intermediate	91,664	44.71%
IIIN Skilled non-manual	28,369	13.84%
IIIM Skilled manual	32,084	15.65%
IV Partly skilled	17,816	8.69%
V Unskilled	3,891	1.90%
Total	205,014	100%

Source: Adapted from UCAS (2001, Table 7.2, p. 15)

Blanden and Machin (2004) who use longitudinal data covering 1981, 1993 and 1999 also found that that the expansion of higher education has been disproportionately beneficial to those with the highest incomes. As Table 2.3 (below) demonstrates, whilst the proportion of young people from the lowest income group obtaining a degree rose from 6 per cent to 9 per cent, those from the middle and highest income groups rose from 8 per cent to 23 per cent, and 20 per cent to 46 per cent, respectively. This means inequality, in terms of percentage participation rates, has actually increased over time.

Table 2.3 Percentage of young people (by aged 23) obtaining a degree, by parental income

	Lowest 20% by parental income with a degree	Middle 60% by parental income with a degree	Highest 20% by parental income with a degree
1981	6%	8%	20%
1993	7%	15%	37%
1999	9%	23%	46%

Source: Adapted from Blanden and Machin (2004, Table 1, p. 237).

Blanden and Machin's (2004) study takes into account the size of the population in each income category. This is an important factor to take into consideration. Indeed, HEFCE (2003g) points out that whilst over 40 per cent of the UK population falls into the SEG IIM-V category, in 2001 only about 25 per cent of young entrants into HE came from these socio-economic groups. The figures are even more widely dispersed when social classes are further disaggregated. For example, Trowler (2003) states that 80 per cent of young people from professional backgrounds enter higher education compared to only 10 per cent of the least skilled. Similarly, Palfreyman (2001, p. 13) contends that:

the age participation rate (APR) at 18 for the children of the AB professional and managerial classes has risen to around 85 per cent with the massification of UK HE over the past 15 years, while the APR for the offspring of manual workers has remained stubbornly stuck at around 15 per cent.

There is also some evidence to suggest that working class students may be disadvantaged by the type of HEI they attend and the courses they enrol on. It is argued that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more heavily concentrated in less prestigious institutions, such as the new universities and colleges of HE (Brown and Scase, 1994; Smith and Webster, 1997; Dearing, 1997; Purcell and Hogarth, 1999; Scott, 2001; Hogan, 2001; CHERI, 2002a; Trowler, 2003).⁵ This has led Morgan-Klein and Murphy (2002, p. 65) to describe the increasing concentration of low income students in new universities as a form of 'ghettoization'.

In addition, working class students are more likely to be studying sub-degree qualifications (Parry and Fry, 1999; Forsyth and Furlong, 2000; UCAS, 2001). It is also pertinent to note that the proportion of applicants to HNDs from the professional and intermediate social classes is declining, whilst those from lower social classes (IIM, IV and V) are increasing (UCAS, 2001).

According to the National Audit Office (NAO), students from lower SEGs are also under-represented in more prestigious subjects such as medicine, dentistry and veterinary science (NAO, 2002). Similarly, a study by CHERI (2002a) found that

disadvantaged students (measured in terms of parental occupation and education) were more likely to study subjects with lower labour market demand. There is also some evidence that in highly competitive subjects (e.g. medicine, dentistry and veterinary science), and in the most prestigious universities, the proportion of applications converted to acceptances is lower for students from SEG's III-V (NAO, 2002, p. 9).

Experience of HE and the labour market by social class

There is a dearth of evidence on the influence of social class on degree performance and the research that does exist is often contradictory. For example, Metcalf (1993) and Hogarth *et al.* (1997) suggest that once in higher education working class students perform just as well as their middle class counterparts. In contrast, research in Scotland found that students from clerical or manual backgrounds obtain a lower proportion of 'good' degrees (i.e. first class and upper-second class honours degrees) than students from professional or managerial backgrounds (CHERI, 2002b, Table 4, p. 6). There is also some evidence to suggest that students from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to fail to complete their courses (Yorke, 2001). However, other research by the NAO found no correlation between social class and drop-out rates (Evans, 2002). The NAO concluded that once in university, working class students were no more likely to drop-out than their middle class peers (*ibid.*).

There is evidence to suggest that once in employment graduates from lower socio-economic group backgrounds earn less than their middle class counterparts (Marshall *et al.*, 1997; Evans, 2002). Yet these statistics may not reflect direct discrimination against students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. For example, it has already been noted that working class students are disproportionately represented in new universities and colleges of higher education - and graduates of these HEIs generally earn less than those from the old universities (Dolton and Vignoles, 2000; Hesketh, 2000; Power, 2000; CHERI, 2002a, 2002b; NAO, 2002; Chevalier and Conlon, 2003). Indeed, research by CHERI (2002b) found that the direct effect of social class is minimal and it is the influence of other factors, such as institution attended and degree classification obtained, that are more important. Furthermore, research carried out by Chevalier and

Conlon (2003) on the economic returns to attending Russell Groups universities suggests that socio-economic background is not a factor determining future earnings.⁶ They argue that, 'The positive earnings effect of attending a prestigious institution is independent of the student's characteristics so these institutions appear to level the playing field within their intake' (*ibid.*, p. 15). Similarly, CHERI (2002a) found the influence of a student's socio-economic background had a less significant effect on subsequent employment prospects for students who had studied vocational subjects such as medicine. It is suggested that this might be because academic achievement, rather than culturally influenced personality traits, may have a greater influence in the selection process for certain types of job (CHERI, 2002a).

Statistical limitations

There are a number of problems associated with statistics on participation in higher education by social class. First, the data is incomplete. This is because some students do not provide sufficient information to enable classification to take place. In Table 2.2, for example, such students numbered 28,222 (12.1 per cent of the total). These have been excluded from the figures. Second, the data is dependent upon the accuracy of student statements about their parents' occupations (NAO, 2002).

We have also seen the problem associated with trying to isolate the influence of social class on factors such as degree and labour market performance. This arises because of the number of variables affecting such issues and the complex inter-relationship that exists between these variables. For example, higher drop-out rates amongst students from SEG's IIM, IV and V may arise because they tend to have lower qualifications, such students may feel alienated because of their social class, or it may be a combination of these (and other) factors. There may also be difficulties defining clearly what is meant by the term 'drop-out' (McGivney, 1996, Archer *et al.*, 2003a).

Similarly, social class can be defined differently (Marshall *et al.*, 1997; Archer, 2003). This is important because the conceptualisation that is utilised will reflect the assumptions and motivations of those with the power to determine the way social class

is defined (for similar comments see Thomas, 1996; Davies, 1997). This may of course impact upon the way policy is formulated, both at the macro and institutional level, and will ultimately determine who benefits from widening participation policies (Popkewitz and Lindblad, 2000).

Social class has been conceptualised in terms of the ownership or non-ownership of the means of production, the possession of employment skills, social standing, lifestyle and value-systems (Marshall *et al.*, 1997; Rose and O'Reilly, 1998). The previous section discussed two different classification systems: the 'Standard Occupational Classification' (SOC) utilising Social Classes I, II, IIN, IIM, IV and V (referred to by Dearing, 1997), and a similar system from the Market Research Society (Archer, 2003) using A, B, C1, C2, D and E (referred to by Palfreyman, 2001 above).

The SOC, as the name suggests, utilises occupations to provide a social hierarchy based on skill levels and social standing (see Rose and O'Reilly, 1998). In contrast, whilst socio-economic groups or classes (SEGs/SECs) utilise occupation, they also take account of employment status (i.e. whether a person is a business owner or employee), and also the size of the organisation, in order to differentiate between the self-employed with no employees and people who own small and large businesses (see NSO, 2003). Socio-economic status is favoured by many researchers because it takes account of not just skill levels, but also the nature of employment relations, i.e. owner or employee and the size of the organisation owned or employed in (Williamson, 1981; Marshall *et al.*, 1997).

When analysing statistical data relating to social class it is therefore important to consider the basis on which categorisation has taken place. In this respect, it is sometimes unclear whether the statistics being referred to are based on social class or socio-economic groups. As Rose and O'Reilly (1998, p. 26) point out:

Government departments do not explicitly deal in theories of society and therefore are unlikely to demand a clear conceptual basis, especially if they see SECs merely as pragmatic tools for the reduction and summarization of complex data.

For example, the Dearing Report (1997, para. 3.14) refers to socio-economic groups, but in a footnote it states that these refer to 'the Standard Occupational Classification' (p. 395). There are, however, mechanisms for converting SEGs into the six social classes (see NSO, 2003).

Other practical problems associated with categorising people by social class also exist. The traditional classification of a family's class on the basis of the father's occupation (see for example Bynner *et al.*, 2003, Table 2.2, p. 12) is problematic because of the increase in dual career families and households where a woman holds the dominant economic position (Heath and Payne, 2000). For this reason UCAS codes social class on the basis of 'the applicant's parent, step-parent or guardian with the highest income' (UCAS, 2001, p. 15). The age at which young people are independent and can be allocated a social class on the basis of their position, rather than their parents, is also subject to debate (Webb, 1997). Finally, the criteria determining official definitions of social class are continually being revised (Archer, 2003). This means that statistics on participation by social class may not be comparable over time (Davies, 1997). For example, UCAS have to date used social class, but from 2002 they are employing the new socio-economic classification developed by the Office for National Statistics. However, because UCAS only collects information on occupations, and not employment status or establishment size, it is going to use a simplified version of the socio-economic classification. This means that data from 2002 will not be directly comparable with data from previous years (UCAS, 2003).

There are also difficulties in conceptualising categories of social class. As Bourdieu (1984) argues there are always going to be problems in deciding where to draw the boundaries around different social classes. In this chapter, for example, statistics on participation by social class have been presented in different ways. In some instances categories have been conflated, for example SEG's IIIM, IV and V, have been grouped together and referred to as 'working' or 'lower' classes. At other times the categories have been discussed separately, especially to demonstrate the contrast between participation rates for those from professional and unskilled backgrounds. There may

also be doubts about the substantive difference between some occupations within socio-economic group's IIM and IIN (UCAS, 2002).

The end of social class?

An even more serious challenge to the use of social class to measure working class disadvantage in higher education is the view that class no longer provides a useful tool for analysis. It is argued that increased individualisation; a weakening of class identity; the fragmented and fluctuating nature of class; and the influence of other factors, such as gender, disability and ethnicity, have combined to render social class an overly simplistic and redundant means of analysing complex social phenomena like participation in higher education. In this section each of these reservations will be considered.

An emphasis on the importance of individuality and individual agency rejects social class as a major influence on behaviour (see Pakulski and Waters, 1996; Archer, 2003). As Savage *et al.* (2001) state, 'Class pollutes this idea of individuality, since it challenges people's autonomy by viewing them as the product of their social background' (p. 882). Indeed, policy is often based on the idea that people have individual agency and are in a position to make 'rational' choices (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). However, it is suggested that the ability of people to exercise genuine choice is constrained by the economic and social context within which they make decisions (Hindess, 1988; Evans, 2002; Hay, 2004). For example, Evans (2002) argues that young working class adults are likely to encounter barriers that severely restrict their ability to act upon, or fulfil, their ambitions. Therefore, class remains a useful concept for identifying 'those that have been excluded from opportunities and access to social resources' (Popkewitz and Lindblad, 2000, p. 30).

Writers such as Bauman (1982), Giddens (1990), Beck (1992) and Lash and Urry (1987, 1994) contend that a lack of class identity amongst individuals undermines the concept of class (cited by Savage *et al.*, 2001). If, however, certain values and behaviour can be ascribed to particular classes of people, it can be argued that it does

not matter whether these individuals are conscious of this influence or not. Having said that, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the general public (Savage *et al.*, 2001; Beynon, 1999), young non-participants in higher education (Archer *et al.*, 2002), and students in higher education (Skeggs, 1997; Mahoney and Zmroczek, 1997; Reay *et al.*, 2001; Macrae and Maguire, 2002) are all conscious of a class system. However, despite feeling uneasy about discussing their own social position (see Sayer, 2002),⁷ people often demonstrate an awareness of their class identity and relative social position. For example, in Archer *et al.*'s (2002) study, non-participants in higher education perceived university to be for the middle classes and not them; whilst Reay *et al.* (2001) found some young people had made the decision to attend less prestigious universities in order to facilitate their integration into the higher education system.

Another challenge to social class arises because of its fragmentation. A number of writers have discussed differences within both the working and middle classes (e.g. Miliband, 1969; Scott, 1995; Pakulski and Waters, 1996; Reay, 1997; Atkinson, 2000; Thrupp, 2001; Brooks, 2004). However, whilst there are inevitably differences within these broad classes, it can be argued that there are enough similarities to bind them together and make them distinctive. Thus, Reay (1997) is able to describe how there are a 'myriad of *different* ways of growing up and being working class' (p. 22, italics my emphasis).

In contrast, Pakulski and Waters (1996) argue against the concept of social class, not because of the existence of differences within classes, but because the boundaries around classes are unclear and insufficiently segregated. Post-modernists have also questioned the permanence and objective nature of social class. They contend that class identities are created through interaction, and therefore change, according to the setting within which a person operates. For example, Archer (2003, p. 13) argues that:

Whereas categorical, positivistic approaches treat social-class identities as 'given' and objectively identifiable, post modern approaches tend to treat class identities and inequalities as constantly constructed and asserted through discourse. Discourses (socially and historically located shared patterns of meaning) are drawn on by people in order to construct and

defend identities and subject positions. From this perspective, classed identities are never 'achieved' or 'complete'; instead they are constantly 'in process'.

The idea that class identity is constantly being redefined as individuals interact with different 'classes' can also be linked to the concept of a post-industrial society, characterised by flexible employment where work based social networks are continually changing (see Scott, 1995; Beynon, 1999; Archer *et al.*, 2002). It is suggested that this undermines the establishment of more permanent class-based values and behaviour, leading some commentators to predict the 'death of class' (see for example Pakulski and Waters, 1996). However, whilst individuals are likely to find themselves in various settings, and with different people, it would be expected that these situations would be similar because of the type of economic (and social/cultural) location individuals occupy. Moreover, whilst a person may change and act differently over time and space, these are adjustments that do not alter their core class-based values. As Archer *et al.* (2002) contend, an individual's class has permanence that is 'stubbornly durable and continually reproduced, albeit variously and differently' (p. 108).

Finally, Bourdieu (1984, p. 102) argues for the need to incorporate what he refers to as 'secondary properties', such as gender and ethnicity into the analysis. Similarly, whilst Archer (2003) maintains that social class is a useful conceptual tool, she contends that other important variables, such as ethnicity, gender, disability and age need to be taken into account. Likewise, other writers argue for a more sophisticated analysis that places class alongside, and interacting with, other variables (see for example Tett, 2000; Anthias, 2001). This will of course complicate the analysis for policy makers, because people have various combinations of characteristics that often identify them as both advantaged and disadvantaged (Bridges, 2002). Focusing on a particular disadvantage has the benefit of simplifying the analysis and policy implications. However, such an approach fails to take into account the complex nature of disadvantage, and as a result, policy may fail to address people's needs. The idea that social class interacts with other variables such as age, gender, race, and disability is important. It is, however, beyond the scope of this research to incorporate an analysis of these variables into this study. Nevertheless, it will be interesting to see if these other variables are being linked to

social class in the formulation of government and institutional policy on widening participation. The next section will, however, focus on social class and how and why working class disadvantage arises.

WORKING CLASS DISADVANTAGE

This section will consider the factors that may be contributing to working class disadvantage at various stages of the student life-cycle. It will begin by examining the factors influencing academic performance at school and college. The higher education decision-making process will then be analysed. Next, the experience of working class students in higher education will be examined. Finally, the factors influencing their performance in the graduate labour market will be analysed.

Educational attainment at school and college

On average working class children perform relatively poorly at both GCSE and A-levels compared to their middle class peers (see Mortimore and Whitty, 1999; DfEE, 2000; Hutching and Archer, 2001; UUK, 2003c). Academic under-achievement at this level is said by some to be the most important factor contributing to low participation in HE by young people from working class backgrounds. As a Head of Widening Participation in this study put it:

The biggest issue is attainment raising ... The crux of the matter is that if you've not got your five A to C's at GCSE, you're not at the starting gate and there are still a lot of working class kids who aren't at the starting gate.

It is also argued that this poorer level of achievement leads to the over-representation of working class students in new universities and colleges of HE (HEFCE, 2004a). This occurs because these institutions generally take students with lower A-level point scores. They are also more likely to accept students with vocational qualifications than

more prestigious institutions (Hodgson and Spours, 2000). This matters because a greater proportion of students from lower SEGs are studying vocational courses (Smith and Boccock, 1999). In addition, working class students with lower A-level grades or vocational qualifications are more likely to enrol on sub-degree programmes such as the Higher National Diploma (HND).

These class differences in educational attainment may be legitimised if they are seen as arising out of the genetic advantages that middle class parents pass on to their children. As Marshall *et al.* (1997, p. 139) point out:

Perhaps working-class children are less intelligent, on average, than are those born into the service class? Or perhaps, though equally intelligent, they are less motivated to achieve educationally, choosing not to apply their natural abilities to the acquisition of educational credentials?

If this is the case, then inequality in educational attainment may be regarded as acceptable because it is the result of differences in individual ability and effort (Williamson, 1981; Bourdieu, 1997; Archer, 2003). Yet the idea that different social classes have varying levels of natural intelligence has ‘a long and disputed academic pedigree’ (Marshall *et al.*, 1997, p. 141). For instance, estimates of the heritability of intelligence vary greatly (Stuart-Hamilton, 1999). These studies also suffer from methodological problems relating to how to accurately measure intelligence (usually through the intelligence quotient or ‘IQ’); and how to separate the effects of ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’ on IQ levels (Colman, 1990; Marshall *et al.*, 1997; Stuart-Hamilton, 1999).

For example, tests of IQ are said to be biased against those from lower social classes (Marshall *et al.*, 1997). This is, however, disputed by Nettle (2003) who found social class explained less than 5 per cent of the variation in IQ test scores for children. More importantly though, IQ tests have not proved a particularly accurate predictor of performance (Stuart-Hamilton, 1999). At best, it would seem that such tests (and intelligence itself) only provide an indication of a person’s potential. This would point to aspects of an individual’s personality, such as motivation, as being particularly

important. Indeed it is argued that the superior educational attainment of the middle classes arises because their home environment provides the 'cultural capital' that values and supports educational achievement (Bourdieu, 1997). Furthermore, middle class parents possess the economic power to supplement this cultural capital by purchasing private education or additional tuition and ensuring their children have everything they need to enable them to study effectively, for example their own room, personal computer, etc. (see Ball *et al.*, 1994; Bourdieu, 1997; Savage and Egerton, 1997; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Young, 1999; Bird, 2000; Reay *et al.*, 2001; Apple, 2001).

In contrast, working class children often do not have these benefits. They are also more likely to attend schools where levels of academic achievement are relatively low. Moreover, even if they obtain the qualifications to progress into further education it is argued that there is a greater likelihood that they will find themselves under pressure to secure employment so that they can make a financial contribution to their family's economic situation (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998). This impacts upon them even if they go into further education. For example, college students from working class backgrounds are more likely to be in part-time employment and working longer hours than their middle class peers (Reay *et al.*, 2001; Farley, 2002). Reay *et al.* (2001) found that this affected the amount of time they devoted to homework, whilst Payne (2003) provides statistical evidence to suggest that students working long hours in part-time work obtain lower A-level grades. Studies also indicate that the need to work part-time also acts as a barrier to going to university (Archer *et al.*, 2002; Harding, 2002). For example, in a series of focus group interviews carried out by Harding (2002) young people articulated fears about being able to cope with the workload associated with study in higher education.

Factors influencing entry into higher education

In addition to educational attainment a person's values will also influence choices about whether to enter higher education or not. It is argued that values are largely shaped by the social world an individual inhabits (Hindess, 1988; Hargreaves Heap, 1992; Weale, 1992; Hatcher, 1998; Bourdieu, 2003). This can be put into a class context (Miliband,

1969; Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu, 2003). Miliband (1969), for example, contends that all classes, 'not only reproduce themselves physically, but mentally as well, and tend to instil in their children the consciousness, expectations and mental habits associated with their class' (p. 235). In this respect, the working class are said to be indifferent to educational achievement, possibly because they seek alternative sources of status since they are educationally disadvantaged (Marshall *et al.*, 1997). It is also contended that they are reluctant to defer gratification and therefore tend to 'live for today' (Marshall *et al.*, 1997). Similarly, Robertson and Hillman (1997) suggest that the working class lack a 'future orientation'. This leads to a lack ambition (Roberts, 1999), 'a poverty of aspiration' (Archer and Hutchings, 2000, p. 556) and a fatalistic attitude to life (Marshall *et al.*, 1997; Bourdieu, 2003). In contrast, the middle classes value education (Gilchrist *et al.*, 2003). They are also driven by a need for achievement and are highly competitive (Marshall *et al.*, 1997). This is combined with a strong work ethic and a willingness to make sacrifices in order to secure benefits at a future date (Beynon, 1999).

The values held by working class families and their children mean they may not even consider higher education as an option. For example, a national MORI survey of 1,200 respondents in social classes C1, C2, D and E aged 16-30 years found that 49 per cent had never considered going to university, a figure rising to 60 per cent amongst interviewees from social class E (Archer *et al.*, 2002). Research by Pugsley (1998) found that working class parents exhibit a lack of awareness of the opportunities presented by higher education and they did not appear to know, or care, about the ranking of HEIs. Furthermore, Trowler (2003) contends that those from SEG's IIM, IV and V who are qualified to go on to higher education 'are only 70 per cent as likely to enter universities or colleges as those from the top two social groups' (p. 81). In contrast, a study cited by the DfEE (2000) discovered that there was only a marginal difference in entry rates to HE between students from lower and higher socio-economic groups with two or more A-levels. It was found that 63 per cent of those from higher SEGs entered HE compared to 58 per cent of those from lower SEGs (*ibid.*, Chart 1, p. 4). However, this study only took into account students qualified by A-levels, and as already discussed, a higher proportion of working class students are on vocational courses and students with these qualifications are less likely to enter HE.

The government has presented higher education as an investment decision (see Chapter 4). According to the 'rational economic model' promoted by New Labour, education is viewed as an investment, which involves students/parents paying higher education fees and foregoing income in order to secure better future life-time earnings (see for example Greenaway and Hayes, 2000). If, however, the working class feel that they have little control over their future and they also lack ambition and 'future orientation', they will not be predisposed to adopting rational approaches to educational decision-making. Moreover, even if they did adopt a rational approach their social background or 'habitus' (see Bourdieu, 2003) would 'give rise to different costs, benefits and probabilities of success' (Hatcher, 1998, p. 10).

There is a danger that this inevitably leads to the pathologisation of working class values and an expectation that they should try to adopt middle class values (Miliband, 1969; Freire, 1972; Reay and Ball, 1997; Roberts, 1999). However, it is important to appreciate that their values have been created by their subordinate status within society (Miliband, 1969). This sentiment is echoed by Rawls (2001) who states that, 'we assess our prospects in life according to our place in society and we form our ends and purposes in the light of the means and opportunities we can realistically expect' (p. 56). Similarly, Bourdieu (2003) argues:

expectations and aspirations ... are very unequally distributed ... by virtue of the law that, through the dispositions of habitus (themselves adjusted, most of the time, to agents' positions) expectations tend universally to be roughly adapted to the objective chances (p. 75).

It has already been noted that working class students perform relatively poorly at both GCSE and A-levels and if they enter higher education they are more likely to go to a new university or college of HE. Moreover, even if they have the qualifications to go to a more prestigious institution they may 'choose' to attend their local HEI in order to reduce the cost of their education, keep their part-time job and retain their social networks (Smith, 2000; Forsyth and Furlong, 2000; Reay *et al.*, 2001). This is important, because as already discussed, research suggests that graduates from these

institutions obtain average earnings that are less than those from old universities. The working class seem to be well aware of this (Brown and Scase, 1994; Hutchings and Archer, 2001). According to interviews carried out with young working class people they regard the 'type' of higher education they are able to access as inferior to that of their middle class peers (Hutchings and Archer, 2001). In this study the working class articulated a view that they would attend what they see as second rate universities, offering lower standards, and inferior job opportunities (*ibid.*).

Therefore, whilst the decision of those from a working class background not to go to university is often seen as resulting from financial concerns and a lack of awareness of the opportunities presented by higher education (see for example Connor and Dewson, 2001; HEFCE, 2001a), in practice their decision may be based on a complex set of factors that indicate an appreciation of the reality of HE and the graduate labour market. From this perspective the decision not to enter higher education might be 'rational' (see Goldthorpe, 1996; Hutchings, 2003 for similar comments). This is not to suggest that people are able to adopt a perfectly rational approach where net expected returns and measures of risk are used to make decisions (see Simon, 1979; March, 1987; Hodgson, 1997). The idea that students and their parents are able to undertake such complex calculations is of course highly questionable. It can, however, be argued that people adopt decision-making strategies that approximate to such an approach by constructing what Beach (1997, p. 100) refers to as a 'bounded' or limited representation of a situation. These representations are, however, likely to reflect the social environment within which parents and students are located. In this respect, it can be argued that working class students and their parents are less likely to have the personal experience and contacts to provide an accurate picture of HE and the graduate labour market (Bourdieu, 1997; Broadfoot, 2000). This situation may be compounded by evidence suggesting that the working class distrust, as potentially biased, formal or 'cold' information from careers officers, admissions tutors, teachers, lecturers, etc. (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Archer *et al.*, 2002; Hutchings, 2003). On the other hand, they may be right to be suspicious of such information and 'hot' grapevine information that is obtained informally (see Ball and Vincent, 1998) may provide better quality information.

The higher education 'experience'

Working class students may also have concerns about integrating into HEIs. There is an extensive literature that suggests students from lower SEGs may struggle to adapt to university life because of a mismatch between their cultural capital and the middle class culture they encounter in higher education (Brown and Scase, 1994; Bourdieu, 1997; Skeggs, 1997; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Reay, 2001; Reay *et al.*, 2001; Bowl, 2001; Hutchings and Archer, 2001; Macrae and Maguire, 2002; Davis, 2003; Archer, 2003). Interestingly, however, there are few stories of working class students embracing the middle class culture of higher education.

It is argued that middle class students are able to adapt to university life because of their background (Brown and Scase, 1994; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1994; Bourdieu, 1997; Broadfoot, 2000). According to Bourdieu, one of the barriers faced by working class students is the complex academic discourse adopted in higher education. Bourdieu (1997, p. 40) argues that lecturers employ a 'rich vocabulary' and 'structurally complex syntax' that middle class, but not working class, students have been exposed to. Bourdieu and Passeron (1994) contend that 'the ability to manipulate academic language remains the principal factor in success at examinations' (p. 21). They go on to contend that:

what we inherit from our social origins is not only a language, but – inseparably – a relationship to language and specifically to the value of language. Everything tends to suggest that the further we ascend the social hierarchy, the greater the tendency to verbalize feelings, opinions and thoughts ... it did not escape Sartre that a childhood spent in a world in which words tended to become the reality of things prepared him [*sic.*] to enter an intellectual world founded on the same principle (*ibid.*, pp. 21-22).

The middle class students in Brown and Scase's (1994) study also explained how they had been prepared for university by their parents and the schools they attended. In contrast, working class students often feel they are entering the unknown (Hutchings

and Archer, 2001) and as a consequence frequently lack confidence (Connor and Dewson, 2001) and feel ill at ease in the university environment (Brown and Scase, 1994). Students who have formed their identity in a working class community (see Davies and Williams, 2001) may also feel alienated from their middle class peers (Lynch and O’Riordan, 1998; Brown and Scase, 1994). This may be particularly the case, if they continue to live at home and work long hours part-time, because this means they may find it more difficult to integrate into university life (Yorke, 2001; Thomas, 2002).

The sort of feelings working class students encounter is exemplified by Skeggs (1997, p. 130) who describes her experience of higher education as follows:

My first real recognition that I could be categorized by others as working-class happened when I went to university (an upper/middle-class university that often felt more like a finishing school) and I was identified in a seminar group as, ‘oh, you must be one of those working-class people we hear so much about’. I was absolutely mortified. I knew what this meant – I had been recognised as common, authentic and without much cultural value. For the first time in my life I started to feel insecure. All the prior cultural knowledge (capital) in which I had taken pride lost its value and I entered a world where I knew little and felt I could communicate even less. I was delegitimated. The noisy, bolshy, outspoken me was silenced. I became afraid to speak in case I gave ‘myself’ (that is my classed self) away. I did not want to be judged and found wanting. Being the object of the judgement of others, whose values are legitimated, is a very uncomfortable position to occupy.

Skeggs is, however, discussing her experience at a particular type of university. It has been suggested that working class students may feel more at ease in new universities and colleges of higher education where there are a higher proportion of working class students (CHERI, 2002a; Ainley *et al.*, 2002). There is some (limited) support for this. For example, Lynch and O’Riordan’s Irish study found that about a third of the students they interviewed ‘felt like outsiders because of their class origins’ (Lynch and

O’Riordan, 1998, p. 462) but interpreting their figures further it appears that the majority of these were in universities rather than colleges. Also a study by Ainley (1992) found that students perceived universities as being more middle-class than the polytechnics.

There is a view, however, that since the ending of the binary system, HEIs have become homogenous with the ex-polytechnics in particular trying to become more like the old universities (Davis, 2003; Collini, 2003). Despite this, Reay (2001, p. 338) found that some students were continuing to choose less prestigious institutions because they felt they would ‘fit in’ better. Whether this was their experience is unknown. The high drop-out rate in new universities (Yorke, 2001; Hodgson and Spours, 2002) may suggest otherwise. On the other hand, the evidence suggests that non-completion is due to poor qualifications (Bekhradnia and Thompson, 2003; HEFCE, 2004a) and financial difficulties (Yorke, 2001; Thomas, 2002; Yorke and Thomas, 2003), rather than an inability to integrate into university life. Furthermore, despite the fact that working class students have to work longer hours in part-time employment than their middle class peers (Archer *et al.*, 2002; Farwell, 2002), the evidence is mixed about how they perform in higher education (see Metcalf, 1993; Robertson and Hillman, 1997; Hogarth *et al.*, 1997; CHERI, 2002b; Chevalier and Conlon, 2003). However, the balance of opinion seems to suggest that working class students perform equally as well as those from middle class backgrounds. It can, however, be argued that those working class students who ‘make it’ into HE and survive have done so despite the barriers they encounter. Therefore, they are likely to have above average levels of motivation and ability, or support that is not typical of those from working class backgrounds. For example, Reay (1997, p. 21) discusses how certain types of ‘aspirant’ working class families can provide an environment that places a strong emphasis on encouraging their children to be academically successful.

The labour market experience

As already discussed working class students tend to earn less than their middle class peers. The reason for this may, however, relate more to the type of HEI working class

students attend rather than because of direct forms of class discrimination. This is because in an increasingly competitive graduate labour market, the status of HEIs has become more important as an initial screening device (Brown, 1997; Harvey *et al.*, 1997). For example, Hesketh (2000) found that two-thirds of the companies he surveyed targeted 'top universities', i.e. those with the highest A-level entry requirements.

However, the advantage of students from elite HEIs is not confined to the initial screening process, but continues at the interview and testing stages (Stewart and Knowles, 1999). It is contended that those involved in the selection process tend (often unconsciously) to recruit graduates who have the same cultural capital as themselves. This may mean candidates who have been to the same type of university as the selectors are favoured. It may also mean, however, that the type of cultural capital that the middle class have built up by engaging in hobbies and broader interests gives them an advantage (Brown, 1997). In contrast, those from working class backgrounds are less likely to be able to become involved in such activities (Pitcher and Purcell, 1998; Hatcher, 1998; CHERI, 2002b). For example, whilst in university their need to work long part-time hours may offer them little opportunity to engage in voluntary (unpaid) work which provides the type of experience valued by top employers (Pitcher and Purcell, 1998).

It is also argued that those involved in the selection process tend to recruit people who are 'like themselves' and therefore able to integrate successfully into the organisation (Brown and Scase, 1994; Tysome, 2002; Brown *et al.*, 2002). As Brown *et al.* (2002, p. 19) point out:

When employers reject candidates as unsuitable it could be argued that they are being rejected for lacking 'cultural' capital. There is absolutely no doubt that this happens when people are seen to have the wrong accent, dress inappropriately at an interview, or do not know the rules of the game when candidates are invited to a formal dinner to meet company employees.

It does, therefore, appear that a combination of cultural capital and educational credentials provides middle class students with an advantage in the graduate labour market. They also have access to social networks (Bourdieu, 1988; Savage and Egerton, 1997). For example, Beverley Skeggs recalls how the power of middle class networks meant that many of her fellow students did not even have to apply for jobs (Skeggs, 1997). On the other hand, statistical studies suggest that the effects of working class disadvantage should not be overstated. As discussed above, there is evidence to suggest that working class students attending 'top' universities and studying certain vocational subjects will find their disadvantage disappears (see CHERI, 2002a, 2002b; Chevalier and Conlon, 2003). However, other studies suggest that even when account is taken of educational qualifications those from higher social classes still obtain the most highly paid jobs (Marshall *et al.*, 1997; Evans, 2002). Also research on class mobility indicates that once account is taken of the increase in 'middle class jobs' there has been little change in class mobility over the past 20 to 30 years (Marshall *et al.*, 1997; Archer *et al.*, 2003b citing HM Treasury, 1999). In other words whilst a degree may enhance an individual's lifetime earnings, a person's social background still appears to have a significant influence on where they finish in the social (and economic) hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has traced the growth of higher education from an 'elite' to a 'mass' system. It has shown that the expansion in higher education has not resulted in significantly changing the under-representation of the working class in HEIs. Furthermore, the raw statistics on participation hide the fact that working class students are disproportionately represented in less prestigious institutions and on lower status courses.

It is impossible at the current stage in the development of research into widening participation to come to any firm conclusions about the exact combination of factors influencing working class disadvantage. There is, for example, little doubt that social class affects pre-higher educational attainment. As Marshall *et al.* (1997, p. 144) state, 'Few people dispute that people's class of origin has a substantial influence on their

educational achievements'. However, they also comment on how 'there is little agreement about the mechanisms by which this influence is effected' (*ibid.*, p. 144). In other words, whilst class based cultural, social and economic factors influence educational attainment, their relative importance and relationship to one another, is not fully understood. In addition these cultural, social and economic factors also affect aspiration levels and educational decision-making, but again in ways that need further research. All that can be said with any certainty, is that uni-causal theories that focus on a particular aspect of working class disadvantage, rather than a number of inter-related factors, are flawed because of their failure to take account of the complexity of the situation (see Robertson and Hillman, 1997; Thomas, 2001a; Gilchrist *et al.*, 2003 for similar comments).

There is less agreement over the extent to which social class influences performance in higher education and the labour market. The evidence, however, suggests that working class students may face greater difficulties integrating into HEIs, especially more prestigious institutions. It also appears that middle class students generally have greater success in the graduate labour market. This is because they are more likely to have attended a prestigious university and their background provides them with the type of cultural capital valued by employers.

NOTES

1. The API measures the proportion of 18-21 year olds studying courses of higher education.
2. Research by Stiles (2000), for example, indicates that the old universities increased the amount of money they received from the funding councils by a small amount in real terms for both teaching and research. In contrast, the amount of money received by new universities declined by a small percentage (*ibid.*, Table 3, p. 55). Stiles (2000) concludes that 'Post-1992 universities have not been able to significantly improve their research competitiveness, and pre-1992 universities have consolidated their research position, while simultaneously improving their ability to secure teaching funds' (p. 57). As he argues in a later article, 'research funding methods continue to favour institutions already enjoying research track records' (Stiles, 2002, p. 728).
3. SEG's I, II & IIN = 151,223; SEG's IIM, IV & V = 53,791. Therefore, $151,223/53,791 = 2.8$.
4. UCAS (2001, p. 8) states, 'UCAS assigns social class to applicants based on parental occupation. If the applicant is aged 21 years or over, the occupation of the person contributing the highest income to the household is requested'.
5. Research by the Sutton Trust (2004) found, even after taking into account entry qualifications, that students from state schools were under-represented in the 'top' universities.
6. Chevalier and Conlon (2003) argue that the higher returns associated with Russell Group HEIs can be attributed to the quality of the teaching experience in such institutions. They contend that this enhances the students' human capital and leads to higher lifetime earnings. This is used as an argument for differential tuition fees.
7. As Sayer (2002, p. 1) contends: 'Class is an embarrassing topic. 'What class are you?' or 'What class are they?' are not easy questions, particularly if those who are asked ponder the implications of their answers, or if the questioner is of a different class from the person being asked, and especially if there are others of different classes present who can hear the answer'.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION

It is sometimes possible to undertake an 'off-the-shelf' approach to research design by adopting the methods employed by previous studies. If the objective is to replicate research in order to check the reliability of earlier findings, then such a methodology is necessary. This research is not, however, seeking to reproduce previous studies. A researcher is nevertheless influenced (both consciously and unconsciously) by the methodological approaches that other, similar studies, have used. Crotty (1998), however, argues that researchers tend to develop their own methodological approach in order to satisfy the particular needs of their research. Similarly, Nixon and Sikes (2003) contend that whilst there are traditional research practices, the researcher inevitably adapts these in creative ways for their own purposes. This heterogeneity in approaches may be beneficial because it means the same social phenomena will be researched in various ways to reveal different understandings and explanations (Morgan, 1983b).

The process of designing research is often conceptualised as a linear step-by-step approach. There are, as Table 3.1 (below) illustrates, differences - but these tend to relate to the terminology used rather than the actual research process.

Table 3.1 The research process

Morgan (1983a, p. 21)	Crotty (1998, pp. 2-7)	Denzin and Lincoln (2003, p.32)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Constitutive assumptions (paradigms) 2. Epistemological stance 3. Favoured methodology 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Epistemology 2. Theoretical perspectives 3. Methodology 4. Methods 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Researcher as multi-cultural subject 2. Theoretical paradigms and perspectives 3. Research strategies 4. Methods of collection and analysis 5. Art and politics of interpretation and evaluation

As can be seen, the starting point to research is usually the researcher's underlying ontological beliefs (i.e. their perspective on the nature of reality) and their epistemological position (i.e. their view of the best way to derive knowledge and understanding). These are key factors influencing the way research is planned and practised (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Denzin and Lincoln (2003) refer to these ontological and epistemological issues - which according to Crotty (1998, p. 10) 'tend to emerge together' - as the researcher's 'interpretive framework' (p. 33). In their conceptualisation of the research process Denzin and Lincoln (2003) also include the influence of the researcher's own socially constructed values in relation to what they feel constitutes 'effective' or 'ethical' research. Other writers also stress the importance of including a moral dimension to the design and conduct of educational research (see in particular Nixon and Sikes, 2003; Paechter, 2003; Pring 2003). For example, Nixon and Sikes (2003) contend, that whilst the technicalities of research are important, they are:

secondary to the primary concern with why, educationally, we do what we do in the way in which we do it. In addressing that concern, we must

acknowledge the moral foundations of educational research and the ways in which our own values rest upon, and sometimes resist, those foundations (p. 5).

In this respect I have attempted to design and conduct this research in a way that I feel is ethically 'right'. Whilst codes of research ethics exist (see for example BERA, 2004), I would agree with Pring (2003) that such codes are unable to 'legislate for every conceivable situation' (p. 58). In addition, it is argued that a deontological¹ adherence to ethical codes discourages researchers from reflecting upon the ethics of their research design, and working out for themselves, what they should do in particular circumstances (Glen, 2000). This does not mean, however, that an individual researcher is responsible for formulating *all* their ethical values. In practice researchers are influenced by other researchers, ethical codes and the social context within which they work. A researcher, as Taylor (1991, p. 305) comments, 'cannot avoid assessing himself or herself in relation to some standards. To escape all standards would not be a liberation, but a terrifying lapse into total disorientation'.

Nevertheless, these external influences will be interpreted by individuals differently. As Pring (2003, p. 63) states, 'the ways in which researchers engage in moral deliberations depends on the sort of person they are – the dispositions they have to act or respond in one way rather than another'. Similarly, Taylor (1991, pp. 305-306) stresses the importance of 'having a coherent sense of self' because:

To have an identity is to know "where you're coming from" when it comes to questions of value, or issues of importance. Your identity defines the background against which you know where you stand on such matters.

This chapter will take the reader through the different stages of the research process, examining the rationale behind the approach adopted. In doing this the influence of my own values, including the moral dilemmas I faced, will be discussed. The chapter begins by addressing the research assumptions underpinning this study. It then provides a justification for the research strategy and methods employed. In the section on research methods the role of documentary analysis and interviews in the collection of data is

examined in detail. This section also identifies the problems encountered when undertaking this study and how these were overcome. The final part of the chapter discusses how the data was organised and analysed.

RESEARCH ASSUMPTIONS

Following on from Taylor's comments about researchers needing to 'know where they are coming from' (Taylor, 1991, pp. 305-306), Denzin and Lincoln (2003) emphasise the importance of the researcher's biography in determining the assumptions that underpin the way they carry out research. In my case, I believe² that the most important factors influencing my ontological and epistemological beliefs are my job as a lecturer in business and management – a discipline that is traditionally viewed as positivist in orientation (Buckley and Chapman, 1997); and my experience as a part-time student at the University of Sheffield - where I have been introduced to more interpretivist approaches to research.

At the start of my academic career the assumptions underpinning my views about research would probably have been categorised as 'positivist' because I believed in a single independently existing reality that could be 'captured and understood' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 14). Researchers adopting this perspective seek *the* truth by attempting to eliminate the effect of their preconceptions, personal views and value judgements on the research process (Sarantakos, 1993). As Bourdieu (1988, p. 6) argues our 'first automatic' inclination as researchers is to try and escape 'any suspicion of prejudice' by attempting 'to negate ourselves as 'biased' or 'informed' subjects'. This was my initial inclination as a researcher. Yet over a period of time, and particularly during my four years at Sheffield, I have become increasingly sceptical about the underlying premise behind approaches to research that assume 'objective' research can be carried out. As a result, I now adopt an interpretivist approach that accepts the existence of different or 'multiple realities' (see Pring, 2000; Cohen *et al.*, 2000) and the notion that different interpretations can co-exist (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). I also believe that as researchers we can only provide our particular construction of 'reality'.

A researcher's view of the nature of reality shapes their thinking about the most appropriate methodological approaches to adopt (Crotty, 1998). In my case, rejecting the existence of a single reality led me to consider, to a much greater extent, other people's perspectives. It has resulted in a greater concern for how reality is constructed, rather than how it can be understood. Such an approach involves 'getting inside the head of an actor to understand what he or she is up to in terms of motives, beliefs, desires, thoughts, and so on' (Schwandt, 2003, p. 296). From this perspective, research can be seen not as an attempt to access the 'truth', but as way of understanding the policy maker's point of view or 'reality'. It is important, however, to take into account that this research is focused on institutional policy-making. The aim of the research therefore is to try and understand the 'shared meanings' of policy makers in an HEI (see Smircich, 1983, p. 168). As Smircich (1983) argues, when we study organisations we are trying to understand the 'consensual meanings' (p. 165) that are developed and sustained by policy makers through the frames of reference (e.g. slogans, stories, myths, ideologies, discourse, etc.) they use to make sense of their world.

In reality policy makers within an HEI will have their personal values, and will interpret institutional policy from their own perspective (Prichard, 2000). Yet one would expect there to be a dominant discourse reflected in key policy documents and the comments of senior policy makers. If serious differences or 'disjuncture' exist between policy makers within an organisation then this can obviously have serious implications for the coherence and effectiveness of institutional policy (Smirnich, 1983, p 162).

This study is further complicated by the subjectivity inherent in the research process. The policy maker's perspective does not represent an objective account of a situation, but their subjective interpretation of it. As Sayer (1992) states, people do not necessarily provide a 'true' account of events: 'history not only happens to people, but is made by them, consciously or unconsciously' (p. 19). In addition, my own understanding of a policy maker's motives, values, etc., is also subjective because I have to interpret what I read in policy documents, or what I am told during an interview. As Schwandt (2003) argues knowledge is not discovered but constructed. Seale (1999, p. 159) sums the situation up neatly by commenting that 'what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions'.

Whilst I will be adopting an interpretivist approach to this research I will still try to suspend or 'bracket' my values (see Greenbank, 2003) and objectively represent the perspectives of policy makers. I acknowledge that this, in practice, is impossible to achieve. Crotty (1998), for example, points out that we all view the world 'through lenses bestowed upon us by our culture. Our culture brings things into view for us and endows them with meaning and, by the same token, lead us to ignore other things' (p. 54). Nevertheless, our preconceived theoretical and conceptual frameworks, or 'prejudices', as Garrison refers to them allow us to make sense and meaning out of a complex world (Smircich, 1983; Garrison, 1996). Garrison (1996, p. 433) states that 'We cannot abandon all of interpretive fore-conceptions or we would have nothing with which to interpret at all'. He argues that:

Prejudices are just "pre-judgements" necessary to make our way, however tentatively, in everyday thought, conversation, and action. It is the fore-having of understanding that we require to disclose the world and the people in it in their possibility and to create interpretation (*ibid.*, p. 434).

Garrison (1996) also points out that our 'fore-meanings' may not necessarily lead to false judgement.

However, our theoretical and conceptual frameworks also provide obstacles to our understanding because they perpetuate existing ways of seeing the world (Turner, 1983). According to Crotty (1998) these run deep and act as a formidable barrier to our understanding:

Layers of interpretation get placed one upon another like levels of mineral deposit in the formation of rock. No longer is it a question of existential engagement with realities in the world but of building upon theoretical deposits already in place. In this way ... our sedimented cultural meanings serve as a barrier ... (p. 59).

Yet, whilst I would argue that the complete bracketing of values is unachievable,³ it is my view that researchers should at least attempt to do this (see Greenbank, 2003 for a more in-depth discussion). Likewise, Psathas (1973) emphasises the importance of trying to approach research with an open mind. He contends that there is a need to ‘remain open to the phenomena themselves. This may mean that one starts by “seeing” rather than by “thinking.” One’s mind is open to all the possibilities present’ (*ibid.*, p. 13).

Garrison also stresses the need to remain ‘open to the meaning of the other person or text’ (Garrison, 1996, p. 433). Crotty (1998), however, argues that it may be necessary to move beyond this, so that the researcher is able to engage in the world of those being researched, in a way that opens up their own theories and values to critique and change. Similarly, Schwandt (2003) contends that ‘understanding requires the engagement of one’s biases’ (pp. 301-302). This means the researcher’s own preconceptions and values should be questioned and put at risk (Simons, 1996; Seale, 1999; Schwandt, 2003). It does not, however, mean that the researcher necessarily accepts the validity of the research participant’s perspective. If I interpret him correctly, Crotty (1998) argues that the researcher may reject the perception or point of view of those being studied. Indeed, Psathas (1973, p. 15) describes as ‘naïve’ the straightforward acceptance of a research participants views. This is important because it allows the researcher to maintain a critical perspective in the research process (Crotty, 1998).

RESEARCH STRATEGY

The research assumptions discussed above, combined with the study’s focus on the rationale behind policy making, pointed to the need for an in-depth qualitative study of a small number of cases using multiple sources of evidence. This approach would facilitate an understanding of the processes, rationale, subjective realities, complexities and context behind institutional policy on widening participation. Whilst the term ‘case study’ research has different definitions (see Atkinson and Delamont, 1985; Hammersley and Gomm, 2000) this seems the most appropriate label to give this research.

Yin (2003, pp. 3-9) defines three types of case study: 'exploratory', 'descriptive' and 'explanatory'. The cases studied for this research can, to some extent, be categorised as descriptive, because they identify 'what' the widening participation policies are of different HEIs (Yin, 2003, pp. 5-6). However, the key focus of these case studies is explanatory, because the research will concentrate on questions of 'how' and 'why' (*ibid.*, p.6). These questions are inherently complex because of the number of factors influencing behaviour (Stake, 1995). Yet it is through the detailed examination of cases that researchers are able to make progress towards understanding the complex inter-related processes involved in determining contemporary social phenomenon (Deem and Brehony, 1994; Bell, 1999; Yin, 2003). In contrast, I could have carried out a large scale survey that would have provided a greater range of data, but with less information and detail from each respondent (Hammersley and Gomm, 2000).

Arguably the most serious charge against the use of case studies is that because they involve only a relatively small number of cases it is not possible to generalise from them. However, many qualitative researchers contend that generalisation is not the main aim of case studies (Bassegy, 1999). The researcher may, for example, have an intrinsic interest in understanding a specific case (Stake, 1995), or they may seek to provide, 'illumination and illustration rather than ... empirical generalizability' (Schofield, 1993, cited by Deem and Brehony, 1994, p. 163).

Researchers are nevertheless interested in generalisation. This is because they want to be able to transfer the results of their research to other situations (Robinson and Norris, 2001). Yin (2003) responds to such criticisms by arguing for multiple case studies. Findings from other studies can also provide 'external validity' (Deem and Brehony, 1994). In this respect, both Stake (1995) and Bassegy (1999) contend that cumulative research can support generalisations in case study research. However, sufficient detail should be provided in order to facilitate comparison between different case studies (Schofield, 1993; Robinson and Norris, 2001).

It can, however, be argued that these writers are pandering to positivistic notions of research validity - a comment Carr (1989) makes in his defence of educational action

research. However, Clyde Mitchell (1983) contends that generalisation can be based on factors other than replication. He, for example, suggests that it is possible to generalise using 'logical inferences' that rely on the 'cogency of the theoretical reasoning' (*ibid.*, p.207).

Finally, it is not the intention of this research to criticise individuals or their institutions. Indeed, I think it is important to try and see the situation from the perspective of the HEI and understand the factors influencing policy making. Nevertheless, the way research is presented may indicate, or be interpreted as implying, a negative judgement about institutional policy (see Ozga, 1999). For this reason I decided to provide anonymity to the HEIs and individuals interviewed.⁴ In order to protect anonymity 'general' rather than 'specific' information (see Cohen and Manion, 1994, p. 368) has, whenever possible, been utilised. For example, in Table 3.3 below, rather than providing precise details about the number of students, HEIs have been classified into bands of small, medium or large institution. This approach may of course jeopardise the ability of other researchers to compare their research with this study. However, the need to protect institutions, and particularly individuals within these HEIs, takes precedence over the requirement to provide detailed information.

RESEARCH METHODS

There are no particular research methods directly associated with the case study approach (Berg, 2001) with researchers tending to 'use what methods seem to them to be appropriate and practical' (Bassegy, 1999, p. 69). Before discussing the research methods utilised for this study it is useful to identify the two main aspects of this research and the different stages involved. This is summarised in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2 The different aspects and stages of this research

Government (and HEFCE) policy on widening participation	The widening participation policy of Higher Education Institutions
<p>This involved an examination of documents such as reports and consultations from a variety of sources including: the Government, HEFCE, QAA, committees of inquiry (e.g. Robbins, Dearing), organisations representing HEIs (e.g. UUK, SCOP).</p> <p>The analysis of the evolution of government (and HEFCE) policy will focus on the following periods/events:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Post-Robbins (1963-1996) - The Dearing Report (1997) - Post-Dearing (1997-2002) - The Future of Higher Education (2003) to the publication of the Higher Education Act in July 2004. 	<p>This involved three stages:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. An initial examination of the widening participation policies of 16 HEIs (utilising publicly accessible documents, both printed and available on websites). 2. A more in-depth analysis of the widening participation policies of six HEIs. This stage again relied upon documentary evidence. However, it involved a more detailed analysis that focused on trying to identify the underlying rationale behind policy. 3. Interviews with key policy-makers in three HEIs were carried out. Documents that were not publicly available were also obtained at this stage.

Government (and HEFCE) policy on widening participation: The initial stage of this study involved examining the evolution of government policy on widening participation, especially in relation to social class. This part of the research enabled me to develop an understanding of the way government (and HEFCE) policy had evolved since the 1960s and how it provided the macro-context within which institutional policy was formulated. Ozga (1987) suggests that macro-level analysis is important, but on its own it can lead to overly abstract theorising. She argues for the bringing together of macro and micro level analysis, with the former representing an essential prerequisite

for, in this case, a detailed institutional investigation (Ozga, 1987, 1990). This is the approach adopted for this research.

There was a need to set a time boundary around this aspect of the research. It was decided to examine the period from the Robbins Report (1963), when the HE sector began to undergo significant change, through to the 'Future of HE' (2003) and the passing of the Higher Education Act in July 2004. The research was therefore being undertaken during a period of policy development which meant that changes had to be incorporated into the study as they occurred.

The widening participation policy of Higher Education Institutions: The first phase of this research involved an initial examination of the widening participation policies of 16 HEIs using publicly available documents (mainly those accessible from websites). Wellington (2000) has suggested that documentary research can be 'used to open up an area of inquiry and sensitize researchers to the key issues and problems in that field' (p. 113). This was the rationale behind this stage of the research. At this point the research was 'exploratory' (see Yin, 2003) and aimed to obtain an overall impression of HEI policy on widening participation by analysing a selection of key documents and websites.

From these 16 HEIs, six contrasting institutions were selected for a more in-depth study. At this stage of the research all the web-pages and links were explored on institutional websites, and where necessary, HEIs were contacted to obtain documents not available through this medium. These documents were analysed in depth to obtain a greater insight into the underlying rationale and values informing policy on widening participation.

Finally, three HEIs were selected and interviews were carried out with key policy makers within these institutions. The interviews enabled the rationale, values and underlying theories and conceptions held by policy makers to be examined in detail. Table 3.3 (below) details the selection of HEIs at each stage of the research process.⁵

Stake (1995, p. 4) makes the point that case study research is ‘not sampling research’. He also argues that the most important criteria for the choice of cases should be that they represent the best opportunity for developing an understanding of the issues being studied. At each stage of this research cases were therefore selected on the basis of what could be learnt from them. There was also an attempt to try and obtain a cross section of different types and sizes of HEI. As can be seen from Table 3.3 the final selection includes a small college of HE, a large new university and a large Russell Group university.

Table 3.3 A summary of the characteristics and selection of cases

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
HEI-1 Medium-sized college of HE		
HEI-2 Large new university		
HEI-3 Small college of HE	√	√
HEI-4 Medium-sized college of HE	√	
HEI-5 Medium-sized college of HE		
HEI-6 Small old university		
HEI-7 Small old university	√	
HEI-8 Medium-sized college of HE		
HEI-9 Large new university		
HEI-10 Large old (Russell Group) ⁶ university	√	√
HEI-11 Large new university	√	√
HEI-12 Large old (Russell Group) university		
HEI-13 Small old university		
HEI-14 Medium-sized old university		
HEI-15 Large college of HE		
HEI-16 Medium-sized new university	√	

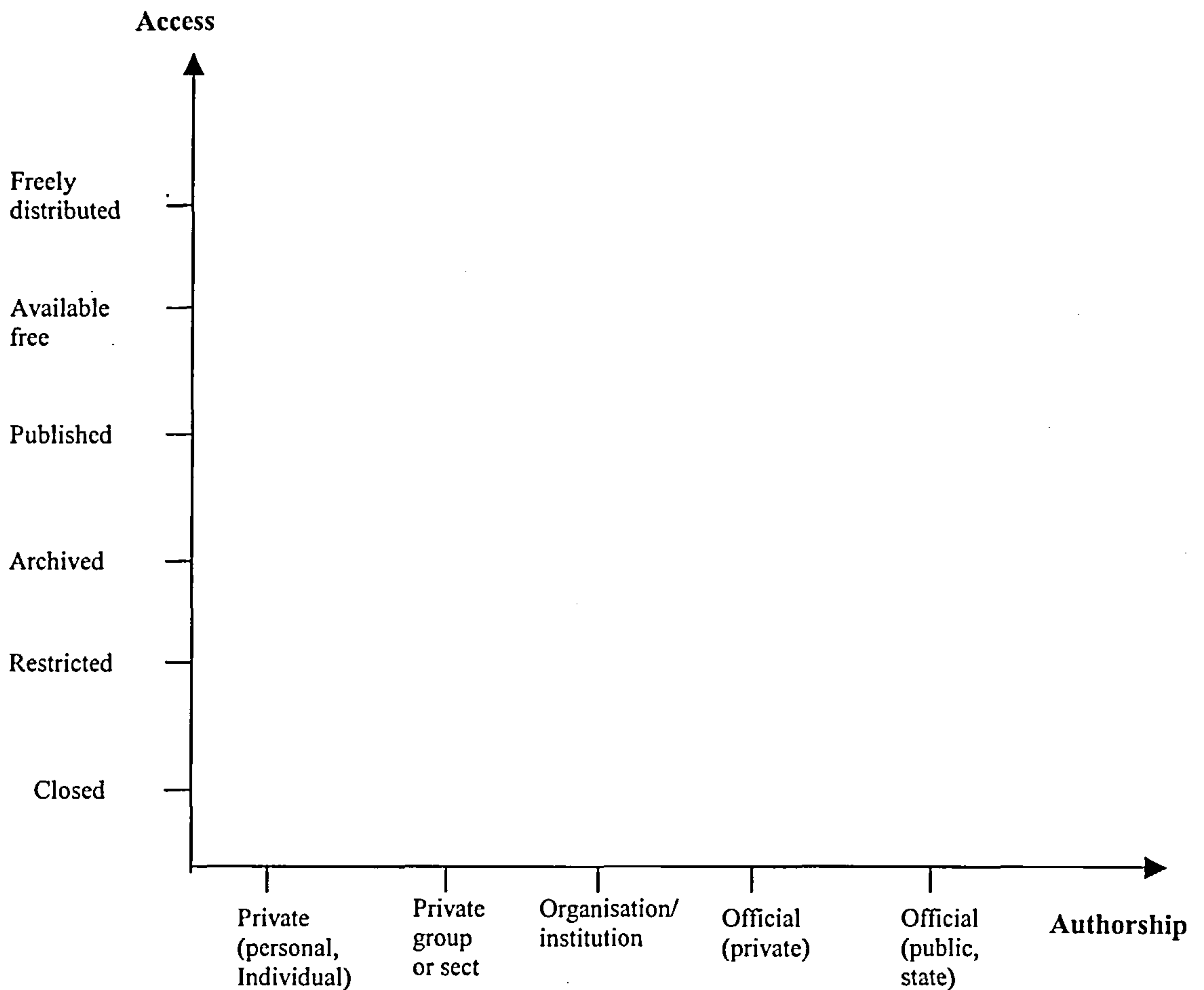
This research involved both documentary analysis and interviews. In the sections below I will discuss each of these methods.

Documentary analysis

Documents include a wide variety of ‘media and modes of delivery’ (Wellington, 2000, p. 110). For the purposes of this research they include reports, prospectuses, policy statements, press releases, in both electronic (e.g. website) and hard copy formats. Whilst the focus of this research is on the written word, account will also be taken of images that appear in documents. This is because the use of photographs, diagrams, heraldic badges, graphics, etc., are increasingly utilised in documents (Woodward, 2000; McCulloch, 2004).

Scott (1990) provides a classification of different types of document based on two dimensions: access and authorship. Wellington (2000) develops this conceptualisation and constructs a useful diagrammatic representation of it (see Figure 3.1 below).

Figure 3.1 A framework for classifying documents in educational research



Source: Wellington (2000, Fig. 8.2, p. 111).

In terms of authorship (horizontal axis) the documents analysed for this study fall into two main groups. First, there are organisational/institutional documents written by HEIs and organisations such as UUK. Second, there are official documents produced by government departments (e.g. DfES) and agencies (e.g. HEFCE). The source of documents obviously has to be taken into account when they are being analysed.

Another important factor is the accessibility of documents (vertical axis). Most of the documents utilised in this research are freely distributed. Yet access to some HEI

documents is restricted and it has on occasions been difficult to obtain them. This unfortunately means there is inter-institutional variability in the information available for analysis and possibly some doubt about the 'representativeness' of documents (McCulloch, 2004). On the other hand, the HEIs selected for the second and third stages of this research (see Table 3.2) were the ones where important documents were accessible.

Authorial intentions: The content of documents is influenced by the values of those producing them (Hutchings, 2003). It is therefore useful to understand the 'authorial intentions that lie behind the text' (Codd, 1988, p. 237). In practice, however, authorial intent may be obscure (Duffy, 1999; Patterson, 2001) and researchers are often left to work out what the author's objectives or rationale might be (Prior, 2003). This may involve the researcher considering the nature of the intended audience (Scott, 1990). It may also entail taking into account, not only what the document includes, but also what has been omitted (Popkewitz and Lindblad, 2000; Trowler, 2001).

The process of interpreting the author's intention can be made even more difficult if the production of documents involves multiple authors with different objectives and values. As Kenway and Willis (1998, p. xviii) observe documents may consist of 'different and often contradictory discourses ... some of these are dominant, some subordinate, some peacefully coexisting, some struggling for ascendancy'. It may therefore be important to understand the social and political processes involved in the production of documents (Codd, 1988; Prior, 2003). A knowledge of such processes is not, however, easy to acquire, even for documents originating from high profile inquiries such as Dearing (1997).

The importance of authorial intentions has also been questioned. Davies *et al.* (1997) suggest that authors may use an 'institutional discourse' without giving any real thought to what is being written. In addition, Codd (1988) questions the extent to which the author of a text has a clear understanding of their objectives. This may seem implausible, but in research on decision-making March (1972) suggests that individuals often do not act rationally. Instead of clearly formulating objectives in their minds and

then making decisions people often act and then retrospectively set objectives. In a later publication he also contends that goals are often:

less clear than is assumed in theories of rational choice. Preferences are often vague or contradictory. They develop over time changing as a result of experience and the decision process (March, 1987, p. 155).

Similarly, MacFadyen (1986) states that individuals have 'changing, inconsistent, often unconscious and irrational preferences' (p. 54). It does not seem unreasonable to suppose that authors may be similarly vague and irrational, which makes analysing their texts on the basis of authorial intent problematic.

Readers' interpretations: All documents are open to interpretation because readers bring to a document their own culturally conditioned perspectives and conceptual frameworks (Scott, 1990; Prior, 2003; Hutchings, 2003). The reading of a particular document will also be influenced by other texts (Mitra and Cohen, 1999) which can restrict thought or introduce the reader to new possibilities and ideas (Foucault, 1979; Davies *et al.*, 1997; Prior, 2003). The text being read also influences the reader through the words used and the way it is structured (Trowler, 2001). As Prior (2003, p. 112) states:

although the reader necessarily appropriates the text in terms of his or her own lifeworld, the text also constrains and produces. That is to say, the text – by virtue of its content – has a creative potential that acts upon the reader, and by its very nature, develops and broadens the reader in new ways of thought and action. There is a sense, therefore, in which a text structures its reader.

It has been suggested by some writers (e.g. Scott, 1990; Willig, 1999b) that documentary research should therefore focus, not on authors, but their audience and how they interpret what they read. This approach subordinates the author's importance (McCulloch, 2004), with some writers even arguing that documents have no meaning until they are interpreted by their readers (Kent, 1991; Bove and Ball, 1992). My personal view is that authorial intention cannot be ignored, but it is important to take

account of how readers interpret documents, especially when they are policy makers or opinion formers (e.g. journalists, politicians and researchers).

Approaching documentary research: The need to incorporate both authorial intention and the readers' interpretation into the analysis of texts illustrates the complexity involved in documentary research. From a researcher's perspective the situation is made more difficult by the fact that methodological approaches to documentary research are relatively under-developed (Scott, 1990; Flick, 2002; Prior, 2003; McCulloch, 2004). For example, Prior (2003, p. 4) states, 'given the role and significance that written documentation plays in most human societies it is strange to note just how little attention has been paid to it by social researchers.' There appears, however, to be a fairly substantial literature on discourse analysis (e.g. Burman and Parker, 1993; Willis, 1999a; Silverman, 2001, pp.177-189; Wetherell *et al.*, 2001) and content analysis (e.g. Fairclough, 1995; Berg, 2001, pp. 240-267; Krippendorff, 2004). Discourse analysis focuses on the message being communicated by a document, often through the analysis of key words (Williams, 1997b). Content analysis is similar except that it adopts a quantitative approach that may, for example, count the number of times a key word is used in a document (Silverman, 2001).

For this study discourse analysis provides some useful insights into how to analyse documents. I am, however, less inclined to adopt the methods associated with content analysis. I agree with Scott (1990, p. 147) who is critical of content analysis for decomposing text into individual elements and being too 'atomistic'. Scott (1990) advocates a more holistic approach, arguing that 'significance is a qualitative rather than quantitative matter, and that the researcher must attempt to grasp the underlying, latent content of the text' (p. 147). Similarly, Prior (2003) argues for a holistic approach that examines a whole document, or series of documents, from a perspective that takes account of the environment and context within which they were produced.

Such advice is, however, rather nebulous, especially compared to the guidance provided to researchers adopting content analysis. The difficulties involved should not, however, put researchers off. If we are to extend our understanding of complex social issues, such as policy making, documentary research provides a valuable research method. It is also

important to appreciate that the overall objective of research is not to obtain the 'definitive account but a legitimate and fruitful one' (Platt, 1981, p. 58).

Interviews

Interviews were carried out with key policy informants at both senior and middle management levels in three HEIs (see Appendix 1 for details) as part of Stage 3 of the research process (see Table 3.2). To some extent this relied on interviewees suggesting other people who could be interviewed. This was a useful way of gaining access to people in HEIs (Flick, 2002), but on some occasions it was restrictive because interviewees made it clear that they did not want me to speak to particular people in the institution. For ethical reasons I did not feel I could ignore their request.

The interviews were carried out during May to July 2004 and usually lasted about an hour. Ozga (1987, p. 146) describes the use interviews with policy makers as 'extraordinarily revealing'. I would agree with this. The interviews provided information on the rationale behind policy. Furthermore, they allowed the content of documents to be discussed in more detail, especially where the person being interviewed was involved in the writing of documents. The interviews also enabled the views of different policy makers within an HEI to be compared.

This approach might be seen as a form of triangulation with different sources of data being used to determine 'the 'truth' (see Silverman, 2001). Yet from the interpretivist position adopted in this research, triangulation is more accurately conceived as a means of obtaining different perspectives (Silverman, 2001). However, Seal (1999) feels that this perspective on triangulation is limited because it makes no attempt to determine which accounts are the most plausible. Seale (1999) contends that triangulation can 'help to build plausibility for a particular account as part of a fallibilistic research strategy in which evidence is sought for central claims' (p. 59). This is the approach I adopted because otherwise the research process becomes overly indeterminate (Bohman, 1991). Nevertheless, I recognise the danger of expressing findings as certainties and will follow Bassegy's (1999) advice to adopt 'fuzzy generalisations' and a circumspect stance in arriving at conclusions. Likewise, Pring (2003) argues that all

knowledge should be treated as 'tentative' or 'provisional' because 'research and scholarship are littered with the corpses of authorities, of the 'last word' articles, of the definitive text that proved not to be definitive after all' (p. 61).

Interview design: The analysis of institutional documents, along with the literature review, provided a framework for designing the questionnaires. However, whilst it is important to be well prepared, especially for 'elite' interviews with senior managers, an overly structured approach was seen as too restrictive (see Buchanan *et al.*, 1988; Stake, 1995; Gillham, 2000). As Buchanan *et al.* (1988, p. 59) contend:

The skilled but mechanical approach is likely to ignore the many trivial remarks and passing comments in the interview which if pursued could lead to further insights and improved understanding. The researcher has to be attentive and ready to put the interview guide aside when such occasions arise.

It was decided to utilise semi-structured questionnaires with open questions that promoted discussion and exploration. The approach was more like a structured conversation (Yin, 2003) and the questionnaires could more accurately be described as 'interview guides' (Buchanan *et al.*, 1988, p. 59). These 'guides' provided the flexibility to explore issues with the policy makers being interviewed. As such, the interview guides consisted of a series of key questions, but with some prompts, to help me probe further and ensure key issues were covered.

The questions were not standardised because they were tailored to the person and institution being interviewed. As Stake (1995, p. 65) points out, 'Qualitative case study seldom proceeds as a survey with the same questions asked of each respondent; rather each interviewee is expected to have unique experiences, special stories to tell'. As indicated above there were, however, a set of core questions that were asked of all interviewees which enabled comparisons to be made. An example of an interview guide is included in Appendix 2.

The interviews were taped. There may be concerns that the presence of a tape recorder inhibits people. However, my own experience, confirmed by these interviews, is that people quickly disregard the fact that they are being taped (see Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991; Gillham, 2000 for similar comments). Tape recording also provides an accurate record of what was said (Gillham, 2000) and it allows the interviewer to concentrate on listening rather than making notes. As Bassey (1999) points out tape recording permits the researcher to 'attend to the direction rather than the detail of the interview' (p. 81).

Tape recording also enabled direct quotations to be used in the subsequent writing up of the research. The following, adapted from Maynard (1991, pp. 486-487), was used to describe additional verbal and non-verbal information:

Emphasis

- 'It was a PROBLEM'.

The use of capitals represents emphasis in terms of volume or pitch.

Transcription conveniences

- 'I didn't (laugh) do anything'.

- 'I said (waives arms) go away'.

Words in parentheses indicate characteristics of talk or non-verbal gestures.

There is a difference between the spoken and written word, and transferring the former to the latter sometime makes the meaning less clear. Nevertheless, words have been written down in the way they were spoken because to do otherwise would misrepresent those being interviewed and may inadvertently change their meaning. Angled [] rather than curved parentheses have, however, been used to include non-spoken words that help clarify what was said.

Interview process: The interviews seemed to go well with institutional policy makers generally appearing to be open and honest about the rationale behind their widening participation policies. Silverman (2001) emphasises the influence of the interviewer on the interview process. In this respect Prichard (2000) describes how he was aware of the influence of dress, vocabulary, etc., when interviewing managers in further and higher

education. He contends that he was able to ‘tactically reduce this [influence]’. I would argue that you cannot reduce your influence, only try and conduct yourself in a way that you feel will provide the most conducive environment for the interview. However, I also feel that as a researcher I have a moral duty to avoid deceit, especially as the interviewees work in the same environment as myself and they have given up their valuable time to speak to me. With this in mind I decided to be myself and act, talk and dress as I normally would. The only modification in my behaviour that I was aware of was a conscious attempt to avoid conflict by being tactful in the way I asked awkward questions and responded to answers that conflicted with my values.

During the interviews I was aware that policy makers are likely to be very sophisticated and adept at providing accounts that are institutionally and politically acceptable. Similar comments are made by Smith (2000) who discusses how interviewees in her research were very keen to represent a positive image of their institution’s commitment to widening participation. Also Prichard (2000, pp. 207-208) describes how university vice-chancellors and college principals are particularly adept at offering a ‘well-rehearsed’ account of the institutions ‘strategic narrative’. The fact that I undertook extensive documentary research prior to the interviews helped me to evaluate interviewee’s answers. Ball’s advice on how to interpret educational policy makers’ responses was also very useful. Ball (1994a) argues that interviews with educational policy makers should be interpreted in three different ways:

1. As ‘stories’ or accounts of what happened. ‘This is the ‘how’ of policy, the practicalities’ (Ball, 1994a, p. 109).
2. As ‘discourse’. ‘[T]he ‘why’ of policy; the types of knowledge which provide justification and explanation of certain policy solutions’ (Ball, 1994a, p. 109).
3. As ‘interest representation’. ‘This is data as indicative of structural and relational constraints and influences which play in and upon policy making ... This is the ‘because’ of policy’ (Ball, 1994a, p. 109).

The above was utilised when carrying out the interviews and also in the subsequent analysis of the transcriptions.

DATA ORGANISATION AND ANALYSIS

According to Yin (2003), 'The analysis of case study evidence is one of the least developed and most difficult aspects of doing case studies' (p. 109). In his book, Yin (2003, pp. 109-140) discusses various methods of data analysis that generally adopt very systematic approaches. Likewise, Paechter (2003, p. 116) argues that 'rigour' and 'transparency' are the hallmarks of 'good research'. The aim of this section, therefore, is to provide a clear exposition of how the data for this study was both organised and analysed. As will be seen, I have attempted to adopt a systematic approach to the analysis of both documentary and interview data.

Organisation

Stenhouse (1978) argues for the creation of case study archives that are readily available for external evaluation by other researchers. He proposes that:

no qualitatively based theorising in education should be regarded as acceptable unless its argument stands or falls on the interpretation of accessible and well-cited sources, so that the interpretation offered can be critically examined (*ibid.*, p. 25).

Similar arguments for making case study material available for external scrutiny or 'audit' have subsequently been made by several writers (e.g. Seal, 1999; Gillham, 2000; Yin, 2003). For example, Coffey and Atkinson (1996, p. 191) argue that:

It is important that the process of exploration and abduction be documented and retrievable. Their [the researcher's] documentation is part of the transformation of data from personal experience and intuition to public and accountable knowledge (quoted by Seal, 1999, p. 162).

Stenhouse (1978) argued for a two stage procedure involving the creation of 'case data' and then 'case records'. This approach was adopted for this research.

Case data: Case data is usually too extensive and unwieldy to be open to external scrutiny (Stenhouse, 1978). It may also include sensitive material that should not be made available. For this study case data includes copies of documents (strategic plans, annual reports, widening participation strategies, etc.), with initial notes and significant points highlighted. This is the material that was collected for Stage 1 of the research (see Table 3.2). The tape recordings of interviews are also included as case data.

Case records: Case records are edited versions of case data. They include detailed records of the approach and rationale for widening participation of each of the six HEIs selected for Stage 2 of the research. Case records also include edited transcriptions of all the interviews carried out at Stage 3 of the research and the subsequent analysis of data using matrices and mapping (see below).

These case records can also be used to establish the ‘credibility’ or ‘authenticity’ of the research and as such can be made available for external scrutiny (Seale, 1999). The case records do not, however, represent a way of validating the data as if a particular truth exists. As already discussed, this research adopts an interpretive perspective that recognises that multiple realities exist. The case records, therefore, represent a particular interpretation or construction.

Analysis

Data analysis involves making sense and providing meaning to data (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). The way this chapter has been written may seem to suggest that research is a linear process with data analysis following data collection. In practice, data analysis is a continuous process that takes place from the point at which data is collected. Nevertheless, after the case records had been compiled the focus of the research did turn to analysis. Whilst qualitative data analysis involves a significant element of intuition (Atkinson and Delamont, 1985; Stake, 1995; Gillham, 2000),⁷ this was applied in conjunction with a systematic approach utilising matrices and mapping.

Matrices: Qualitative data is both detailed and complex. In order to make sense of this data matrices were used to categorise different aspects of institutional widening participation policy and the rationale behind it. These matrices provided an overview and enabled comparisons to be more easily made by identifying, ‘singularities, regularities and variations within the data’ (Dey, 1993, p. 195). It can be argued that the categorisations in a matrix reflect the perspective of the researcher and the theoretical position they adopt (Sayer, 1992). This is inevitable and is a criticism that can be levelled against any research. In this research I have, however, attempted to ground the categorisations in the data itself. I am not arguing that I adopted a fully grounded approach (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Straus and Corbin, 1997), because existing theories and perspectives will always influence the categorisation of data. However, I consciously tried to detach myself from established theories by focusing on what the data was saying. It can also be argued that the use of matrices is reductionist and fails to reflect the complexity and ‘messiness’ of the data being analysed (Simons, 1996; Dubois, 1996). However, matrices are only used as a starting point for analysis. An example is included in Appendix 3.

Mapping: In previous research (see Greenbank, 2000a) I used ‘cognitive mapping’ as a method of modelling micro-business owner-managers decision-making processes in the form of diagrams. This was based on a seminar I attended on cognitive mapping (Berry and Hughes, 1995) and further reading on ‘mind mapping’ (see Buzan, 1995; Spicer, 1998). The technique enabled the complex interaction of interconnecting factors influencing the decision-making process to be presented in diagrammatic form in order to aid understanding.

According to Schwenk (2002) cognitive mapping dates back to the 1940s and was used to map decision-making processes in laboratory experiments. Buzan’s conception of ‘mind maps’ was aimed at improving memory (Teale *et al.*, 2003), but its use has been modified, extended and indeed given different names. I will use the generic term *mapping* because the technique has been used to ‘map’ not only the rationale underpinning policy - which at the level of the individual could be described as ‘cognitive mapping’ (see Bougon, 1983) - but also the relationship between different institutional policies (see Schwenk, 2002). The process of mapping assists in

conceptualising processes, relationships and causality and also helps to identify the relative importance of the different factors that have been incorporated into the analysis.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study involves an examination of both government and institutional policy on widening participation. In particular, it focuses on the rationale behind HEI policy on widening participation, especially in relation to social class. In order to address these issues the research utilises a case study approach and uses both documentary research and interviews. The rationale for the approach and the methods adopted has been justified on moral, ontological and epistemological grounds. For example, confidentiality was adopted for moral reasons and the use of documents and interviews were seen as complementary methods that could be justified on epistemological grounds. As Duke (2002, p. 43) argues documentary research informs the interview process, whilst the data gathered from interviews provides insights into interpreting and understanding documentary evidence.

The chapters following this one cover the empirical stage of this research. It should be appreciated that the complexities inherent in trying to make sense of policy making mean that my conclusions are tentative. This does not, however, undermine the validity of what I am trying to do. As Pring (2003) points out all knowledge should be treated as provisional. It is also important to emphasise that this study is based on an interpretivist perspective. This means there is an acceptance of the existence of multiple realities and the fact that the subsequent analysis only represents my construction of 'reality'. This does not mean that I have simply accepted subjectivity as inevitable and have adopted a casual approach to this research. On the contrary, I have sought to be as impartial as possible (whilst acknowledging that all aspects of this research process are driven by my values). I have attempted to achieve this by trying to 'bracket' my values and by adopting a systematic approach to the analysis of data. During this study I have also tried to use Seale's (1999) suggestion that researchers should use their imagination to adopt the role of their critics in order to question the 'validity' of their findings. He contends that researchers can do this by looking for 'disconfirming evidence' (Seale,

1999, p. 73) and ‘instances that tend to contradict the researcher’s assumptions’ (*ibid.* p. 74). Similarly, Simons (1996) discusses the need for researchers to confront their underlying assumptions and expectations and ‘embrace’ and ‘explore’ situations that challenge these.

NOTES

1. Pring (2003) differentiates between deontologicalists who follow general rules of behaviour regardless of the consequences; and consequentialists who are concerned with the consequences of their actions.

2. I accept Seale’s (1999) point that a researcher may not be aware of the values influencing their research because they operate at the unconscious level. However, we are likely to be aware of some of the values influencing us, especially if we adopt a reflexive approach and deliberately try to confront our values (see Garrison, 1996, pp. 434-435).

3. Although Bohman (1991, p. 139) points out that because some of our beliefs and values may not be strongly held they may be more amenable to revision.

4 . For similar examples of researchers anonymising their research see Trowler (1998), Prichard (2000), Davies *et al.* (2002) and Rolfe (2003).

5. Colleges of HE were divided into three sizes:

- Small: Less than 5,000 students
- Medium: 5,000 to less than 10,000 students
- Large: 10,000 or more students

Universities were divided into three sizes:

- Small: Less than 10,000 students
- Medium: 10,000 to less than 20,000 students
- Large: 20,000 or more students

6. The Russell Group is a coalition of 19 self selected research led HEIs who are considered to the most prestigious universities in the United Kingdom (Chevalier and Conlon, 2003).

7. Bourdieu, 1988) points out that only somebody who has not undertaken empirical research could make a claim for a perfectly transparent and systematic approach that did not involve 'a proportion of what is called 'intuition'' (p. 6).

CHAPTER 4

THE EVOLUTION OF GOVERNMENT POLICY ON WIDENING PARTICIPATION

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will examine the evolution of government policy on widening participation and how it seeks to influence the way HEIs implement this policy. Fitz (1994) contends that funding and legislation are perhaps the more effective levers open to government, although some writers (e.g. Wagner, 1989) suggest that government exhortation may also be influential. This may be particularly the case when government pronouncements are juxtaposed with statistics that demonstrate how institutions have performed in terms of widening participation (see for example Appendix 4).

The important role of officials, as well as politicians, is highlighted by Gewirtz and Ozga (1990). Quoting Matthew Arnold they state that ‘He [*sic.*] who administers, governs because he infixes his own mark and stamps his own character on all public affairs as they pass through his hands’ (*ibid.*, p. 42). For this reason documentation from a variety of government and quasi-governmental sources will be utilised. The methodological implications of this approach have been considered in Chapter 3. It is worth reiterating, however, that the production of such documents is a complex social and political process often involving a number of authors who will attach different meanings to the documents they have co-authored. Where possible, therefore, details about the production of documents will be incorporated into the analysis. My attempts to understand documents will also be influenced by the interpretations offered by other commentators. For this reason the analysis will take into account, and where necessary make explicit, the insights of other writers.

This chapter examines the formulation of government policy on widening participation in relation to social class from the 1960s to the present day. It provides a brief review of

policy in the post-Robbins period (1963-1996), before analysing in detail the Dearing Report (1997). The response to Dearing by the government and HEFCE and the development of widening participation policy in the post-Dearing period (1997-2002) is then examined. Finally, the influence of the Labour Government's white paper 'The Future of Higher Education' (2003) and the policies resulting from this are considered.

POST-ROBBINS (1963-1996)

The Robbins Report (1963) recommended the expansion of higher education. According to Blackburn and Jarman (1993), however, the growth in student numbers was evident before its publication and Robbins merely 'legitimated an expansion that was already underway' (p. 201). Probably more importantly Robbins argued for expansion in order to make better use of under-utilised ability, especially amongst those from lower socio-economic groups (Trowler, 2003; Ross, 2003a). It therefore set the tone for a more equitable system of higher education (Hayton and Paczuska, 2002b). Yet whilst there was a significant growth in higher education (Reay *et al.*, 2001), with actual growth much higher than that projected by Robbins (Ross, 2003a), the social mix of the student population remained largely unchanged (Reay *et al.*, 2001; Ross, 2003a). For example in 1960, 3.6 per cent of 18 year-olds from lower SEGs entered HE and by 1970 this had increased to 5.1 per cent (see Table 2.1). Whilst this was a substantial percentage increase in participation, the participation rate amongst working class students relative to those from middle class backgrounds remained very low. This can be seen in Table 2.1 where participation rates for SEGs IIIIM, IV and V were 5.1 per cent in 1970, compared to 32.4 per cent for those from SEGs IIIN, II and I.

In 1979 a Conservative Government heavily influenced by a laissez-faire ideology, and a preference for market solutions was elected. They sought to encourage individual responsibility, choice, self-interest, competition and enterprise (see Levacic, 1993; Pollitt, 1993; Atkinson *et al.*, 1996; Ball, 1997; Beynon, 1999; Hodgson, 1999; Halsey, 2000a; Loxley and Thomas, 2001) and regarded the market and 'consumer choice' as the most efficient way of allocating resources, even for public sector organisations such as hospitals, schools and universities. In order to make the higher education market

‘work’ the Conservatives introduced mechanisms for making HEIs accountable to their ‘consumers’, i.e. students and their parents (see Chapter 2). According to critics, however, the effect has been to make HEIs accountable to state regulators, such as HEFCE (see for example O’Neill, 2002).

In the ideological environment created by the Conservatives, the market was regarded as offering the most efficient way of allocating resources, and any resulting inequalities were seen as ‘natural’, and necessary, for the economy to run effectively (Loxley and Thomas, 2001). As a result, concerns about disadvantage and social exclusion were generally absent from government rhetoric (Ross, 2003b). The focus on markets also promoted ‘entrepreneurialism’ in higher education, rather than concerns about social justice (Scott, 1995). Nevertheless, whilst the DES’s 1985 Green Paper, ‘The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s’ emphasised the contribution higher education made to the economy, it also included a separate chapter on access and continuing education (Wagner, 1989). Concerns about access were also addressed in the 1987 White Paper, ‘Higher Education: meeting the challenge’ (*ibid.*).

Despite the Conservative Government’s commitment to a market approach there was still, therefore, a debate about issues of inclusion. According to Wagner (1989) these green and white papers moved access to higher education centre stage. Ross (2003b), however, maintains that the main focus during this period was on issues of gender and race, rather than social class. For example, one of the initiatives introduced by HEFCE during the early 1990s sought to encourage people from minority ethnic groups to train as teachers (Lewis, 2002).

THE DEARING REPORT (1997)

In 1996 the Dearing Inquiry was commissioned. It was initiated prior to the 1997 General Election as a response to concerns about the funding of higher education (Robertson, 1997), and with the support of the Conservative Government and the Labour Party opposition (Parry and Fry, 1999). The recommendations of committees of inquiry are supposed to be derived from ‘objective’ evidence-based deliberation by so

called experts and purportedly free from political bias. In practice, however, Robertson (1999, p. 133) contends:

inquiries never take place in a 'neutral' political space. If the state does not steer the course directly, its choice of terms of reference, chairman [*sic.*] and appointees guarantees that the inquiry will be alert not just to the considerations which give rise to the inquiry, but to political conditions in which an inquiry's recommendations will be required to flourish. Hence there is usually a close affinity between the state's tacit priorities, the social composition of the committee, and the recommendations of a final report.

Similarly, Trow (1998, p. 114), suggests that the Dearing Report was:

heavily constrained by its perceived necessity to be 'relevant' – i.e. not to make recommendations that will be dismissed out of hand by the Government of the day, a constraint that reflects its character as a civil service document rather than a document by an independent body that might have had less to lose by more radical recommendations.

It is not possible, however, to disentangle the effect of government influence on the content of the Dearing Report, because it was commissioned with the Conservatives in power, but only completed after the election, when Labour was in office. The events following a change of government probably influenced aspects of the Dearing Report, but without direct access to their deliberations, it is impossible to determine how.

The Dearing Inquiry was concluded by July 1997, taking just 14 months to complete, compared to 2½ years for the Robbins Report (Robertson, 1999). Williams (1998) contends that the Dearing Report leaves important issues unresolved. Similarly, Parry (1999) suggests that the short duration of the inquiry led to 'occasional short-cuts' (p. 226), especially in relation to widening participation which was not the subject of a separate working group (see Dearing, 1997, pp. 383-385) or 'systematic investigation in depth and breadth' (Parry, 1999, p. 235). Furthermore, the special reports on widening

participation - such as Report 6 by Robertson and Hillman (1997), which examined the experience of students from lower socio-economic groups and those with disabilities - were not commissioned until about three-quarters of the way through the inquiry (Parry, 1999). This is surprising given the emphasis subsequently placed on widening participation. For example, widening participation dominates the initial recommendations of the Dearing Report. It is also the subject of the first chapter in the government's response to Dearing (see DfEE, 1998).

The Dearing Report was also reliant on government sponsored research and specially commissioned reports, rather than refereed academic papers. As a result the report was said to ignore the 'voice of the academic community' (Robertson, 1999, p. 132). This criticism could not, however, be extended to the report by Robertson and Hillman (1997) which involved a rigorous review of the academic literature. It can, nevertheless, be maintained that both Robertson and Hillman (1997) and the Dearing Report fail to draw directly upon evidence from 'ordinary university teachers' (Trow, 1998, p. 96) or the communities towards which widening participation policy is directed. The failure to engage with the communities affected by policy is a criticism of educational policy making expressed by a number of authors (e.g. Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Morris and McMahon, 1998; Gewirtz, 2001; Thomas, 2001b; Nixon *et al.*, 2002a, 2002b). For example, Thomas (2001b) argues for a participative approach to developing widening participation policies, in which all stakeholders, particularly the intended 'beneficiaries' are involved. As Nixon *et al.* (2002b) argue, 'evidence-based policy can only be as good or effective as the values and questions it responds to, and the kind of evidence available or sought' (p. 237). The danger is that 'professional' or 'expert' opinion is emphasised at the expense of other forms of evidence (Nixon, 2001; Nixon *et al.*, 2002b). In this sense the least powerful are 'silenced' (Garrison, 1996), or when such evidence is heard, it is mediated through the voices of middle class academics.

The main thrust of Dearing's recommendations relating to widening participation are based on the premise that students from lower SEGs are failing to access higher education because of poor qualifications, low aspiration levels and flawed educational decision-making (see Dearing, 1997, especially pp. 101-113). It was felt that universities and colleges of HE had a role to play in improving aspiration levels and

decision-making. The Dearing Report is therefore based on a 'deficit' or 'victim blaming' model which identifies those from lower SEGs as responsible for their poor rates of participation in higher education, and as a result in need of change (see Reay and Ball, 1997; Woodrow, 1998; Tight, 1998). Dearing also concentrated on the earliest stage of the 'student life-cycle' (see Table 4.1 below for a summary), e.g. aspiration raising and admissions. It largely ignored the later stages of the student life cycle, such as the students' experience of higher education and their transition into employment.

The lack of concern with later stages in the student life-cycle was perhaps influenced by Report 6 to the Dearing Inquiry (Robertson and Hillman, 1997) which cited evidence from two reports indicating that once in higher education, working class students performed equally as well as their middle class peers. Yet Robertson and Hillman (1997) also expressed a fear that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds 'end up at the lower end of the labour market and are twice as likely to enjoy low starting salaries as any other group' (para. 2.31). This issue was not considered in the main Dearing Report.

The Dearing Report also recommended the expansion of higher education and that this should take place predominately at the sub-degree level (Dearing, 1997, Recommendation 1, p. 100). It was felt that such programmes would meet the needs of the economy and also the aspirations of 'those with non-standard qualifications and more diverse aspirations' (Dearing, 1997, para. 6.52, p. 100). In conjunction with this proposal it was suggested that more flexible routes that facilitate progression between sub- and honours degrees, and between further and higher education, should be developed. These proposals appear to be based upon Robertson and Hillman's (1997) metaphor of a 'climbing frame', where students can progress through a number of routes to the award of an honours degree. However, Robertson himself has been critical of Dearing's decision to back the continuance of the HND/C¹ and not the adoption of USA style associate degrees (Robertson, 1998). In addition, he did not feel that the system proposed by Dearing would enable students to transfer easily between courses and institutions. Robertson (1998) goes on to argue that:

Unless an effective system of credit transfer is developed which permits genuine student choice and mobility, and which is jointly developed by further and higher education, we may further consolidate in the UK the kind of socially stratified system of higher education from which some of us had hoped the Dearing Report would allow us to escape (p. 16).

A recurring theme in the Dearing Report is its endorsement of more collaborative approaches. This is seen in its support for the development of flexible routes between FE and HE. Dearing also favoured collaboration to increase participation in higher education. For example, it cites examples of HEIs and schools co-operating with each other to raise working class awareness of the benefits of higher education and to increase their aspirations. Dearing also provides examples of 'compact' agreements between HEIs and colleges that guarantee places to local students who meet minimum entry requirements (see Dearing, 1997, pp. 107-108).

Dearing placed a strong emphasis on the need for institutions to develop a widening participation strategy and mechanisms for monitoring and reviewing institutional progress on participation (Dearing, 1997. Recommendation 2, p. 107). Therefore, Dearing was advocating a 'strategic planning approach' (see Mintzberg *et al.*, 1998, pp. 48-79) to widening participation, involving the development of written strategic plans and targets. Such approaches have a long history. For example, in 1980 the House of Commons Select Committee demanded that HEIs produce statements relating to their purposes and objectives (Mackay *et al.*, 1995); in 1985 the Jarratt Committee recommended that universities produce strategic plans (*ibid.*); and the University Grants Committee made strategic plans a condition of receiving grants (Davies and Glaister, 1996). Following this tradition Dearing (1997) proposed that HEIs should:

Devise a clear policy about its strategic aims for participation, with particular reference to those groups who are known to be under-represented; and that it should monitor admissions and participation against those aims (para. 7.22, p. 107).

Again, it is pertinent to note that the focus is on the early stages of the student life cycle, in this case admissions.

Finally, the Dearing Inquiry undertook a very detailed examination of higher education funding (see Dearing, 1997, pp. 263-346). It concluded that higher education required a substantial increase in funding and recommended that graduates should make a flat rate contribution to their tuition, payable either up-front, or by taking out a student loan to be repaid on an income contingent basis when they were in employment (*ibid.*, Recommendation, 79, p. 380). Dearing also suggested that loans on living expenses be repaid on an income contingent basis. The Dearing Committee was concerned about the impact of these arrangements on students from low income families. It therefore proposed that means tested grants towards students' living costs be maintained (Dearing, 1997, Recommendation 83, pp. 380-381).

POST-DEARING (1997-2002)

The Dearing Report was published with a 'New' Labour Government in power. In the run-up to the 1997 general election the Labour Party 'repackaged itself [as 'New' Labour] signifying a shift away from traditional Labour connotations of working-class representation, nationalization and overtly redistributive policies' (Gewirtz *et al.*, 2004, p. 340). According to Laffin and Thomas, (1997) the label 'New' signalled a departure from the 'old' politics of left and right and the introduction of a 'new' approach (referred to as the 'third way') that transcended these divisions. New Labour relied on augmenting its traditional working class backing with support from the middle classes (and the affluent working class) for its election. As such, it adopted a conservative approach to social issues that stressed 'equality of opportunity' rather than 'equality of outcome' (Laffin and Thomas, 1997). According to Burke (2002), New Labour emphasised individual choice and responsibility, based on a belief that people would be willing to take risks to pursue opportunities that are presented to them in a meritocracy. A good example is provided by tuition fees where there is an expectation that individuals will be willing to incur a debt in order to invest in higher education.

New Labour also sought to build a reputation for effectively managing both the economy and the public sector. As a result, they developed many of the Conservative initiated policies that introduced markets and increased accountability in education (Loxley and Thomas, 2001). For example, Ozga (1999, p. 60) argues that the marketisation of education 'remains in place under New Labour, but overlaid with managerialism'. (See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the rise of managerialism in higher education).

The Government and HEFCE's reaction to Dearing

Robertson (1999) contends that governments have always been selective in their adoption of recommendations from Committees of Inquiry. In the case of Dearing, he argues that New Labour had even more latitude than usual because, although they had agreed to the inquiry, the composition of the Dearing Committee had been largely determined by the previous Conservative administration. They therefore had an excuse for not adopting all Dearing's recommendations. In the event, however, many of the Dearing Report's recommendations on widening participation were accepted by New Labour. HEFCE's position also shifted. Prior to the Dearing Report HEFCE was unenthusiastic about the idea of HEIs playing an active role in widening participation in relation to social class, suggesting that:

the question of increasing the participation of students from social groups III to V may *not* be one which the HE sector can address because it requires action at an earlier stage of the educational process (HEFCE, 1996a, Executive Summary, para. 3a, italics my emphasis).

Yet in their response to the Dearing Report, HEFCE changed its position. It stated that whilst it still believed that many of the causes of under-representation originated from outside the HE system, it felt that 'higher education can make a contribution to redressing particular imbalances' (HEFCE, 1997, para. 24). Moreover, within a few years social class and widening participation had become a 'major priority' for HEFCE

(HEFCE, 1999a, para. 5) and ‘one of the Council’s most important strategic aims’ (HEFCE, 2001c, para. 24).

Aspiration levels and educational decision-making: Dearing (1997) recommended that HEIs become involved in raising aspiration levels and improving the educational decision-making of those from lower SEGs. This recommendation was endorsed by the government which suggested that HEFCE allocate money to widening participation projects, ‘designed to address low expectations and achievement and to promote progression to higher education’ (DfEE, 1998, Recommendation 3, p. 12).

Collaboration: Dearing had emphasised the importance of collaboration between the different sectors of education. The Government endorsed this idea² and proposed that additional funds be directed to HEIs that encourage and support young people from families without a history of participation in HE by developing links with schools in disadvantaged areas (DfEE, 1998). This resulted in special funding initiatives for collaborative projects that developed strategies to increase participation in higher education (see HEFCE, 1999a, 1999b, 2000c). Collaboration is also encouraged in the provision of foundation degrees (see below) (Parry, 2003; HEFCE, 2004b).

Sub-degrees: The Government noted Dearing’s recommendation that the expansion of higher education should largely take place at the sub-degree level but only said it would ‘consider’ this option in any review of future provision (see DfEE, 1998, para. 1.2). Yet by 2000, the Government did commit itself to significant levels of funding to support, not the expansion of HND/Cs, but the introduction of a sub-degree qualification in the form of the Foundation Degree (HEFCE, 2000a). These degrees were set up in 2001-02 with the aim of providing ‘intermediate technical and professional skills’ and a ‘flexible and accessible’ way of studying (HEFCE, 2004b, para. 9, p. 3).

Like Dearing’s rationale for sub-degrees, the Government’s (and now HEFCE’s) reasoning was based on both labour market demand, and the belief that foundation degrees would make higher education, ‘more affordable, accessible and appealing to a wider range of students – thereby widening participation in HE and stimulating lifelong learning’ (HEFCE, 2000a, para. 1). This is confirmed by the fact that the criteria used to

allocate funding for foundation degrees includes a reference to encouraging bids that 'widen participation by increasing the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds' (HEFCE, 2004b, p. 1).

Strategic planning: Dearing advocated a strategic approach to widening participation involving the development of plans and targets. The need for such an approach was endorsed by New Labour (see for example DfEE, 1998) and it has been strongly supported by HEFCE, which from the late 1990s has requested (and linked to funding): first, the submission of institutional widening participation statements (in 1999); and then strategies and action plans for 2001 and 2003 (see HEFCE, 1998a, 1999b, 2003c, 2003d). HEFCE also endorsed Dearing's commitment to target setting as an integral part of the planning process (Lewis, 2002). This has been facilitated, since the late 1990s, by the publication of national and institutional data and performance indicators on the proportion of state educated students; the percentage of students from lower SEGs; and the proportion of students from low participation neighbourhoods (see HEFCE, 1999d, 1999e, 2002b). HEFCE's (2001b, Annex B, para. 8) analysis of widening participation statements, however, indicates that HEIs are not very good at setting targets, and HEFCE has recently suggested that it may have to play a more active role in setting performance targets for institutions (see HEFCE, 2002a, paras. 47 & 49).

Tuition fees and financial support for students: From the late 1970s to the mid-1980s students received high levels of financial support that included the payment of tuition fees by local authorities, the provision of means tested maintenance grants and access to social security benefits (Blanden and Machin, 2004). However, from the 1989-90 academic year a combination of loan and grant came into operation, but the grant declined in size over the years (NAO, 2002) and other benefits, such as unemployment payments during vacations were gradually withdrawn (Blanden and Machin, 2004).

The incoming Labour government adopted Dearing's proposals to introduce tuition fees, but it did not, as recommended by Dearing, maintain means tested grants to cover students' living expenses. Therefore, from 1998/99 Labour introduced flat rate tuition fees undifferentiated by institution or course (Robinson, 2004). Students from families

with low incomes were exempt from these tuition fees but there was no additional financial help other than the continued provision of income contingent student loans (which had been introduced in the early 1990s) for living expenses (see Greenaway and Haynes, 2000).

The growth in participation in higher education has declined since the introduction of tuition fees. Yet because a number of factors are potentially influencing this fall off, it is not possible to relate this directly to the introduction of fees (Hodgson and Spours, 2000; HEFCE, 2001a; HEFCE, 2004a). As Budd (2003), however, points out 'demand curves slope downwards' (p. 6). Therefore, tuition fees will have an adverse effect on the demand for university places, but it is the magnitude of this effect that is at issue. It is also contended that the complexity of the system of up-front tuition charges and arrangements for student loans creates confusion and acts as a barrier to participation in higher education (Archer *et al.*, 2002). In addition, research suggests that those from lower socio-economic groups lack awareness of the financial assistance available to them (HEFCE, 2001a; Opinion Leader Research, 2003) and even when they do not, pride or cultural norms mean they may not apply for financial support (Harrison quoting on-going research at the University of the West of England in a letter to the THES, 19 March 2004, p. 19).³ This is supported by research claiming that students from lower socio-economic groups are more averse to incurring debt (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000; Hodgson and Spours, 2000; Thomas, 2001a; HEFCE, 2001a; Evans, 2002; Opinion Leader Research, 2003; Thomas and Jones, 2003). The fact that the parents of working class students are not in position to provide financial help to their children exacerbates this situation because it increases the debt they have to incur (NAO, 2002). Christie and Munro (2003) also suggest that debt for working class students may seem greater when it is set alongside their parents' income and wealth. Indeed, Christie and Munro (2003) contend that students, especially those from less privileged backgrounds, are concerned about the financial burden they are placing on their parents.

The development of widening participation policy

The Dearing Report (1997) provides an important starting point in the evolution of New Labour and HEFCE's policy on widening participation. Since its publication there has, however, been significant policy developments, culminating in the formulation of the 'student life-cycle model' (see HEFCE, 2001b, 2002a). This model (summarised in Table 4.1 below) emphasises the need for institutional widening participation policies to adopt a more 'holistic approach to the issue of student access, progress and success by focusing on the student life-cycle' (HEFCE, 2001c, para. 47).⁴

Table 4.1 The student life-cycle

<i>Stage 1</i> Raising aspirations	Attempting to demystify HE and raise awareness of what it has to offer. Aspiration raising can be aimed at primary, secondary or further education students and also parents. It includes junior universities, university experience days, events for parents, school/university partnership schemes, promotional campaigns, school visits to universities and colleges.
<i>Stage 2</i> Preparation for higher education (pre-entry phase)	Assistance in preparing for and applying to HEIs. This often operates through schemes involving partnerships between universities or colleges of HE and schools and FE colleges. Examples include access courses and summer schools.
<i>Stage 3</i> Admissions	Widening participation is encouraged by giving credit, or guaranteeing places, to students who complete access courses or summer schools at Stage 2. There may also be 'compact schemes' between particular schools and colleges and HEIs. Activities aimed at reducing barriers to admission such as taster courses may be implemented.
<i>Stage 4</i> First steps in higher education (during first term/semester)	Extended induction programmes which aim to prepare students for the approaches to teaching and learning adopted in HE. It also enables deficiencies in skills and knowledge to be identified and rectified. Approaches include diagnostic tests, workshop support, tutor support and peer support groups.
<i>Stage 5</i> Moving through the course (support for students in HE)	Continuing to support students after Stage 4 so that they further develop their skills and knowledge and are able to progress successfully through their course. This may involve flexible progression routes.
<i>Stage 6</i> Successful progression into employment	Supporting the students as they make the transition from higher education into employment. This can include taught modules on career management skills, personal development profiles, work experience and the integration of key skills into programmes of study. May also include careers education, support, etc.

Source: Adapted from HEFCE (2001b, 2003d)

As discussed, the Dearing Report focused on the early stages of the student life cycle and neglected the latter stages, particularly 4 to 6 in Table 4.1 (above). In contrast, HEFCE encourages institutions to consider all aspects of the student life cycle. It appears that these policies have evolved in partnership with HEIs. For example, HEFCE makes explicit reference to the way it uses the widening participation statements and

strategies of colleges and universities, and seminars involving HEIs, to identify examples of good practice (see HEFCE, 2000b, 2001b, 2002c).

It can, nevertheless, be argued that what is regarded as 'good practice' is determined by HEFCE. Moreover, HEFCE can be criticised (like the Dearing Inquiry) for failing to engage with the communities that are, or will be, affected by widening participation policies. For example, a summary of responses to HEFCE's draft strategic plan for 2003-08 (see HEFCE 2003a) reveals that of the 109 responses, only one was from a students' organisation (the Open University Students Union), and none were from organisations representing working class communities (see HEFCE, 2003e, Annex A). In addition, only nine (unspecified) responses from individuals were recorded (*ibid.*).⁵ Furthermore, HEFCE seems to be attempting to increase its control over widening participation policy. They have recently, for example, proposed a central facility for storing and disseminating what they regard as high quality widening participation research (HEFCE, 2004a, para. 18, p. 6).

From the end of the 1990s onwards HEFCE directed funds to those HEIs recruiting an increasing number of students from 'underparticipating areas' (HEFCE, 1999b, 2001b).⁶ This was in recognition of the additional support costs such students were believed to incur on HEIs. However, no money was linked directly to measuring how successful institutions were at providing student support. Instead, HEFCE examined institutional widening participation strategies for evidence that policies were being developed to support achievement and success once students were in higher education (HEFCE, 1998a, 1999c). Dissatisfaction with this has resulted in HEFCE deciding to direct funding, not just to recruitment, but to student retention (HEFCE, 2003c). This approach has also had the effect of further reinforcing the use of quantitative targets to monitor institutional widening participation policy.

According to Lewis (2002) evidence of the government's increasing concern for later stages in the student life cycle is provided by the 'Excellence Challenge' which recognised the need to link widening participation strategies to learning and teaching. However, an analysis of institutional teaching and learning strategies carried out by Professor Graham Gibbs found that only 35 per cent of HEIs 'made explicit reference to

their widening participation statements in their teaching and learning strategies' (HEFCE, 2001b, para. 57). Similarly, the HEFCE document, 'Strategies for widening participation in higher education – a guide to good practice' (HEFCE, 2001b) emphasised the need for HEIs to develop widening participation policies that relate to other HE policies, such as teaching and learning, student support and careers (HEFCE, 2001b). HEFCE has also commented on how employability does not seem to feature in institutional widening participation strategies (HEFCE, 2002a, para. 24d). Nevertheless, the latest reports from HEFCE, indicate that HEIs are beginning to adopt more 'integrated' and 'coherent' approaches to widening participation that take into account different aspects of the student life-cycle (HEFCE, 2003b, para. 54).

HEFCE has also made an attempt to move away from the deficit model evident in the Dearing Report by identifying the need for HEIs to change the way they traditionally operate. For example, HEFCE asks whether:

the style of the curriculum assume[s] a particular type of background, and if so how easy is it to integrate students from diverse backgrounds into the course? It may be that students from access courses or GNVQ advanced courses, for example, are used to a very different learning style ... Whatever the approach, it is helpful to ask questions about the HEI's provision to establish if it is suitable for a diverse group of students (HEFCE, 2001b, para. 99).

Whilst HEFCE does not refer to working class cultural capital (see Chapter 2), it is identifying that students from different backgrounds may have particular needs, and it may not necessarily be the students that need to change, but the institution. In a later document HEFCE re-emphasises the need for institutions to change in response to increasing and widening participation:

As we work towards the Government's target of 50 per cent participation in HE by people aged under 30, HEI's will be admitting more students who may not be suited by the degree courses currently on offer.

Institutions may therefore need to change the nature of courses and their styles of support and delivery (HEFCE, 2002a, para. 11).

HEFCE also indicated that it would back such changes with funding: 'We will provide further funding over the next three years to support improvements in learning and teaching under the Total Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF)' (HEFCE, 2002a, para. 12).

THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION (2003) TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION ACT (2004)

The 'Future of HE', sets out the Government's medium and long-term strategy for higher education (Pratt, 2003). The discussion arising from this white paper has been dominated by the debate over the introduction of variable tuition fees. This obviously forms an important part of the document and has serious implications for widening participation. There has, however, been a tendency to overlook (at least in the popular media) other important aspects of the 'Future for HE'. This section will examine the different aspects of this document and how it has informed subsequent publications from HEFCE and the DfES. In addition, the response from HEIs, and particularly from bodies representing universities and colleges of HE such as Universities UK (UUK) and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP), will be incorporated into the analysis. The development of the government's policy on widening participation will also be traced from the publication of the 'Future of HE' (January 2003) through to the passing of the Higher Education Act on the 1 July 2004.

This section is divided into three parts. The first discusses those policies that represent a reiteration or development of existing policy. The second part deals with those aspects of the 'Future for HE' that seem to lag behind current thinking on widening participation. Finally, the third part identifies those policies that are substantially new.

Reiteration/development of existing policies

Rather than seeking to introduce new policies on widening participation the 'Future of HE', in many respects, reaffirms existing policy. For example, it confirms the government's commitment to improving pre-higher educational qualification standards and to raising the aspirations of schools and young people (DfES, 2003a). In the case of aspiration raising, the government set out its plans to rationalise the different programmes under 'Aimhigher' (DfES, 2003a, paras. 6.7-6.8, p. 70). This aspect of the white paper was generally welcomed by HEIs, although SCOP (2003a), which represents the colleges of HE, felt that the government wrongly assumes that all students want to attend elite institutions. This sentiment is echoed by Brown (2002) who writing in his capacity as the Principal of Southampton Institute states:

Paradoxically, the Government's desire that more widening participation students should go to 'top' universities is actually likely to *prevent* their WP objectives from being achieved. Such institutions are generally not geared to such students (pp. 75-76, italics in original).

There appears, therefore, to be some tension between different types of HEI, not with the overall policy, but with the underlying assumptions that influence the way it is articulated. The criticisms from SCOP are, nevertheless, likely to be influenced by their need to carve out a particular 'niche' for themselves in a fast changing, and increasingly diverse and competitive, HE market. For the type of institutions SCOP represents, widening participation is a policy area where they would expect to have a 'competitive advantage' over many universities, particularly elite institutions. This is seen in their response to HEFCE's Strategic Plan 2003-08 where they 'welcome[d] the intention to provide targeted funding for those institutions with a particularly strong commitment to widening participation' (SCOP, 2003a, para. 8).

The importance of target setting is also emphasised by the 'Future of HE' (see DfES, 2003a, paras. 6.22-6.23, pp. 73-74). The document discusses the need for more sophisticated and relevant benchmarks that enable widening participation policies to be monitored more effectively:

The current ways of measuring access relate to social class, postcode and state/private school. The Government favours moving towards more sensitive indicators, looking at a student's family income, their parent's level of education, and the average results of the school or college they attended (DfES, 2003a, para. 6.23, p. 74).

This is the type of strategic planning approach first proposed by Dearing (1997) and readily embraced by HEFCE.

As already discussed, the Government has committed itself to foundation degrees and regards these as the way to expand participation rates in HE for the 18 to 30 age group. This is reiterated in the 'Future of HE' which states that the government wants to see an 'expansion in two-year, work focused foundation degrees' (DfES, 2003a, p. 60) which will provide the 'bulk' of the expansion programme in higher education (*ibid.*, p. 57). It is interesting to note, however, that foundation degrees are discussed under the chapter entitled 'Expanding higher education to meet our needs' rather than in the chapter 'Fair access'. Indeed, within the 'Future of HE' little emphasis is placed on the role of foundation degrees in widening participation. It is left to HEFCE to reiterate that foundation degrees are important, not only to the expansion of higher education, but to widening participation (see HEFCE, 2003a, 2003d).

Whether foundation degrees will be able to meet the forecast demand for associate professional and higher technician level jobs that these qualifications are designed to meet (see DfES, 2003a) remains to be seen. Doubts have, however, been raised about the level of demand for foundation degrees, and pressure has been exerted on the government to abandon attempts to centrally determine the number of places that should be allocated to such programmes (see for example UUK, 2003a). Elsewhere, concerns have been expressed that foundation degrees may become the poor relation of higher educational qualifications, providing for the needs of disadvantaged, rather than a wide range, of students (see LSDA, 2003; House of Commons, 2003, pp. 34-35). In this respect, research suggests that rates of return on sub-degree qualifications, such as the HND/C, are well below those of a first degree - a factor which may explain the overall

decline in demand for such qualifications (HEFCE, 2001a). The same fate could await foundation degrees, especially as vocational qualifications have historically been afforded a lower status than academic qualifications.

Thomas and Jones (2003) also point out that widening participation students may not want to undertake work related sub-degrees. As far as I am aware, the Government or HEFCE has not produced any evidence, or even asked what working class non-participants in higher education wish to study. This may of course be deliberate: in a higher educational system geared to the needs of the economy, it is the opinion of employers, not the students that will be the driving force for change.

Behind current thinking?

In some respects the 'Future of HE' lags behind current thinking on widening participation and appears to fail to accommodate some of the advances made by HEFCE. For example, whilst the 'Future of HE' discusses issues such as student support and effective teaching and learning, it does not adopt the more sophisticated student life-cycle model currently informing HEFCE's widening participation policy. There is a section on 'inclusive and flexible teaching and learning' which refers to the need to accommodate those from non-traditional backgrounds (DfES, 2003a, p. 63). This, however, seems to focus on the need for flexible progression to honours degrees, especially from two year sub-degrees, rather than issues relating to pedagogy and the curriculum. Moreover, there appears to be nothing to connect issues of widening participation to the last stage of the student life-cycle, namely the transition into employment.

Thomas and Jones (2003) have argued that the 'Future of HE' adopts a deficit model. They do not provide any detail but point to paragraphs 6.4, 6.5 and 6.15 of the white paper as evidence. Paragraph 6.4 discusses the Government's 14-19 strategy which 'will promote higher aspirations and levels of attainment by age 19' (DfES, 2003a, para. 6.4, pp. 68-69). The need to raise aspirations (and achievement) is again emphasised in paragraph 6.5 by stating:

Raising school standards is critical, but it will not be enough on its own. More young people must be motivated to stay on in learning after age 16 and more of those who achieve the requisite qualifications at age 18 or 19 must be encouraged to consider going on to higher education (DfES, 2003a, para. 6.5, p. 69).

It is true that these statements are based on the rationale that some young people need to be educated about what is the best for them, and therefore, it is based on a deficit model. However, in the next paragraph cited by Thomas and Jones (2003), the 'Future of HE' suggests that those responsible for admissions should receive training to enable them to identify potential, as well as, actual achievement:

admissions staff, both academic and administrative ... [should be] properly trained so that they can recognise genuine potential as well as achievement, and make fair decisions (DfES, 2003a, para. 6.15, p. 72).

This approach recognises that the qualifications obtained by working class students may have a higher currency than suggested by the grades they have obtained. Such a perspective challenges the deficit model because it is acknowledging that there is nothing inherently wrong with disadvantaged students, even if they have lower qualifications than more privileged students.

There was, however, apart from SCOP (see SCOP, 2003b, para. 7) extensive opposition to the idea that anything other than merit should be used in admissions policy. For example, responses to the DfES indicated:

a fairly widespread view that entry to university must be based purely on merit; nothing else should be a factor, and regulation of admissions could lead to positive discrimination, putting the 'middle classes' at a disadvantage (DfES, 2003c, p. 12).

As a result, the government seems to have retreated from the idea that student 'potential' should form part of the criteria for admissions procedures arguing that 'they entirely agree that admissions to higher education should be on the basis of merit, regardless of background' (DfES, 2003c, p. 14). Nevertheless, the government set up a steering group to look at admissions procedures and in its first report issues of both merit and potential, along with the contribution students from non-traditional backgrounds may make to an institution, were placed on the agenda for consideration (Schwartz, 2003).

Both the initial and final reports from Schwartz send out confused messages because they state that the admissions system should not compensate for social disadvantage, but they then argue that HEIs have a responsibility to identify potential which 'may not be fully demonstrated by examination results' (Schwartz, 2004a, para. B5, p. 15; Schwartz, 2004b, para. B5, p. 23). However, my interpretation of Schwartz is that it is advocating a holistic approach that takes account of all aspects of an application, rather than the utilisation of a blanket system of compensation based, for example, on social class or the type of school an applicant attended.

New policies

The key policy initiative contained in the 'Future of HE' is its plans to allow HEIs, from the academic year 2006/07, to charge variable tuition fees of up to £3,000 per year. This policy can be seen as consistent with New Labour's adoption of market values and the notion that higher education represents an economic investment. The rationale behind this is exemplified in a Labour Party publication justifying variable tuition fees:

On average graduates earn 50 per cent more than non graduates and, over a lifetime, £120,000 more than someone who goes out to work having got two A levels. *It pays to get a degree.* The latest OECD report proves that the financial benefit from getting a degree in the UK is among the best in the world (Labour Party, 2003, p.7, italics in original).

Tuition fees would be repayable by graduates through the tax system once their income reaches £15,000 per annum (see DfES, 2003a, para. 7.30, p. 85). In order to help those from 'the poorest backgrounds' the Government proposed that students from low income families should be exempt from the tuition fee and entitled to means tested grants up to a total value of £2,100 (DfES, 2003a, pp. 85-87). HEIs charging variable fees are also expected to support disadvantaged students by putting into place 'bursary schemes and other financial measures' (DfES, 2003a, para. 6.3, p. 75). The 'Future of HE' also proposed that for institutions charging in excess of the basic tuition fee,⁷ it would be compulsory to have in place an access agreements that 'set out the action they will take in order to promote access, and the targets they will set for themselves' (DfES, 2003a, para. 6.29, p. 75). It was proposed that access agreements be monitored by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), who would have the power to impose financial penalties and prohibit institutions from charging more than the standard tuition fee (see DfES, 2003b, pp. 18-23).

The 'Future of HE' was published in January 2003 and the Higher Education Bill (see House of Commons, 2004) received its first reading on the 8th January 2004. There was only opposition to the principle of variable tuition fees from a minority of HEIs (MacLeod and Curtis, 2004). Both UUK and SCOP supported variable fees (see SCOP, 2004; UUK, 2004) and on the day of the second reading of the Higher Education Bill 74 vice-chancellors put their name to a full page advert in *The Guardian* (27/1/04, p. 8) urging MPs to vote for the Bill. There was, however, opposition to variable fees from the other political parties, the trade unions representing university and college lecturers, academics and students. More importantly, however, significant opposition came from within the Parliamentary Labour Party. In order to get the Bill through the second reading the government was forced to make a number of concessions (Economist, 2004). The most important of these was to increase the contribution towards tuition fees for the poorest students from £1,100 to £1,200 and raise the means tested grant from £1,000 to £1,500. The Government also announced that HEIs charging the full £3,000 fee would be obliged to provide minimum bursaries of £300. This would take support for students from the lowest income backgrounds to £3,000, which effectively covers the cost of tuition fees (but not living costs). As a result, the Higher Education Bill obtained a majority at the second reading stage in the House of Commons. This was,

however, achieved by just five votes making it the largest rebellion against a domestic piece of legislation since 1945, with 72 Labour MPs voting against the Bill and 19 abstaining (White, 2004).

The later stages of the Bill's passage through parliament have largely concentrated on the role of OFFA. Despite its narrow focus (see House of Commons, 2003; DFES, 2003b), and its remit to consider 'equal opportunities' rather than more radical concepts of social justice, HEIs are still concerned about its threat to institutional autonomy (HEFCE, 2003e; House of Commons, 2003; UUK, 2003a, 2003b; SCOP, 2003b). For example, Universities UK maintain that OFFA's role should be in 'monitoring, advising and facilitating rather than target-setting and imposing penalties' (UUK, 2003a, p. 3). When the Bill became law on the 1st July 2004 OFFA did not have the authority to influence admissions or teaching (THES, 9/7/04, p. 7), but it did have the power, first proposed in the 'Future of HE', to refuse to approve an access agreement and impose financial penalties (Hill, 2004). There are, nevertheless, claims that the government is now seeking to limit the influence of OFFA – a view reinforced by the appointment of an ex-vice-chancellor of a Russell Group university as its director (Hill and Johnston, 2004).

CONCLUSION

This chapter represents my interpretation of how government (and HEFCE) policy on widening participation has developed. As can be seen, there appears to be no overall long-term strategic plan with policy apparently developing over time in an ad hoc, piecemeal and incremental way. Similarly, Pratt (1999) has commented on how policy making in higher education lacks 'any sense of a grand strategy. Much of the policy-making would be comfortably, possibly generously, described by Lindblom's (1959) term: 'muddling through' (p. 265).

My analysis began with the Robbins Report (1963) which recommended the expansion of higher education. As the statistics, however, indicate, this did not translate into a significant shift in the balance of participation by social class. This failure to increase

participation amongst those from lower SEGs was not helped by the election of a Conservative Government in 1979. Under this government, policies designed to challenge issues of social exclusion became less important as the market became the main arbiter in the distribution of resources.

The Dearing Report (1997) and the election of New Labour in the same year brought about a renewed emphasis on widening participation. The need to increase participation rates amongst those from lower SEGs was recognised, and although there was a tendency to adopt a deficit model and focus on the early stages of the student life cycle, some advances were being made. On the other hand, the introduction of tuition fees was regarded by many commentators as having an adverse effect on the participation rates of those from working class backgrounds. This will in the opinion of some be made worse by the introduction, from 2006, of variable tuition fees. The government would, however, point out that there is no upfront payment of fees and those from low income families will be provided with financial assistance.

The Labour Government and HEFCE have also been responsible for working with HEIs to develop more sophisticated widening participation policies that influence all stages of the student life cycle and not just the early phases, e.g. aspiration raising. As such, HEIs are encouraged to adopt a more holistic approach to widening participation and to focus on issues like student retention as well as recruitment. There is also evidence that policy is beginning to move away from adopting a deficit model that ‘blames’ the working class for the disadvantages they face. This puts the onus on institutions to also consider how *they* might change.

The government and the HEFCE have failed to unambiguously conceptualise who their widening participation policies are targeted at. Documents are littered with different definitions of social class and terms such as ‘disadvantage’ and ‘non-traditional students’ are used without being clearly defined. Moreover, HEFCE is still part of a regime of control, and many would say excessive regulation, that characterises higher education generally (see Chapter 2). As such, HEFCE presides over a bureaucratic system that formalises strategy through a process of planning with funding dependent

on written strategic plans, action plans and target setting. The effect is summed up by Hoggett (1996, p. 22):

The majority of public sector organizations in the UK today appear to be overwhelmed by forms of performance monitoring. Scrutinies, audits, performance review systems, inspections, client or pupil progress reports, peer assessments appraisals, routine statistical returns, etc. now appear to consume an enormous amount of time in all of the educational sectors and many parts of the health service and local government.

As HEIs look to the future they are facing an environment that continues to be highly regulated. In addition, uncertainty is growing, especially with the introduction, from 2006, of variable tuition fees. The next two chapters shift the attention from government policy to how policy is interpreted as it migrates to the institutional level.

NOTES

1. The Higher National Certificate (HNC) is a part-time programme usually studied over two years.
2. The Government's positive attitude towards collaboration may reflect the European Union's encouragement of policy initiatives that rely on the development of partnerships and multi-agency approaches (Murphy and Fleming, 2003).
3. In a personal communication with Harrison (dated 25/3/04) he informed me that from 1,000 students who were eligible for bursaries only about 600 applied. He goes on to write: 'Interviews have started to suggest that, in some cases, there was cultural opposition to what were perceived to be handouts, while other students simply lost the forms in mountains of paperwork'.

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4. The need to consider widening participation beyond the point of entry into HE had been made by academics some time ago (see for example Mills and Molloy, 1989).
 5. Similarly, the 'Future of HE' received 120 responses relating to widening participation, but only 13 came from student bodies, none were from parents, five were from unspecified individuals and most of the remainder originated from education and national bodies (DfES, 2003c).
 6. HEFCE recognised that the use of geodemographic areas has its drawbacks, but at the time felt this was the best measure available to allocate funds (HEFCE, 1999b, 2001c).
 7. The basic tuition fee will be equivalent to the present standard fee (House of Commons, 2004).

CHAPTER 5

FACTORS INFLUENCING INSTITUTIONAL WIDENING PARTICIPATION POLICY

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter the evolution of government/HEFCE policy on widening participation was discussed. This chapter now focuses attention on how widening participation policy is interpreted at the institutional level. It is not, as discussed in Chapter 1, simply a matter of HEIs implementing government policy. In reality HEIs are able to interpret and modify policy as it ‘migrates’ down from the macro to the institutional level.

This chapter involves the use of institutional documents and interviews with key policy makers in three HEIs (see Chapter 3). The interviews with institutional policy makers would, at first, seem to indicate that institutions have a significant degree of latitude in interpreting government policy. Senior managers expressed a belief in their ability to determine strategies that were congruent with the objectives and values of their institution. For example, the Pro-vice-chancellor (PVC) of a Russell Group university said, ‘You can take widening participation very seriously or not nearly so seriously. So there is a definite choice, yes, no question about that’. Middle managers also seemed to have a significant influence on policy, especially in the decentralised organisational structures that characterised the HEIs in this study.

These comments would seem to prioritise agentic understandings of institutional policy formulation over structuralist perspectives that emphasise the influence of external forces beyond the control of individuals or organisations (see Trowler, 2002). In reality, however,

both agentic and structural factors are likely to influence institutional policy (Johnson, 2002). Moreover, a closer reading of HEI policy documents and the comments of policy makers reveals, that whilst initial statements may stress individual and organisational agency, this is often qualified later on. For example, the PVC quoted above who articulated a view that institutions had control over the extent to which they engaged in widening participation admitted that there were 'parameters set by the funding environment'. The Vice-chancellor (VC) of a new university also provided detailed accounts of how the uncertainty created by the funding regime restricted the ability of HEIs to develop long-term strategies.

A closer examination of interview transcripts and policy documents led me to identify four key influences on HEI widening participation policy:

- Organisational culture.
- Economic forces.
- Political factors.
- Institutional conceptions of 'widening participation students'.

In practice there are inter-connections between these factors. For example, an HEI's culture is influenced by economic and political forces, whilst the way an HEI conceptualises widening participation students will be partly derived from an institution's culture. However, in order to aid analysis these four influences will be considered separately.

The first three of these - organisational culture, economic forces and political factors - would probably be regarded as structural influences on institutional policy making. However, individuals play a key role in the way they respond to these influences, and in the case of culture, people play a part in the creation of an HEI's culture. On the other hand, the way institutions conceptualise widening participation students might be seen as evolving from individual perceptions and perspectives and therefore largely agentic. Yet external forces, such as HEFCE, are likely to have an important influence on how policy makers conceptualise widening participation students. Therefore, as Johnson (2002) argues, both

structural and agentic factors influence policy. The relative importance of each will be considered in this and later chapters.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Culture can be defined as ‘the set of key values, beliefs, understandings and norms shared by members of an organization’ (Daft, 2000, p. 86). These shared values are important because once they are established they help to ‘define what are acceptable, natural [and] desirable’ to an organisation (Bate, 2002, p. 204). Therefore, organisational culture is an important influence on institutional policy.

This section will consider the influence of an HEI’s culture on its attitude to widening participation. It will then discuss how HEIs have attempted to change the culture of their institutions and the difficulties involved in doing this.

HEI culture and widening participation

The effect of culture on the strategic importance of policies to widen participation was referred to by a number of interviewees. In particular, the influence of an HEI’s history and geographical location were emphasised. For example, the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-11 said widening participation was a high priority because of the university’s polytechnic history. The institution’s close proximity to areas of economic deprivation also meant the university had a tradition of working on issues of social inclusion. HEI-11 also attracted a small number of students from these areas.

These opinions were reinforced by the VC of HEI-11 who stated that:

The mission of this university going right back to when it was a polytechnic was to provide education for all with the motivation and ability to benefit. So

we've ALWAYS had a VERY VERY strong widening participation remit and that hasn't changed. Look, I mean to me, you can't be a chief executive of something else – the fundamental thing is that it is HIGHER education and it's the values that underpin that and what it is you're trying to do with it. The organisation does not EXIST outside what it's trying to do, and what it's trying to do is educate and train people with the ability and motivation to benefit ... It's the values that underpin our work that are actually important.

The VC therefore emphasises how it is the university's values - rooted in its history - which predispose it to adopting policies to widen participation.

It is not, however, just the ex-polytechnics that are driven by such values. A PVC at HEI-10, a Russell Group university, argues that they take widening participation very seriously:

There is a sort of natural cultural affinity with the idea of it being in [name of area] and our staff are comfortable with it. A lot of the activity stretches back piecemeal to well before the government's formulated policy.

This PVC is again making the point that the values leading to the adoption of widening participation policies pre-dates the recent emphasis placed on such issues by New Labour and arises because of the university's location in an economically deprived city.

The Principal of HEI-3, a specialist college of higher education, takes a different perspective. S/he states that 'widening participation is something that we actually do quite naturally'. The Principal goes on to explain how the college never set out to recruit particular 'types' of student. Nevertheless, because of a focus on student potential rather than just academic qualifications, combined with the socio-economic characteristics of the local population, the institution has recruited a high proportion of students from lower SEGS and low participation neighbourhoods. As the Principal of HEI-3 explains:

It is interesting that in terms of widening participation we do come out so near the top and above our benchmark and I have to say to you that is *not* something that we consciously aim for, though it is something which is in the psyche and you know the way in which we operate. It's our *natural* way of doing things (italics my emphasis).

The Principal therefore refers to widening participation occurring 'naturally', a word that is also used by policy makers in other institutions. For example, the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-11 commented on how they do not tend to target particular students, but it is those from lower socio-economic groups that 'naturally' come on to their courses. In effect what appears to be happening in new universities and colleges of HE is that because they accept students with lower A-level grades, and are more likely to take students with vocational qualifications, they naturally end up with a greater proportion of students from lower SEGs, low participation neighbourhoods and state schools (see Appendix 4).

The Principal of HEI-3 also suggests that the institution's FE background and the fact that they maintain some FE provision also influences the culture of the institution:

What that does is give natural progression within the institution ... so there is an ethos that is supportive to saying you can do it; and because this is also an HE environment that you are operating in you can progress.

A member of the Senior Management Group (SMG) at the same institution also pointed out that 10 years ago, when they embarked on their widening participation strategy, the institution's infrastructure and facilities were not of a sufficiently high standard to enable them to compete with other more elite specialist colleges. S/he commented on how widening participation was adopted as 'a strategic tool that has now become embedded, so that it became part of our practice'. This illustrates how the need to develop strategies that can benefit the long-term survival and expansion of an HEI can become embedded in the

culture of the institution so that the original reason for adopting a strategy is lost in the passage of time. It also demonstrates how an institution's culture can change over time.

Changing cultures

A number of middle managers cited the importance of senior management commitment to widening participation. The Head of Widening Participation at HEI-10, for example, stressed the significance of having a vice-chancellor who is committed to widening participation:

He talks about social inclusion and widening participation. He came from the top and verbalised it and he got rid of about three or four key players in senior management who were the blocks for my work. So I think leading from the top is absolutely crucial.

HEIs have also initiated structural changes to their institutions to encourage widening participation. These include the creation of various forms of steering, task and advisory groups/committees with a remit to examine issues of widening participation. The importance of such groups was stressed by a number of interviewees. For instance, the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-11 said that some people emphasise the importance of agency and the influence individuals have on policy. However, s/he believed structural factors are more important:

Some people say structures aren't important, it is people who make things happen and so on. But because universities are bureaucracies, it can be very difficult to make things happen, especially if they are large and devolved and so on. It is really important to have formal structures that can actually facilitate things and move them on.

A number of institutions have also attempted to provide mechanisms for integrating widening participation policy into different aspects of the student experience. For example, at HEI-3 the widening participation manager is a member of the institution's Senior Management Group, the Learning and Teaching Advisory Group and other quality management teams (HEFCE, 2002c). Similarly, at HEI-11 there is recognition of the inter-relationship between widening participation and other areas of the institution. Accordingly they have located the Learning and Teaching Unit, Research Development Unit and Widening Participation Unit together in order to encourage 'collaboration' and 'synergy' (Corporate Planning Statement, 2003, p. 1).

In addition, a number of HEIs have in recent years created new positions to encourage widening participation. For example, HEI-11, which has a long history of widening participation, still felt the need to introduce the post of Head of Widening Participation in order to 'create a new 'access' *culture* in the institution' (internal publication, italics my emphasis). This university also appointed a number of principal lectureships with a responsibility for widening participation at the departmental level. As the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-11 acknowledged this was a response to the need to promote widening participation more rigorously in certain departments. Indeed, the variable response to widening participation across institutions was commented on by a number of those interviewed, particularly in the larger HEIs where it appears to be easier for sub-cultures that are different to the core institutional culture to develop.

Barriers to change

Morgan (1997) points to the difficulty in changing organisational culture when he states:

... culture is not a simple phenomenon. It is not something that can be mandated, designed, or made. It is a living, evolving, self-organizing reality that can be shaped and reshaped but not in an absolute way. The challenge of changing ... culture is always difficult (p. 147).

There appear to be varying responses to the need for culture change. Some institutions accept the need for a 'significant shift in organisational culture' (see for example Widening Participation Strategy HEI-13, p. 21). Others indicate that only minor changes are needed (e.g. QAA, 2000, para. 9 referring to HEI-7); whilst HEI-10 seems to be implying that a significant change in culture has already been achieved (Widening Participation Strategy, 2001, pp. 6-7).

However, interviews, with middle managers (including those at HEI-10) reveal that a culture of widening participation is not embedded throughout institutions. These managers often faced significant barriers in their attempts to engage some departments in widening participation. This arises because departments and service areas have different values and objectives (Johnson, 2002). For example, the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-10 found that departments without a recruitment problem were often not very receptive to widening participation. The Director of Aim Higher at the same institution tells a similar story from when s/he was employed by HEI-5:

We used to approach individual subject areas and departments and say would you get involved in this access course? And they'd say well we don't really need to because we were oversubscribed and they would flatly refuse to get involved.¹

The Director at Aim Higher also discussed how departments in HEI-10 often prioritised research which made it difficult to get them to allocate time to widening participation activities.

The problem appears to be exacerbated by the fact that those involved in formulating widening participation have an advisory or facilitative role rather than any direct authority. For example, the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-10 refers to 'only having the power to influence'. Similarly, the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-11 describes how the university they work in devolves power and responsibility to faculties and departments. As a consequence, s/he feels s/he has no authority over them, which means it

is difficult to initiate change. Therefore, unlike senior management who wish to maintain institutional autonomy, s/he admits that the Schwartz Report and OFFA (see Chapter 4) may provide him/her with some much needed leverage:

I think in those relative rare cases where departments aren't imbued with the kind of philosophy of looking at under represented groups I think anything that comes via that route [Schwartz, OFFA, etc.] that can give me and other colleagues an opportunity to put pressure on them – I think that would be good.

This Head of Widening Participation's perspective is, however, not shared by everyone. A member of the SMG at HEI-3 feels that it is not authority that is important but the ability to persuade others that widening participation is an activity worth pursuing. S/he argues that, 'If you have to be directive and if you like beat people with sticks they're not going to be committed. It'll then never be strategically embedded so you're fighting a losing battle'. However, this is often made difficult by the marginalisation of those involved in widening participation. Staff are often on short-term contracts and they may be located in peripheral geographical locations. Moreover, in the case of Aim Higher, although the Directors/Managers are working from a 'lead' HEI, they are not part of that institution, and so they often feel like outsiders. As the Director of Aim Higher based at HEI-10 states:

It's quite a sensitive issue about where we're based and why we're based here and so on. It is very sensitive and we are working in partnership with other institutions. So I have to be mindful of the fact that I'm based within HEI-10, but I'm not of HEI-10 as such. And I'm working on behalf of the partnership so it is often a delicate balancing act to be honest.

The independence of Aim Higher teams may also create friction because HEIs try to use them to pursue their own objectives. They may for instance try and use visits to schools to promote their own institution. The Manager of Aim Higher based in HEI-3 was adamant

that s/he would not be influenced by senior management within the institution s/he was working:

No, absolutely not and everybody knows it. They KEEP TRYING, you have to give them credit for trying, but if I've told them once I've told them a hundred times we are here but we are not OF here (laughs). I'll happily fund anything that people give me, good ideas that can help young people BUT it will never be branded HEI-3 and if it's to recruit more people here then we cannot do it, so they know that now. Because I said how would it LOOK to anybody else? You know we've got HEI-15 down in [names place] and we've said the same to them.

However, this determination to remain independent means they have only a limited understanding of the policies and practices of the partner institutions. The Manager of Aim Higher based in HEI-3 admits s/he has little idea of what is happening in the partner HEIs. S/he states, 'I have no idea here [in HEI-3] what goes on in admissions and I have no idea what goes on in any of the others'. This is a remarkable assertion for somebody who is responsible for raising awareness and advising students about higher education, especially as many students will want to attend HEIs in their home region.

This lack of understanding is also an issue when those involved in widening participation seek to influence departments and other areas such as student services and careers. A project manager at HEI-11, who was obviously frustrated by their continuing attempts to get departments involved in supporting students from non-traditional backgrounds, said that Heads of Department demonstrated a 'remarkable level of ignorance on WP matters'. Similarly, I found a lack of awareness of widening participation issues during interviews with support services. However, these people are obviously managing in very difficult circumstances: they have wide ranging responsibilities, tight budgets, the problem of managing overworked staff, etc. It is therefore not surprising that they are not well informed about widening participation. On the other hand, they sometimes expressed reactionary comments about widening participation students. For example, when asked

about working class disadvantage in the labour market, a Senior Careers Adviser said ‘What am I supposed to do about it give them elocution lessons?’

ECONOMIC FORCES

Higher education is characterised by increased competition for students and funding (see Chapter 2). As a consequence some commentators argue that the decision to adopt widening participation may be motivated by the economic returns accruing to such activities (see for example Ward and Steel, 1999; Thanki and Osborne, 2000; Morgan-Klein and Murphy, 2002). However, funding for widening participation remains small in comparison to the income obtained from teaching and research (Stiles, 2000). On the other hand, because of the moderate level of research money allocated to new universities and colleges of HE (see THES, 15/3/04, pp. 6-8), widening participation funding may be more important to these institutions than the old universities (Osborne, 2003; Thomas *et al.*, 2003). As Thomas *et al.* (2003, p. 2) suggest, ‘Funding initiatives to widen participation are likely to be of more significance to post-1992 institutions than more traditional institutions in receipt of higher levels of research related funding’.

This means that there are likely to be differentiated levels of commitment to widening participation by type of HEI (Osborne, 2003). However, an analysis of institutional widening participation strategies for this study suggests that different types of institution, including old universities articulate an economic rationale for adopting widening participation policies. For example, HEI-10, a Russell Group university, stresses the importance of attracting non-traditional students:

The university cannot afford to ignore good potential students who fall outside its “traditional” student recruitment markets. The market for affluent, full-time young, high A-level scoring school leavers is virtually saturated with participation rates in excess of 80%; this leaves little scope for growth in the numbers of these students. By contrast less than 20% of young people from

social groups C2, D and E go to university and if fee legislation is to bring about even a degree of localisation of higher education participation, then we must ... take the opportunity to address this situation (Widening Participation Strategy, 2001, p. 2).

The institution's Widening Participation Strategy goes on to argue that this is why widening participation must be part of the universities 'mainstream activity' (*ibid.*, 2001, p. 2).

The idea that economic forces are the prime motivator for widening participation is supported by the notion that universities and colleges of HE have undergone a significant culture change with universities reconstructed as 'businesses' and run as if they are private sector institutions (see Chapter 2). It is argued that if HEIs resemble business organisations then senior managers are equivalent to company chief executives and directors (see Kogan, 2002; Sanders, 2004). This was supported by the VC of HEI-11 who said that vice-chancellors are now 'like the chief executives of medium to large companies. Yes, that is what it is - it's being a chief executive of a 150, 160 million pound business'.

Such arguments have led a number of writers to conclude that educational institutions are now prioritising strategies that maximise economic gain (see Ball, 1997; Trowler, 2001; Morgan-Klein and Murphy, 2002; Osborne, 2003). For example, Osborne (2003, p. 48) states 'a strong economic rationale associated with competition for students, institutional survival and reduction of unit costs underpins many forms of provision, and this rather than equity often guides practices'.

There is some support in this study for the view that economic objectives dominate HEI strategy. For example, institutional documents often refer to the competitive environment they are operating within and the need to generate income. Therefore, HEI-14's Strategic Framework 2001/02 refers to how:

Growth in student numbers has been the cornerstone of conventional planning to achieve income growth but with the core full-time graduate market nearing saturation, and a low marginal rate of funding, a different strategy is called for. The University must look to areas that are less constrained or that promise a better rate of return, such as overseas and postgraduate student income and commercial activities (p. 5).

Also, in HEI-16's University Plan (2003-08) the rationale for developing foundation degrees is based on economic grounds rather than widening participation:

Recent research has demonstrated that the young full-time undergraduate market will demonstrate only modest growth over the planning period. We will need to retain our share of the market through increasingly targeted recruitment whilst seeking new areas of growth such as Foundation Degrees (p. 6).

In the interviews responses from senior managers are also littered with 'the language of the business world' (Williams, 1997a, p. 35). For example, a PVC who maintains a strong commitment to research and is responsible for what they describe as the 'cuddly' aspects of policy still adopts a discourse dominated by business terminology:

We take learning and teaching extremely seriously here. We have worked hard in the past five years to make sure that we're as good as anywhere like us in a context where I don't think maybe before that we were trying as hard as we could. And we were losing *competitive edge* as a result. Within that we certainly see our *unique selling point* as the Russell Group University that takes widening participation very seriously (PVC at HEI-10, italics my emphasis).

Senior managers also seem to be encouraging entrepreneurialism² within their HEIs as a way of competing in an HE environment characterised by competition and scarce financial

resources. In terms of widening participation this entails generating external funds to fund projects. Indeed, a number of writers have argued that academic departments and support services are having to be more entrepreneurial which means they have to be concerned with generating income as well as controlling costs (see for example Hoggett, 1996; Prichard, 2000). As Prichard (2000, p. 57) points out:

The 'enterprising manager' is constructed between the income and expenditure of a particular cost centre. This positioning requires the post-holder to take responsibility for securing, and preferably generating, a level of resource – for example, by increasing effort, reducing teacher contact hours, or finding alternative income sources.

There appear, therefore, to be strong arguments in favour of conceptualising HEIs as businesses, with senior managers acting more like chief executives and directors, and middle managers taking on a more entrepreneurial role. However, the PVC of HEI-10 pointed out that the chief executive and directors of a company are concerned with making profits for their shareholders whereas HEIs operate under a completely different philosophy. S/he also disagreed with the business analogy because of the academic role adopted by senior managers:

No, we're not the same as directors, not in a place like this where all the pro-vice-chancellors are actually academics. We're all research active. In fact we tend to be from strong research areas otherwise we would lose that sense of speaking for, as well as to, the community that we're working for. All PVC-ships are for a fixed term – there are no executive pro-vice-chancellors. And the Vice-chancellor as a chief executive is a false analogy too I would say. The governance arrangements are different, the mission is different because we haven't got any shareholders, everything goes back into the university ... I feel like a senior academic.

Therefore, this PVC maintained a dual role as academic and senior manager which s/he felt acted as a restraint on the development of an overly managerialist role. The Principal of HEI-3 also felt that the values they brought to the job were very different to those of a chief executive. Moreover, the VC of HEI-11, who had at first articulated a belief that vice-chancellors were comparable to chief executives (see quote above), later talked about their educational values and their commitment to social inclusion in a way that did not fully support this analogy.

It is interesting to note that middle management did not seem to regard their senior managers as preoccupied with pursuing economic goals. For example, the Head of Student Services at HEI-11 did not believe that senior management were focused on financial issues because 'half the members of our Directorate are Deans of Faculty and because there is so much devolution here a lot of them are very involved, if you like, in individual student cases. So they do see the human side of it'. Again senior management seem to be maintaining an academic role.

It is also pertinent to note that whilst most middle managers seem to accept they have an entrepreneurial role, they were quick to delineate the extent to which they were going to be 'enterprising managers'. According to these middle managers obtaining external funding is a labour intensive and time consuming process and neither they, nor their staff, have the time to investigate and draw up the detailed bids required. For example, the Director of Aim Higher based in HEI-10 said s/he knew there were funds available but 'at the present time I just haven't had the time to actually try and identify it'. In contrast, the Head of Widening Participation in the same institution was content with his/her current level of funding:

I don't get huge amounts of money from the institution, but what I do get, they don't take overheads from me, and also I'm not desperate for the money these days because I don't want a bigger team to be quite honest.

This manager therefore appears to be exhibiting satisficing behaviour because they are content with the amount of work their unit is currently carrying out on widening participation. S/he is also exhibiting 'local rationality' (Cyert and March, 2002, p. 65), where managers pursue objectives that are rational for them, but not necessarily, for the institution as a whole.

Other managers simply distanced themselves from the entrepreneurial function and positioned themselves in the more traditional role of managing a cost centre. For instance, the Head of Student Services at HEI-11 juxtaposed a discussion of how student services had unsuccessfully bid for external funding with how effective others in the institution were at this type of activity. They went on to say that if the institution wanted student services to do more on widening participation additional resources would have to be provided.

Therefore, economic forces might be pushing institutions towards operating more like businesses. Yet the values that pre-existed the increasingly competitive environment that HEIs now find themselves in appear to militate against a significant cultural shift. This does not mean that economic forces are unimportant. It does, however, mean that the response of institutions to widening participation cannot be explained only in economic terms. In reality, the reaction of HEIs to economic forces seems to be far more complex with economic rationales articulated alongside and interconnected with political and social objectives. The need to respond to economic forces elicited three (not necessarily mutually exclusive) responses. Each of these is detailed below.

'We do what we can'

In an environment characterised by intense competition and scarce resources the financial consequences of policy need to be taken into account by managers. In this respect, some HEIs have claimed that their efforts to widen participation are being hindered by a failure to compensate them adequately through HEFCE funding for the additional costs involved in recruiting and supporting non-traditional students (see for example NAO, 2002; HEFCE,

2004a). For example, PA Consulting carried out a small scale study that estimated the additional costs of 'attracting, recruiting and supporting non-traditional students ranged between 30 to 35 per cent' (HEFCE, 2004a, para. 28, p. 10). Whether such claims are accurate, or representative of all HEIs, is impossible to determine because of the subjective nature of such costing exercises and the small number of institutions included in these studies.³

During the interviews for this study senior policy makers often emphasised that they were 'doing what they can', but the cost of widening participation outweighed the economic benefits. It is difficult to know the extent to which this was rhetoric for my benefit. Yet the culture of an HEI may predispose it to prioritising widening participation, but their ability to do this might be constrained by the need to maintain the economic viability of an institution. For example, the PVC of HEI-10 commented on how it was sometimes difficult to justify allocating money to widening participation in an environment of increased competition for resources. The VC of HEI-11 articulated how the institution continued, whatever the outcome of funding bids to HEFCE and other bodies, to put money into widening participation activities. However, the VC also emphasised the importance of having a 'sound' financial base before the university could commit itself to such activities:

You can't do what you want to do unless you are sound financially and we've NEVER EVER turned in a bottom red line. You know we've always made a surplus, only a small surplus, between one and two per cent normally ... [refers to more figures] and that gives us the confidence and the strength to be able to do what we want to do.

'Hedging their bets'

The uncertainty of the higher education environment may encourage institutions to 'hedge their bets' (Mackay *et al.*, 1995). As Davies and Glaister (1996) argue, HEIs may be reluctant to focus on a particular aspect of the HE market 'in case it proves less tenable than

their traditional 'universal' higher education role. To claim a special position in regard to one part of the market may result in unacceptable losses from other parts' (p. 292). This leads to institutions keeping their potential income streams open, which includes the option of obtaining money from widening participation activities.

The unpredictability of the higher education sector and the financial consequences of adopting the 'wrong' strategy was referred to by the VC of HEI-11. S/he explained how changing the criteria for research funding following the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) affected their institution:

It was a very disappointing outcome for us, we had done very well in terms of the grading. We'd more than exceeded our expectations ... but we lost 25 per cent of the funding more or less overnight. They changed the goal posts and suddenly they decided that fours weren't going to be funded. We wanted to make that break through so that we got adequate research funding and suddenly we'd achieved what we wanted to do in terms of outcomes and lost – we went down from over 4 million to around 3 million - and the following year we lost another 10 per cent even though, you know, our grades were going up and up.

This vice-chancellor also commented on how other funding, relating to business and the community, was suddenly withdrawn:

We had all put infrastructure in, you know we'd created a new external relations division to reflect this. We changed the nature of our strategic plan, we put in different strategic objectives. So you try to be confident about what you want to do as a university, but to make sure that you are addressing these important national agendas, and then suddenly the rug gets pulled right out from underneath you.

It is therefore unsurprising to find that HEIs do not wish to differentiate themselves from other institutions by focusing on a particular strategy such as widening participation. Neither do they want to ignore any aspect of the portfolio of work HEIs are involved in, just in case the government decides to make this a priority. As a result HEIs are forced to 'hedge their bets'. This might be one reason why every strategic plan of the 16 HEIs included in the first phase of this research identified widening participation as a key component of their strategy.

Double coding

In this study the rationale put forward by HEIs for adopting widening participation policies often attempted to combine economic and social/educational objectives using a 'not only but also' approach (Gewirtz *et al.*, 2004, p. 327). This is similar to New Labour's tactic of 'double coding' where policies that may be assumed to be in conflict are presented as complementary (*ibid.*). Therefore, HEIs admitted that their widening participation policies helped them to ensure they have sufficient student numbers, but they also fulfilled the objective of widening participation.

A classic example of double coding can also be seen in the response of HEIs to variable tuition fees. The majority of institutions backed the government's proposals to introduce variable tuition fees. For example, 74 university heads placed an advert in *The Guardian* urging MPs to vote for the second reading of the Higher Education Bill (see *The Guardian*, 27 January 2004, p. 8). It would seem that the desire for increased financial resources outweighed concerns about the potential effect on the HE participation rates of students from lower SEGs. This led Ryan (2004) to comment on how the debate over top-up fees provided a 'spectacle of self-interest' (p. 17). However, in interviews with senior managers they articulated the view that whilst variable fees would help HEIs financially they would not seriously affect attempts to widen participation because of the support package designed to help students from lower income family backgrounds. For example, a member of the SMG at HEI-3 said:

It won't necessarily act as a disincentive to the market because obviously there are, you know, there's means tests and all sorts of things in place. And normally, I think only a third of our students pay any sort of fee at all – so I think there's enough safety mechanisms in the system ... I have quite genuinely come to terms with this top up fees thing now that I can see the criteria and the means testing that's in place, I'm not as bothered.

There were, however, concerns about effectively communicating the precise nature of the system to students. As a member of the SMG at HEI-3 commented, 'I am worried about the publicity of it because you know the assumption will be that everybody will pay it and nobody will come – the publicity and managing the media messages is always a nightmare'. Therefore, this senior manager, like many others in the sector working in widening participation feels that the package is a fair one but it has to be 'marketed' properly.

The PVC of HEI-10 also supports the introduction of variable fees but feels they will have 'to make sure our bursary structure provides the encouragement needed'. Similarly the VC of HEI-11 expresses concerns about students from lower socio-economic groups being put off, but again feels that the institution can introduce bursaries that provide help to students from lower SEGs:

I worry that it might put people off, particularly for the first two or three years because I think until people get used to it. I think there's a lot of misunderstanding even among people who know, you know, they haven't quite worked it out. And I think that my own view is that we'll probably charge three thousand pounds, but we'll give it back in bursaries – after all if the institution is going to get the three thousand pounds from the Treasury, which as I understand it at the moment, that's the plan. Why not take that three thousand pounds and give poor students a thousand pounds back or whatever. You know we would still be on the right side.

It might be argued that 'double coding' is nothing more than rhetoric or 'spin'. For example, Morgan-Klein and Murphy (2002, pp. 69-70) argue that:

professed aims such as social inclusion may mask or sit alongside more pragmatic concerns. Indeed, in the majority of our interviews, social justice concerns were often eclipsed by concerns with recruitment, marketing and institutional survival.

Later Morgan-Klein and Murphy (2002, pp. 75-76) conclude that:

In our interviews with staff, and in particular institutional policy-makers, social justice concerns often seemed secondary to the more general concern with recruitment and institutional survival. It does appear as though the policy initiatives that begin with the objective of widening access are in danger of becoming refracted at the institutional level into policies designed to increase access. While these differing aims are not necessarily contradictory it is not yet clear if this shift is ultimately detrimental to the aim of widening access. It could be argued that the pressure on particular institutions to increase their market share, not only of traditional student cohorts but also of previously untapped sources, may have the effect of actually widening participation for socially excluded groups.

In this respect we have already seen how institutions in this study may not explicitly set out to recruit students from lower SEGs. Yet attempts to increase participation may result in higher levels of participation from working class students. Institutions may also be adopting widening participation policies because they feel economic (or political) pressure to do so. As Morgan-Klein and Murphy (2002), however, argue the motives of institutions may not matter provided HEIs continue to improve their record on widening participation. On the other hand, Chapter 2 indicates that there continues to be wide discrepancies in HE participation rates between students from different social classes. Students from lower

socio-economic groups also tend to go to the less prestigious institutions and there is some evidence that they might be disadvantaged both in HEIs and in the graduate labour market. Given this record, there does appear to be some complacency amongst institutional policy makers and a inclination to put a positive 'spin' on what they are achieving.

POLITICAL FACTORS

HEIs function in a political environment and have become very aware of the effects of bad publicity. The adverse publicity surrounding the University of Bristol's attempt to widen participation by making lower offers to students from schools in disadvantaged areas illustrates this point in dramatic fashion (Gibbes, 2003). In this section I will discuss the attempt by HEIs to put a positive 'spin' on their widening participation strategies and also how this sometimes occurs because of the need to counteract stereotypes about their institution.

'Spin'

In Chapter 3 I discussed how policy makers are likely to be very sophisticated and adept at providing accounts that are politically acceptable. Indeed, it would be naïve to believe that the statements made by policy makers in interviews and documents did not take account of external opinion. This may of course be the real motivation behind HEI attempts at 'double coding'. For example, vice-chancellors may argue the case for variable fees not because they believe the package of support for low income students will be effective, but because they want the extra revenue that fees will bring. The problem of course is that as an interviewer I have no way of being able to tell what they actually think. As I wrote in Chapter 3 the people interviewed seemed honest and open, but this may simply reflect their political skills.

There were, however, occasions when it was evident that policy makers were putting a positive spin on what they were doing. For example, one HEI made claims about their commitment to widening participation by referring to the number of staff they had involved in widening participation activities. I subsequently found out that these staff were not employed directly by the institution, but were on a HEFCE/LSC funded Aim Higher project. This study also revealed that HEIs are well aware of the need to generate positive publicity through publications, advertising, press relations and events. Publicity on widening participation is promoted using 'commercial style promotion' (Gewirtz *et al.*, 2004, p. 333). In addition, policy documents are well written and adopt the right 'type' of language. Institutions (particularly old universities) seem to have come a long way since research by Williams (1987) into institutional equal opportunities statements found:

The tone of the replies from many old universities was a mixture of indignation and incomprehension. The traditionalist academic discourse of merit as measured in a specific, 'quantifying' examination was seen as unproblematic and demonstrated a commitment to equity (quoted by Williams, 1997b, p. 89).

This research relates to the 1980s and it is suggested that institutional statements (mission, equal opportunity, strategy, etc.) may now provide little insight into the actual policies of HEIs because institutions have learnt to develop the 'right' form of words (Williams, 1997b; Patterson, 2001). For example, Patterson (2001) citing a study by Mackay *et al.* (1995) suggests that mission statements appear to be written to formula and vary little between institutions. Similarly, Williams (1997b) cites research by Smith *et al.* (1993) that analysed the strategic plans of 76 HEIs and found only small difference between them.

It is, however, also important to note that the promotion of widening participation may play a part in influencing policy (Gewirtz *et al.*, 2004). As the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-11 said, internal publicity on the intranet and in-house magazines helps to raise the profile of widening participation, and makes it easier to persuade people in the institution to take it more seriously. Such activities help to build organisational assumptions and beliefs

about 'who we are' and 'the way we do things around here' (Morgan, 1997, p. 178). Publicity and statements in policy documents may therefore influence the development of an institution's culture.

Counteracting stereotypes

One of the issues that arose during the interviews for this study was the way policy makers often stereotyped other institutions. For example, a member of the SMG at HEI-3 said that the new universities 'get the students in by lowering the entry requirements and then they don't support them and the students are LOST'. On the other hand, s/he felt that the prestigious institutions are only involved in widening participation 'because they have to, and often with huge reluctance'. The Head of Widening Participation at HEI-10 said that at a local university (HEI-16) 'Eighty, ninety per cent of students are from low income working class backgrounds'. However, the statistics indicate that 34 per cent of students in HEI-16 are from socio-economic group's IIIM, IV and V (see Appendix 4). S/he also referred to the new universities 'getting students in and not caring if they fail or not'. This stereotyping also occurs in the academic literature and in newspapers where there is a tendency to make assumptions based on a simple dichotomy between new and old universities (with colleges of HE often ignored).

There may of course be some truth in these stereotypes, but their potential inaccuracy was driven home to me when a policy maker at a Russell Group university said that my own institution 'ran a nine to five curriculum'. Whilst there may be more class contact in a college of higher education compared to a Russell Group university it would, however, be wrong to characterise it as 'nine to five' teaching.

It is therefore not surprising that the image HEIs project in documents seems to reflect a desire to counteract stereotypical notions about their particular institution. Therefore, HEI-10 (a Russell Group university) emphasises the importance of teaching and its commitment

to widening participation. In its prospectus it states that it is a 'leading research establishment with an international reputation' (p.2), but it goes on to say:

If this reputation makes you think that only high-fliers and the chosen few are accepted for degree programmes, then you'd be wrong – our doors are open to students from all walks of life, whatever their age, background or country of origin ... we are committed to widening participation in higher education and to addressing the social inclusion agenda set by the government (Prospectus HEI-10, 2004, p. 7).

Indeed, this university regards itself as at the forefront of widening participation amongst Russell Group institutions, with their vice-chancellor arguing on their web-site that they are an 'access elite institution ... characterised by excellent research, low student drop-out rates, high quality teaching and comparatively high proportions of students recruited from disadvantaged areas'.

Another old university, HEI-7, includes a statement about inclusion in its mission statement, but other documents point to this HEI's commitment to improving its status as a research institution. As such, public statements and publicly available documents make very little reference to widening participation. This probably reflects its desire to match the research standing of Russell Group universities such as HEI-10.

HEI-10 and HEI-7 also seem to be conscious of a perception from those outside the institution that their universities are very middle class. In internal policy documents these two universities discuss the need to change the culture of their institutions so that they are seen as less elite and more inclusive. For example, in HEI-7's Equal Opportunities Guide it states:

The University is committed to promoting equal opportunities and aims to create an environment where people are encouraged to realise their potential, whether as employees or students. One of the ways of working towards these

aims is to foster a greater awareness of the role that language plays across all sectors of the university. Since this is an educational institution, we have responsibility to use language in which all members of the community feel included and to create a climate of equality, understanding and mutual respect.

Furthermore, under a heading 'Language, Class and Institutional Positioning' it states the:

University attracts students from different parts of the country with different social class backgrounds. The University is also a major employer in the area ... and currently has a large and diverse range of employees. Many University employees come from local rural or working class communities. It is important for staff and students of all social backgrounds to feel that they are afforded equality of treatment in their work and in their studies at HEI-7 and to know that their particular contributions to university life are valued.

In contrast, some of the less prestigious institutions such as colleges of HE focus on establishing their academic credibility. For example, HEI-4's prospectus emphasises the college's academic credentials by giving prominence to the college's coat of arms on the front cover of its prospectus. It also makes a number of references to the institution being 'long-established' and states that it has 'a history longer than that of most British universities' (Prospectus HEI-4, 2004, p. 4). The prospectus also includes a list of the senior management team and their titles and qualifications.

This desire for institutions lower down the hierarchy of HEIs to imitate and aspire to the status of their more prestigious peers is a trend that can be traced back through history and also manifests itself in other countries (see Pratt, 1999; Collini, 2003). The danger of such a process of 'academic drift' is that it may lead to the less prestigious institutions 'neglecting innovation, rejecting students they would previously have accepted, and transferring lower level work to other colleges' (Pratt, 1999, p. 258). For example, there was pressure amongst some members of the senior management group in HEI-3, which has a combination of FE and HE provision, to focus more on the latter. However, those members of the SMG

committed to widening participation have argued against this on the grounds that this forms a key element of the institution's widening participation strategy.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF 'WIDENING PARTICIPATION STUDENTS'

What became clear from analysing institutional documents and interviewing key policy makers is that whilst they use HEFCE definitions of 'widening participation students' (i.e. SEGs IIM-V, low participation neighbourhoods and state schools/colleges), particularly in policy documents, they often did not find such conceptualisations of practical use. Accordingly, policy makers within institutions frequently developed their own concept of a widening participation student. This is acknowledged by HEFCE (2004a) who point out that the way in which 'non-traditional groups' are defined by HEIs often varies 'according to the institutional and cultural context' (para. 18, p. 6). Yet the concept of non-traditional or widening participation students was often, as policy makers themselves admitted, not clearly defined. In addition, there were sometimes different definitions employed by policy makers within the same institution.

In HEI-10 they acknowledge they had yet to develop a clear conceptualisation of a widening participation student. They do, however, as discussed in Chapter 2, recognise the complexity of the concept and how different aspects of disadvantage (e.g. class, gender, ethnicity, disability etc.) overlap. The PVC of HEI-10 admits that the university tends to focus their strategies on particular schools because this is the easiest way of targeting widening participation students:

How do you identify a widening participation cohort? I don't think anybody quite knows what it is going to look like. We use school background, school type, as the key indicator ... We've found that in practice you go to inner city socially deprived, economically depressed areas – you go to the schools there and you find an awful lot of people there whose parents never thought of going to university and who wouldn't themselves have thought of going either

until we got at them. So that's our kind of approach, all be it somewhat rough and ready, but it seems to work. It's not rocket science, but if you go to a comprehensive in [names area] you're going to be dealing mostly with the kind of people that we're trying to get to.

In the quote above, the PVC introduces a number of factors that he felt determined a widening participation student, such as type of school attended, living in economically depressed areas and parents' educational level. In other institutions similar concepts are used. For example, a member of the SMG at HEI-3 felt that a widening participation student was one with a lack of prior experience of higher education in the family. S/he was critical of the use of social class because:

You could have somebody coming from a fairly affluent middle class family whose family are very dismissive of education. Whether you're from a lower socio-economic group, or whether you're from a more sort of middle class type of background where there's no participation and therefore it's rejected – it doesn't matter what class you are the problem is still the same.

The Principal of HEI-3 appeared uncomfortable, as some people do (see Sayer, 2002), with the concept of social class. Consequently s/he preferred to focus on the academic background of students and regarded widening participation as a means of providing opportunities for students 'who have not done well at school and college, but had the potential to succeed in higher education'. As such, s/he regarded HEFCE benchmarks as 'just bureaucratic measures'. Similarly, the member of the SMG who drafted the institution's widening participation strategy utilised HEFCE definitions within this, but as indicated above s/he regarded parental educational levels as the most important factor.

In contrast, the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-11 had no problems with HEFCE's conceptualisation of widening participation students and was happy to utilise them, or as they said, 'we go with the flow'. S/he did feel there was some merit in using socio-economic groups, but like HEI-10, they target particular schools. The Head of Widening

Participation at HEI-11 admits this is not perfect because you tend to 'get some middle class young people', but they target particular areas where 'we can assume that 85 per cent of the kids are working class and OK so if 15 per cent aren't we will live with that'.

The Head of Student Services in the same institution also felt that class was very important. However, the VC was more interested in the notion of the 'non-traditional student' in its various forms. S/he regarded the concept of a widening participation student as multi-dimensional and calculations such as the proportion of students from lower SEGs as surrogate measures:

You're looking for something that actually defines a non-traditional student aren't you? And you can't just go up to somebody and say are you a non-traditional student? So you're looking at surrogate measures all the time which stand in for saying you're a non-traditional student.

Like many of the people interviewed s/he was aware of the drawbacks with these measures, but in the absence of anything else was happy to use them as a way of benchmarking.

There are therefore different conceptualisations of a widening participation student. What is, however, widespread is a reticence to publicly refer to social class.⁴ For example, HEI-3 makes the following statement about equal opportunities in its 2004 prospectus:

HEI-3 is committed to providing equal opportunities both in the appointment, employment and personal development of staff and in the recruitment, teaching and assessment of students. The institute aims to treat all staff and students equally irrespective of gender, age, race, colour, nationality, ethnic origin, marital status, sexual orientation, disability, family responsibility, union or association membership, political outlook or religious belief (p. 37).

As can be seen every aspect of disadvantage apart from social background is mentioned. Research by Thanki and Osborne (2000) also found that whilst the majority of institutions

monitored students according to gender, ethnicity, disability and age, less than 20 per cent monitored them by socio-economic group (Table III, p. 92). Note, however, that this study was carried out in the late 1990s and the situation may have changed since then.

HEIs also wanted to avoid labelling students as 'working class' or from 'lower socio-economic groups'. This seemed to be because they felt the terms had negative connotations and positioned students as 'different'. For example the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-10 said:

I think class is the fundamental thing. I use the word class a lot, I mean I don't get bogged down in social class group this and whatever but I still fundamentally believe that you have got to put support on that is NOT labelled. We provide a wealth of support and we might target students and encourage them to access stuff but we do NOT offer labelled support.

This is supported by Popkewitz and Lindblad (2000) who suggest that students may not want to be identified in terms of being 'working class' and might be 'stigmatised' through a labelling process (cited by UUK, 2002).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter demonstrates that there is a complex combination of factors influencing policy on widening participation. As such, widening participation policy cannot be reduced to simplistic categorisations based on the distinction between old and new universities/colleges of HE. In practice there are both similarities and differences between institutions that go beyond these categorisations. This chapter suggests that not only are there cultural, economic, political and conceptual factors influencing policy, but there is often a struggle between structural influences and individual and institutional agency. Despite the emphasis placed on individual/organisational agency by institutional policy makers the chapter highlights the importance of structural factors. The next chapter will

analyse how these factors have influenced policy decisions in relation to raising aspirations, admissions and student support.

NOTES

1. This is supported by HEI-5's Access and Widening Participation Policy and Strategy Document (1999/00-2003/04) which states that one of the problems it faces is the 'lack of commitment to widening participation strategies in some subject areas – sometimes perceived as relevant only to those subjects which have difficulty in recruiting' (p. 2).

2. The notion of 'entrepreneurialism' and 'enterprise' has different interpretations and is in reality a multiple dimensional concept (see Greenbank, 2000b). It is, nevertheless, associated with concepts such as being alert to profitable opportunities, risk-taking, innovation and the possession of particular skills. There has also been a growing literature on the idea that enterprise can occur in larger organisations (intrapreneurship) and in the public sector (civic entrepreneurship). See for example Leadbetter and Goss (1998); Thompson (1999); Jones-Evans (2000); Wickham (2004).

3. The NAO (2002) study included seven institutions, but only one provided costings. The PA Consulting study reported by HEFCE (2004a) was based on only two HEIs. Moreover, the whole issue of the funding of widening participation is made complex by the existence of multiple sources of funding, including the fact that HEIs often partly finance such activities themselves (see Woodrow, 1998, pp. 122-124). For example, in HEI-10 the overhead costs are funded by the university, but the direct cost of widening participation projects has to be met by externally generated finance.

4. There are two exceptions in this study. In its Equal Opportunities Statement HEI-1 refers to 'social background' and in HEI-5's Equal Opportunities Policy Statement and Guidelines it discusses 'socio-economic background' and 'social class'.

CHAPTER 6

INSTITUTIONAL WIDENING PARTICIPATION POLICIES AND THE STUDENT LIFE CYCLE

INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 4 the evolution of government/HEFCE policy was traced from the 1960s to the present day. This demonstrated how HEFCE now embraces the concept of the student life cycle model and encourages HEIs to adopt this in developing their widening participation policies (see HEFCE, 2001b; 2003d). The student life cycle model emphasises the need for institutions to adopt a more holistic approach to widening participation by focusing on all aspects of the student experience, i.e. raising aspirations, preparation for higher education, admissions, first steps in higher education, moving through the course and successful progression into employment (see Table 4.1).

This chapter examines the widening participation policies of the HEIs in this study using the student life cycle model as a conceptual framework. The phases relating to student support at the pre-entry, first term/semester and moving through the course stages have, however, been combined for ease of analysis. Therefore this section will examine institutional widening participation policies on raising aspirations, admissions and student support.

RAISING ASPIRATIONS

All the universities and colleges of HE in this study are involved in activities to raise aspiration levels amongst groups traditionally under-represented in higher education. Other research also indicates that HEI involvement in aspiration raising is widespread (e.g. Universities for the North East, 2002; NAO, 2002). This is expected given that significant levels of government funding is provided to encourage collaboration between HEIs, colleges and schools to raise the aspiration levels of young people from lower SEGs (see Chapter 4).

The HEIs in this study are involved in similar types of activities. These entail school/college visits, summer schools, mentoring, taster, familiarisation and open days, which are aimed at raising the awareness of young people (and also their parents and teachers) to the opportunities in HE¹ and to demystify higher education and the application process. The homogeneity in approaches is in many ways expected given that HEIs are often collaborating and they are subject to the same advice on 'good practice' from HEFCE (see for example HEFCE, 2001b). Also, Cyert and March (2002, pp. 66-67) have argued that business organisations develop 'industry-wide conventional practices' as a way of reducing uncertainty in competitive markets. Similarly, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) use the term 'mimetic isomorphism' (p.150) to describe how organisations operating in the same market or 'field' often adopt imitative behaviour as a way of combating uncertainty. This appears to be a factor contributing to the development of homogeneous practices amongst HEIs in relation to aspiration raising.

The development of conventional or isomorphic practices was something that policy makers agreed occurred. They pointed to the need to 'keep up with competitor institutions' and the way informational and collaborative networks and HEFCE's statements about 'good practice' facilitated this. However, the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-11 also felt that the type of issues they faced inevitably led to these solutions being developed:

Even if you weren't collaborating where do you go? I mean, if that's the challenge to open up more opportunities for particular sub-groups of people ... I can't see that the response is going to be very different.

Yet whilst there is a high level of homogeneity in the type of aspiration raising activities undertaken, there are some significant differences in the theories and rationales that underpin what is being carried out. For instance, whilst all the HEIs stressed the need to involve teachers in aspiration raising there were different perspectives on why this needed to be done. At one extreme the attitudes reflected the clash of values between teachers and the local community discussed in Lynch and O'Riordan's (1998) Irish study. In this research I did not have access to the views of teachers, but those interviewed in HEI-3 were particularly critical of teachers' attitudes towards higher education. For example, a member of the SMG at HEI-3 made this comment:

There is a particular school in the very deep south of the county – and this is a classic example – and I accept that it is a significantly disadvantaged school. It is in the EAZ [Enterprise Action Zone], it does have a number of children there, with you know special needs statements and all the rest of it. I accept all that, but whatever the situation I don't think that as educators you ever close down opportunity. That school will NOT do ANYTHING, will NOT engage, will not get involved. And it was one of the sort of senior pastoral tutors that I talked to one day to try and get around this when I was still running the widening participation project, and he was quite adamant that their pupils didn't go on and that was his terminology, and he kept saying it: 'our pupils don't go on'.

In contrast, the view from HEI-10 was that the teachers did not want to generate unrealistic objectives amongst their pupils, so the teachers were protecting them from potential disappointment by helping pupils to adjust 'expectations to chances' (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 79). On the other hand, the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-11 felt that teachers'

aspirations did not represent a problem at all. They believed the key issue was bringing teachers up to date with developments in higher education:

Our experience, and its not just the experience here, it's throughout the sector, is that there is a remarkable lack of knowledge about what HE is, and has become. I mean, how many people know about the foundation year as a possible route in? How many know about foundation degrees? How many know about HNDs, HNCs? How many know about the post-sixteen routes that are very valid routes for their progression into HE, modern apprenticeships, and so on? There is a remarkable lack of knowledge about the modern HE system, progression routes and opportunities. So that awareness raising has got to be not just for the youngsters and their parents, but also for the educational sectors and connexion advisors and so on.

This was also mentioned by others. For example, the Director of Aim Higher (HEI-10) said:

Most of the information that young people get around higher education, a lot of it comes from teachers, heads of sixth form for example. My son's doing his GCSEs this year and he's planning to go to sixth form and I went to this sixth form parents evening and the information the head of the sixth form gave out about higher education was something that was fifteen, twenty years out of date, probably based on information from when he was going into HE ... I think there has been some radical changes in higher education provision which I think schools just aren't aware of.

Whilst all the HEIs in this study said they were targeting people who can 'benefit' from higher education, there were significant differences in their perception of what this meant. For a Russell Group university like HEI-10 the focus was on the 'gifted and talented' and for young people to raise their attainment levels if they want to enter an institution 'such as this' and be able to 'cope'. This is reflected in the comments made by the PVC at HEI-10

who said, 'For us it is a question of working with various partners to identify students, potential entrants, who show the promise to be able to cope with what we offer'. S/he went on to stress that the process is not just about aspiration raising, but getting young people to appreciate that if they want go to somewhere like HEI-10, they will have to work hard to gain the necessary academic qualifications. These sentiments were echoed by the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-10 who talked about the students needing the necessary qualifications if they are to 'cope', especially in subjects such as medicine and engineering. Similar comments can be seen in the documents of more elite institutions such as HEI-12 and HEI-13. Therefore, for HEI-13 a key element of its widening participation strategy is to attract more students who are 'suitably' qualified so as not 'to lower current standards' (Widening Participation Strategy, ND, p. 3).

In contrast, HEI-3, which is a college of HE, defined those who can benefit more broadly. They did this by placing a greater degree of emphasis on attributes other than academic qualifications. This was followed up by a rigorous support infrastructure once they are in the institution. Such an approach differed from more elite institutions, such as HEI-10, which tend to focus more on aspiration raising rather than student support. This is perhaps understandable given the low rates of application to Russell Group universities from suitably qualified working class candidates (see DfES, 2003b, pp. 10-14).

HEI-10 also made a point of targeting subject areas which were under-represented by certain non-traditional groups. For example, the proportion of students from lower SEGs is especially low in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science (NAO, 2002). Accordingly, HEI-10 focuses on encouraging more working class children to consider a career in the medical profession. In contrast, whilst HEI-11 recognises that inter-disciplinary differences in working class participation exist within their institution, they do not regard tackling this as part of their widening participation strategy. The VC at HEI-11 pointed out the areas of under and over-representation of students from lower SEGs:

It may not surprise you to know that in the Faculty of Art and Design we have a fewer number of widening participation students which is interesting isn't

it? And education has the most, followed by health and social care - in other words those people going into social work, going into nursing. So something like 70 per cent of our students in education actually come from non-traditional backgrounds. I am measuring this by the fact that they don't pay fees.

However, when s/he was asked about policies to attract more students into certain disciplines the VC was against this idea:

No, NO, I mean I think what we want to do is to encourage students to access higher education and on the whole we're trying to do that by working with our supply lines, all right if you like to use that sort of terminology, and getting very close partnerships with our supply lines – identifying particular colleges in [names the city where the HEI is located]. Inner [name of city], you know, has DREADFUL participation rates, absolutely DIRE, and you know I think there's an overall participation rate of something like 26 per cent. Now well nationally it's well over 50 per cent and the government wants it to be 70 per cent and all this kind of thing in terms of people getting A-levels and so on. And in some parts of the city there are individual wards where it's under 10 per cent, so you know we want to make ourselves accessible and we actually don't mind what they want to do, we'll take them. Whatever they want to do we will try and find a way through for them.

This VC therefore regards the role of the institution as encouraging more young people into higher education, whatever they want to study. Again this issue does not divide neatly along the old binary lines because HEI-3 is conscious of differences by subject. However, their strategy is to provide foundation degrees to overcome this problem. A member of the SMG explains:

There are about 10 applicants per place in Performing Arts and usually it is the more middle class applicants that have an advantage, because they have

had music lessons, dance lessons, singing lessons, etcetera. The foundation degree might provide a means of getting more working class students if the prerequisites were not so practically advanced as on the degree.

ADMISSIONS

The process by which universities admit students has become an important concern because of the publicity given to well qualified candidates failing to obtain places in 'top' universities.² Admissions procedures were also under review during this research (see Schwartz, 2003, 2004a, 2004b). Due to these factors, interviewees were particularly sensitive about this aspect of their institution's policy.

This section will analyse the admissions policies of HEIs, and the rationale underpinning them, from the perspective of widening participation. It begins by examining general issues relating to entry standards before analysing the policies HEIs have specifically developed to widening participation.

Entry standards

As expected there are substantial differences in entry requirements across institutions. Broadly, the more elite institutions ask for higher entry grades than the less prestigious new universities and colleges of HE. For example, HEI-10 (a Russell Group university) requires 280 points for a BA Business Studies, whilst HEI-11 (a new university) is asking for 160 points for a similar course. It is, however, interesting to note that some of the colleges of HE (e.g. HEI-4 and HEI-5) require more points than HEI-11 for business related degrees. It was suggested to me by a senior manager in one of these institutions that this represents an attempt to counteract the view, that because they do not have university status, colleges of HE are an 'inferior' institution.

In reality, students with much lower entry requirements than those specified by these colleges of HE will obtain places through clearing. The danger is that attempts to bolster the image of an institution by raising entry requirements will discourage prospective students. This is especially pertinent for widening participation because those from lower SEGs tend to possess less knowledge than their middle class counterparts about the workings of the educational system (Apple, 2001; Gilchrist *et al.*, 2003). As a result of their lack of experience of higher education, and their poorer informational networks, those from working class backgrounds may not know that it is possible to obtain a place in HE with lower grades than those officially demanded.

The old universities, conscious of the relatively low level of applications from working class students, are attempting to send positive messages out to such students. These range from bland single sentence statements such as, 'The University welcomes applications and students from all sections of society' (Prospectus 2004, HEI-12, p. 15), to more in-depth and imaginative attempts. For example, HEI-10 emphasises that the university, 'despite' its strong reputation for research, is open to everybody:

if this reputation makes you think that only high-fliers and the chosen few are accepted for degree programmes, then you'd be wrong – our doors are open to students from all walks of life, whatever their age, background or country of origin ... we are committed to widening participation in higher education and to addressing the social inclusion agenda set by the government (Prospectus, 2004, p. 7).

Similarly, on HEI-10's web-site it states:

Many people don't think university is for them because they are the first in their family to consider it. Some people think that they are not clever enough or that a university like HEI-10 is not for them because of where they live, their financial situation or even their accent!

Nevertheless, whilst some of the old universities are seeking to be more welcoming, they have much higher entry standards which inevitably means they admit a lower proportion of students from SEGs III, IV and V. This is defended on the grounds that students need a certain level of attainment in order to be able to cope with studying at a more prestigious institution. As a Russell Group HEI's Widening Participation Strategy states:

The diversity of the Higher Education sector means that participation strategies will vary according to mission, ethos and wider institutional strategy. The approaches adopted by this University must be viewed in the context of its mission; most notably its commitment to recruiting students who will benefit from learning in a research led environment. The University is committed to providing access to high-quality degree programmes for suitably qualified candidates. Hence, whilst the University strives to be socially inclusive, it also aims to preserve appropriate entry standards (Strategy for Widening Participation, HEI-12, 2003, p. 1).

The PVC at HEI-10 made similar comments about the need to maintain standards:

A fundamental problem is that for quite a big range of subjects that universities like this teach YOU JUST CAN'T DO IT unless you are already at a very high academic level. It's nothing to do with social class except that there does seem to be a correlation between how seriously you take your school work from the ages of 12 to 18 and what your social background and the type of school is. But there's no point in letting people come here to take on Aeronautical Engineering or Medicine if they haven't really got A-level Maths. You can't admit somebody to read Medicine who hasn't got a sound science base because they just won't be able to do it – it's fiercely externally accredited, you can't fail anything. Likewise, Aeronautical Engineering which is very very popular here. You know, you just can't understand any of it from DAY ONE. So it's JUST THAT that holds us back.

The rationale provided by this PVC is based on the belief that subjects such as medicine and engineering require a certain level of prior academic attainment. In addition, the need for accreditation by professional bodies is seen by this PVC as restricting flexibility in admissions. Similarly, HEI-13's Widening Participation Strategy notes that the requirement for accreditation by professional bodies restricts the institution's ability to be more flexible in its admissions policies.

There are, however, institutions that provide more flexible routes on to courses such as medicine. For example, HEI-12 offers a one year pre-medical course for students without A-levels in science subjects. Nevertheless, both institutions make quite stringent stipulations about attainment at GCSE level which could be highly restrictive to someone who only excelled academically post-16. For example, HEI-12 asks for 'four to five passes at Grade A in subjects including Chemistry, Physics, Biology and Mathematics' (Prospectus, 2004, p. 155).

Vocational qualifications

All the HEIs, including those from the Russell Group, stated that they accept alternative qualifications to A-levels, e.g. AVCE, BTEC National Diploma/Certificate, Advanced GNVQ, Access, etc.,³ although only one institution, a college of HE, expressly indicated that it would accept Advanced Modern Apprenticeships despite the government regarding them as a valid route into HE (Hodgson and Spours, 2000). The more prestigious HEIs, however, have a lower proportion of non-A-level students (Chevalier and Conlon, 2003). Smith and Boccock (1999) suggest that vocational qualifications are less acceptable to old universities. In addition, vocationally qualified students are more rigorously vetted (*ibid.*). The application process may also disadvantage vocational students because it is argued that they will find it more difficult to match their qualifications to degree course and it is not always clear from prospectuses what the entry requirements are in terms of grades (Smith and Boccock, 1999; UCAS, 2002). As Smith and Boccock (1999) argue:

University prospectuses and UCAS guides are clear about the standard entry offer i.e. entry grades required for particular courses and universities [for A-levels]. In contrast, the students in our study [with vocational qualifications] frequently had to make personal enquiries to individual universities to ascertain basic grade requirements and any additional qualification expectations. This is particularly true in respect of pre-1992 universities where the role of admissions tutors is heavily geared to selection rather than recruitment (p. 295).

For this study, an examination of entry requirements found that in the more prestigious (selecting) universities there appeared to be a reluctance to accept alternatives to A-levels, especially (although not exclusively) amongst high status subjects such as medicine. For example, HEI-7 states in its Prospectus (2004) that students studying vocational qualifications 'are *also* welcomed, particularly where they are taken alongside A/AS-level, in different subjects' (p. 36, italics my emphasis). However, the use of the word 'also' insinuates that vocational qualifications are inferior; as does a preference for them being studied alongside A-levels. Similarly, HEI-10 only accepts Advanced GNVQs for their Business Studies degree in conjunction with an A-level at Grade C or above. Other courses either do not discuss vocational qualifications (e.g. Veterinary Science) or require special treatment (e.g. Medicine and Surgery). For example, in HEI-10's Prospectus (2004) it states that, 'if you wish to offer qualifications other than A and AS levels, you should write to the Admissions Sub-Dean before applying' (p. 213). HEI-12 goes further and expressly states under Medicine that 'We do not normally accept BTEC qualifications' (Prospectus, 2004, p. 154).

Such approaches are again justified by the elite universities on the grounds that it is only high calibre students who are able to 'cope' who are admitted on to courses. For example, the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-10 said, 'I think it's important to give status to vocational training, but if you are going to do a vocational A-level you ain't going to do medicine'. I asked if that is wrong and they said:

NO, I think if you are going to do medicine you need to be fully prepared to do medicine. The other students will have the three A's at A-level and students coming on to the programme need to be able to cope. You actually have to have that context and those without the A-levels won't have that. You have got to be able to hack it.

Variation in entry requirements

An analysis of entry requirements by course indicates a range of entry standards and pre-requisites (usually in terms of subjects studied in FE), especially in the more prestigious institutions. This could probably be justified on pedagogic grounds by admissions tutors, but may in reality owe more to the demand for particular courses. Indeed, a recent documentary on the University of Bristol illustrates how departments with low application levels demonstrate a greater willingness to embrace widening participation and revise entry standards downwards (BBC, 2004). For example, the Head of Archaeology at Bristol said:

One of the problems we have in Archaeology along with several other subjects in the university like, for example, Earth Sciences, is that actually the number of applications we get are actually fairly small. And so widening participation is actually a vital part of our strategy to actually attract people to come to Bristol.

He justified this approach by stating:

We did some statistics some years ago which actually showed there was ABSOLUTELY no correlation between A-level results and final degree results. They were the most hopeless predictor for Archaeology, at least, of how well students were going to do at the end of the day.

Such arguments were often mobilised by institutions in this study who wanted to rationalise their decision to be less reliant on A-level grades.⁴ This is the ‘why’ of policy that Ball (1994b, p. 109) refers to in his typology of responses discussed in Chapter 3.

The Head of Archaeology’s reasoning could of course be extended to other subject areas, but he explicitly refers only to Archaeology. Also, other empirical studies suggest the lack of correlation may not hold across all subjects (UUK, 2003c). On the other hand, research based on quantitative evidence only looks for statistical relationships and does not attempt to find out why correlations exist or do not exist. It may be the case, that subjects where there is a high correlation between A-level results and degree classifications, have particular types of pedagogic practice - which if altered may improve the performance of students with lower A-level grades.

The PVC at HEI-10 also admitted that their institution dropped entry standards for courses where demand is low. Similarly, new universities and colleges of HE have higher standards on courses that are oversubscribed and drop the requirements for courses where there is insufficient demand. For example, a member of the SMG at HEI-3 said they had trouble filling places on their joint honours degrees and, ‘we’ll take anything that breathes’.⁵ However, the stance generally adopted, especially in the more prestigious institutions, is that particular courses have to maintain standards or the students will be unable to cope. For example, I referred to the BBC programme on the University of Bristol during an interview with the PVC at HEI-10 and s/he said:

Archaeology is an area where you can certainly work with the raw material at a less, you know, in a less refined state as we say. But you can’t get someone through an externally accredited professional vocational course so that they’re able to practice as a doctor or a chartered engineer, you know it’s just not going to happen.

There is also some concern expressed about the image of institutions. For example the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-11 said, ‘This university is very sensitive to the

possibility of accusations that we're lowering standards'. The Head of Widening Participation admitted that this leads to what s/he describes as 'some inflexibility in admissions'. Although none of the more prestigious institutions in this study mentioned it, Stuart (2001/02) suggests that these universities may feel that widening participation students will adversely affect their league table position and therefore be bad for the image of the university.

It is unclear whether elite universities will consider vocational qualifications if they are struggling to attract sufficient applications. There is also little evidence to suggest that such institutions are changing their attitude to vocational courses. However, the PVC at HEI-10 did admit that they needed to reconsider the value they placed on vocational qualifications:

It probably would be fair to say that in a university like this there is a kind of residual scepticism about, or a residual just lack of developed understanding of certain types of qualification which in the past has not been associated with our sort of intake. I think that would be fair. We're probably going to have to have a rethink about the level of understanding on the part of our admissions tutors to the full range of qualifications that they're having to assess.

Admissions and widening participation

As can be seen, the admissions policies of HEIs owe more to the nature of demand, than attempts to widen participation. The fact that lower entry requirements may lead to the admission of more students from SEGs IIM-V, or from low participation neighbourhoods, is of course seized upon by institutions as reflecting their commitment to widening participation. This was often acknowledged during interviews where managers admitted that the recruitment of widening participation students occurred 'naturally' or by 'default'. For example, the Head of Student Services at HEI-11 commented that, 'This institution has always been a widening participation institution almost by default partly by its location, nature of its programmes, the nature of the other universities in the area'.

There were in practice few policies aimed specifically at students from lower SEGs or low participation neighbourhoods. The most common are 'compact schemes' where students from selected schools and colleges are guaranteed places if they obtain the entry grades required. HEIs also adopt a variety of access, foundation and Year 0 courses, although these are often aimed at students without the necessary entry qualifications, rather than students from lower socio-economic groups. There is, however, no evidence that more radical approaches to admissions, such as making lower offers to students from particular backgrounds, are being operated by HEIs. As Rolfe (2003, p. 29) found, institutions maintain a strong desire to recruit what they perceive to be the 'most able' students.

None of the HEIs in this study indicated in their documentation that they would positively discriminate in favour of students from lower SEGs by giving them precedence over middle class students with the same or superior grades. Only one institution referred specifically to students' background in respect of admissions. HEI-8, a college of HE, states that it 'takes positive action to support candidates who by reason of disability or disadvantage may otherwise find difficulty gaining access to higher education' (Prospectus, 2004, p. 176). It is not clear what this exactly means, but it falls short of providing a commitment to positive discrimination. Moreover, the interviews carried out for this study revealed widespread opposition to the application of positive discrimination at the admissions stage. The main reason given was that positive discrimination was seen as lowering standards. It was also pointed out that those benefiting from such a policy would be perceived by others as 'second class citizens' (Director of Aim Higher, HEI-10).

The adoption of 'holistic approaches' to admission, where a range of factors other than academic qualifications are considered, may encourage HEIs to take into account a student's social background. According to Schwartz (2004a), who advocates holistic admissions policies, there is little evidence that HEIs are adopting such methods. Similarly, in this study an analysis of institutional documentation provides few examples of the use of such approaches. However, even if there was, this does not necessarily mean that they would help to widen participation. The type of cultural capital middle class students have

acquired (see Bourdieu, 1997; Brown, 1997) may continue to provide them with an advantage when holistic approaches to admissions are adopted. For example, the PVC of HEI-10 refers to veterinary science and how it:

is almost all upper-middle class white eighteen-year old girls. They've all got to have four As, plus grade A on the flute, plus a term at the Royal Ballet or whatever. Just to try and pick out 120 from the 200,000 who apply or whatever it is. You know it's completely mad.

The problem is also illustrated in a college of HE where a member of the SMG at HEI-3 admitted that middle class students applying for their degree in Performing Arts are advantaged during auditions because they are more likely to have had lessons in music, dance, singing, etc. However, s/he then qualifies this by saying that the course leader for Performing Arts is very good at recognising potential. When I asked if their institution is doing a 'Bristol' by accepting lower standard students because of their background s/he responded by saying:

I never really thought about it in that way until you've sort of said that. I suppose it's easier to explain with Performing Arts because you can say okay they've barely got a D in A-level English, but my goodness they can't half sing and dance, and you can see that and you can justify it on that basis – we wouldn't get into the hot water that Bristol did.

This, however, is not addressing the issue of recognising 'potential' and taking account of social background when doing this. In a later interview I asked the Principal of HEI-3 about this and s/he gave an equally confused (or was it evasive?) response. The Principal began by reiterating that the college does not just take into account academic results:

Unlike a lot of institutions in the HE sector we spend a lot of time looking, if you like, at the evidence that a student can bring and of course their potential for studying a particular subject. Now in the case of the visual arts more often

than not it is a portfolio of work that they have undertaken, in the case of the performing arts of course it will be an audition to demonstrate their capabilities and in media it will be a combination of the two.

However, when I asked if they would take into account somebody's social background s/he appeared uncomfortable with this concept saying:

You would take into account their potential. When you say take into account their background I suppose what I am saying is yes, you would take it into account, but we wouldn't give more credibility to one type of background than another.

The Principal of HEI-3 appears to be more comfortable talking about academic, rather than social background, because s/he then focused on this:

More often than not the students that come into the creative arts are students who don't have that kind of high academic background – all singing all dancing recognisable respected, if you like grammar school, sort of background.

They then went on to reject the idea that admissions might positively discriminate in favour of students from lower SEGs. However, s/he did admit (as did interviewees in other institutions) that because of the autonomy given to subject level admissions tutors, forms of positive discrimination may in practice take place. The Principal of HEI-3 said it might happen 'inadvertently, not necessarily consciously'. Whilst the VC of HEI-11 became very defensive when questioned about admissions policies and said:

That's left to the discretion of admissions tutors. They know what our widening participation philosophy is, they know they should be trying to ENCOURAGE people with the motivation and the ability to benefit and I'm

confident that they do. (S/he then motioned his/her hand to indicate this was the end of this particular discussion).

All the institutions in this study stressed the autonomy of subject areas in terms of developing admissions policies. This means policy and practice is likely to vary significantly between subject areas. In this respect, Woodrow (1998) suggests that more centralised control over admissions may benefit widening participation.

STUDENT SUPPORT

This section will examine the rationale behind the type of support offered to students at different stages in the student life cycle (pre-entry, first steps, moving through the course and transition into employment). A key factor discussed in Chapter 2 is that working class students may have difficulty integrating into 'middle class' HEIs (see for example Bourdieu and Passeron, 1994; Bourdieu, 1997, Bowl, 2001; Hutchings and Archer, 2001). How the institutions themselves perceive this issue will be addressed first.

HEIs: middle class institutions?

The vast majority of the policy makers interviewed did not believe there was a mismatch between the culture of their HEI and the cultural capital that working class students brought to the institution. For example, the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-10 (a Russell Group university) maintained that working class students fit in very easily. They admitted it varied from department to department, but s/he believed that 'once they get here our students are by and large comfortable with being here. There is the word elite, we avoid it, we avoid research led'. Similarly, a PVC at the same institution felt that there may be 'misconceptions' from those outside the institution about what people at the university are like, but pointed to the high retention rates as proof that students were not having problems integrating into the institution.

Those in HEI-3 (a college of HE) and HEI-11 (a new university) thought that students from non-traditional backgrounds may have problems adjusting to the culture of more elite institutions. For example, the Principal at HEI-3 said of one institution, 'You can almost feel the money in the air. You get the feel that their students, the majority of them are fairly well heeled and come from a particular sort of background'. The VC of HEI-11 is particularly concerned that certain institutions are not geared up to the needs of working class students:

That's my argument about Gordon Brown wanting Laura Spence to go to Oxford. And it's as if UNLESS students from comprehensives are admitted to Oxford and Cambridge they aren't achieving what they ought to be achieving and I don't believe in that at all. I went to Cambridge at the age of eighteen ... and very few of my school had ever been there and it's a HUGE culture shock ... It's a very hot house atmosphere and actually students there are very able but you don't get a lot of support.

On the other hand, this vice-chancellor is commenting on one of the most elite institutions in the country. They are also referring to their experience during the 1960s. This may be a flawed way of generalising about contemporary old universities such as HEI-10. Nevertheless, the proportion of students from SEGs IIM-V at HEI-10 is only 21 per cent compared to 33 per cent at HEI-11 (see Appendix 4). Moreover, the proportion of students from lower SEGs varies significantly across subjects and so a working class student could find themselves in a very small minority in something like medicine. However, this could also happen in certain subjects in a new university or college of HE. Furthermore, the culture of HEIs, including new universities and colleges of HE may, regardless of the student composition, be middle class. Just because an HEI takes a relatively large proportion of students from lower SEGs does not mean it is not a middle class institution.

Level of support

HEIs have created a whole infrastructure of support for students, including specialised units such as counselling services, personal tutor systems and peer support and mentoring schemes. These are aimed at providing both personal and academic support. When reviewing the systems operating in different institutions it quickly becomes clear that there is very little difference between HEIs. They may use different names for support units and schemes, but what they offer appears to be very similar.

Whilst it is impossible from this study to determine whether there is more support available to students in new universities/colleges of HE than in old universities it does appear that the former are more proactive. For example, both HEI-3 and HEI-11 provide diagnostic tests to help identify any academic needs that students have. They also seem to be more active in publicising the support available. The rationale for such approaches appears to be based on a belief that their students need more academic support because they are entering higher education with poorer qualifications than students going to old universities. The VC of HEI-11 argues that HEIs have a moral duty to ensure such students are given the support they need:

If you take the responsibility of accepting people without traditional, or with relatively low, qualifications then it is incumbent upon you to do what you CAN to support them. If you fail them at the end of the first year, you've not just put them back in the position they were in before, you've put them in the same position minus two. You've probably damaged them, you know, quite significantly. I don't think any of our students are any less ABLE than students who go to other universities that are much better in inverted commas, or supposedly much better, because I actually think what we tend to get are people who have not been coached in how to do examinations. And that's all it is, and therefore some learning support is what they need.

The VC of HEI-11 also acknowledges that students from non-traditional backgrounds may bring with them more problems. S/he expands upon this saying, 'They also tend to have much more difficult lives, they're maybe coping with a lot more difficult problems at home'.

In contrast, the emphasis at HEI-10 is on recruiting the 'right' students. For example, the PVC argues that the main reason for their high levels of retention is that, 'We have a deeply embedded culture of careful selection. We do take trouble over who we let in. We have got to make sure they can cope'. However, s/he also feels that a contributory factor is that the university has a culture that values student support. The way this translates into practice is impossible to know. However, as the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-11 admitted, student support varies significantly by department. I would contend that this is also likely to be the case in HEI-10. Indeed, the Director of Aim Higher, based in HEI-10, suggested that, 'Within a research institution there is pressure on staff to undertake research, so issues around the support of students aren't necessarily a priority for many of them'.

Targeted support

Pre-entry support such as bridging courses aimed at preparing students for the transition from FE to HE, are often targeted at widening participation students, or more usually, at schools or colleges in relatively deprived areas, or with low progression rates into FE/HE. Also financial support is targeted at students from low income families. This will of course become an important aspect of widening participation policy from 2006 with the introduction of variable tuitions fees and bursaries for students from lower income families.

When HEI policies are examined in relation to later stages in the student life cycle they tend, however, to be aimed at the general student population, rather than particular under-represented groups. This means that induction programmes, counselling, careers advice, courses to develop employment skills, methods of teaching, learning and assessment, etc., are devised for the general student population. As discussed in Chapter 5, this approach

arises because of the reluctance of institutions to 'label' students. As a member of the SMG at HEI-3 commented:

I believe you've got to put support on that is not labelled. This way we're not making students DIFFERENT. And there's a good reason for that, because the worse thing you can do is have a student turn round to you and say but why am I doing this when they don't have to? You CAN'T do that. Things are only acceptable if EVERYBODY has to do them.

Similarly, the PVC at HEI-10 said:

We're very very loathe specifically to flag up individuals as possibly being likely to need special support. And therefore you are back where you started with just saying you have this generic support available and you can either refer yourself to it or someone will refer you to it, but we're not going to tell anyone that they've GOT to do it. So ironically that means you've GOT to have it for EVERYONE.

The Head of Careers at HEI-10 also argues against targeting on the grounds that:

You can take a horse to water but can't make it drink We are not in the business of sort of ramming it down people's throats and not everybody needs it, so you know people who have confidence and know exactly what they're doing and perhaps they've got parents who understand the process. But what we are trying to do is cater for the people who need that support, but it is difficult because how do we encourage those who do need it to come forward?

This last point is picked up in Thomas *et al.*'s (2003) study on student services. They make two points. First, they suggest that generic support may not be effective in attracting widening participation students. Second, generic support may fail to meet their particular needs.

In this study HEIs appear to be tackling the first problem by attempting to market student support in a way that is attractive to the groups the institution's feel need support. This is obviously very difficult to do and it is not clear how successful HEIs are at this. The second problem is potentially more serious because it is suggesting that generic approaches fail to meet the needs of widening participation students. This is contested by the HEIs in this study. They argue that support for the general student population will be more useful for widening participation students, such as those from lower SEGs. For example, a member of the SMG at HEI-3 referred to the way they developed employability amongst their students through work placement projects and a module involving career planning. S/he felt this would prove particularly beneficial to students from working class backgrounds because they are more likely to lack these skills.

The other argument mobilised by policy makers in this study is that they treat students as 'individuals', rather than as members of a particular group or class. This rationale is often used by support services such as careers. For example, the Head of Careers at HEI-10 contends that:

It's people's needs rather than class that is the issue and people from working class backgrounds can be very confident or have developed the necessary skills. Equally those from middle class backgrounds may not have the necessary skills. It is how people present themselves and whether we can help them that matters.

Such an approach is supported by the Principal of HEI-3, who as previously pointed out, is sceptical about the usefulness of social class:

The assumptions you make about people are actually to do with them as individuals rather than what class they fall into. It's more to do with them as individuals and what they present to you in terms of their abilities and their

needs than it is to do with you actually saying well let me see, your needs are based on the fact that you are such and such.

Deficit models

As discussed in Chapter 4, early approaches to widening participation policy were often based on a 'deficit' or 'victim blaming' model (see for example Dearing, 1997). In recent years HEFCE has begun to move away from this model (see HEFCE, 2001b) by suggesting that HEIs may need to need to change their practices to accommodate a more diversified student body. Yet Trowler (2002) contends that the widening participation policies of HEIs remain predicated on the deficit model:

the 'problem' of how to widen participation in higher education is usually formulated ... on the basis of taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of higher education, the forms of propositional knowledge that need to be acquired and notions of 'quality' and 'standards'. These in turn derive from ideological positions and usually latent sets of values and attitudes. Such preconceptions give rise to the idea of the 'under-prepared' student and so constitute the site of the problem in individual deficiencies. They 'write out' alternative ways of looking at the issues in a fundamentally different way (pp. 18-19).

The 'values' and 'attitudes' described by Trowler can be seen to be influencing the way institutions in this study have formulated policy. For example, concerns about standards and quality seem to be a factor influencing attitudes to entry qualifications. It could also be argued that the whole approach to student support adopted by HEIs is based on the rationale of the 'under-prepared student'. A factor relevant here is that if, as indicated in this study, HEIs do not feel that there is a mismatch between the culture of their institution and the cultural capital that working class students bring to the university or college of HE, then any problems of integration will inevitably be seen as arising from the students'

failings. It might also be contended that approaches that emphasise the need to treat students as individuals are less likely to acknowledge that structural factors, such as social class, will influence student behaviour (see Thomas *et al.*, 2003 for similar comments). This might lead to 'victim blaming'.

However, institutional widening participation policy is not articulated in the documents examined for this research in the language of 'victim blaming'. Indeed, documents generally go out of their way to stress that the deficit model does not underpin institutional policy on widening participation. For example, in HEI-16's University Plan (2003-08) it discusses the need to, 'align our infrastructure, culture, policy and procedures to meet the differing and flexible learning needs of widening participation students' (p. 9). On the institution's website it also states that, 'We are focusing more clearly on what our students want and need to learn to meet their own life and career goals'. Similarly, in interviews policy makers often emphasised that they were not victim blaming, and were quick to qualify any comments that could be interpreted in this way. Where policy makers stressed that they treated students as individuals they were, on most occasions, quick to acknowledge that factors such as class were also influential. Such responses could of course reflect the fact that policy makers are sensitive to accusations that they are adopting a deficit model. Therefore the content of policy documents, and the answers provided by policy makers, may present greater political awareness rather than a genuine shift in values.

It can, on the other hand, be argued that the role of HEIs is to promote values that they regard as valuable to society. As such, it would be wrong for them to simply change so that they are more accommodating to students from a particular cultural background. This seems to be the position adopted by a number of policy makers. For example a member of the SMG at HEI-3 said, 'It's not about institutions changing their values, it's about changing how you receive students and how you then equip them'. Similarly, the Head of Widening Participation at HEI-10 argues that the students coming to their university may need to change if they are going to cope:

If they do decide to come into higher education, they actually need cultural competency because if you don't they're not going to hack it. You then have to look at how do you give young people the cultural competency to cope.

From this perspective student support will focus on developing the knowledge, skills and values that will enable students to study more effectively (Gale and McNamee, 1995; Haggis and Pouget, 2002). It is argued by Gale and McNamee (1995) that this is achieved by promoting middle class values. It might, however, be contended that the values the university is promoting are of benefit to the student. This appears to be what the policy makers quoted above are implying. Whether these are 'middle class' values is open to debate. For example, widening participation strategies often refer to the need to develop autonomous or independent learners. For example, HEI-5's Access and Widening Participation Policy and Strategy Document (1999/00-2003/04) discuss the need to 'provide a range of teaching and learning opportunities to support and develop students as autonomous learners' (p. 9). It has been contended that working class students, who are aware of the cultural distance between themselves and their tutors, may lack the confidence to approach academic staff for help and may therefore struggle to adapt to such pedagogic approaches (Vincent, 1994). This is not, however, necessarily an argument against particular pedagogic practices. It can be argued that if certain methods are deemed to be beneficial to students then they should be utilised. What is important is that students are provided with adequate support to develop as autonomous learners.

Whilst institutions are expecting students to change they also indicated a willingness to accept change themselves. For example, the PVC at HEI-10 said:

We have to change to accommodate all sorts of people all of the time. We will have to change, yes. But it might be more tangential things than simply putting in some special support for certain types of student. It might be more to do with maybe trying to be more flexible about delivery modes and times, or making sure that methods of assessment aren't in some UNINTENDED way discriminating against people from certain types of background or in

certain contexts ... We have changed a lot. I mean it's quite hard to change universities, but we certainly – I mean I don't think there's a fundamental hostility to the notion of it. There might be feet dragging in terms of reacting to it.

The PVC at HEI-10 admits that it is often difficult to initiate change in a university. This view is not, however, confined to Russell Group universities, such as HEI-10, but appears to extend across the whole spectrum of HEIs. The policy makers interviewed for this study indicated that initiating change, especially in methods of teaching, learning and assessment, is difficult. As such, developing pedagogic practice to facilitate widening participation is in the very early stages of development. Indeed, an examination of institutional widening participation policies on teaching, learning and assessment for this study reveals that they are often nebulous and under-developed.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter demonstrates that there appears to be a degree of homogeneity in the type of policies that the different HEIs are implementing, especially in relation to aspiration raising and student support. For example, all the institutions are involved in raising aspirations and they are all participating in collaborative activities with other HEIs, colleges and schools. Also, the systems of support for students (e.g. counselling, personal tutors, careers advice, etc.) are very similar. Moreover, all the HEIs admit to having underdeveloped widening participation policies in relation to the later stages of the student life cycle, especially in teaching, learning and assessment and the preparation of students for the transition into employment. HEIs find it particularly difficult to develop policies in these areas because of their reluctance to 'label' students and their desire to treat students as 'individuals' rather than as members of a particular group or class. In addition, the utilisation of different definitions of a 'widening participation student' and the reluctance to refer to social class (see Chapter 5) were again also a prominent feature of discussions with policy makers when they talked about raising aspirations, admissions and student support.

Whilst there does, at first, appear to be a significant degree of homogeneity in institutional responses to widening participation (especially in relation to aspiration raising and student support), the underlying rationale behind policy often differs significantly. For example, the more prestigious institutions emphasised their desire to encourage the ‘gifted and talented’ and the need for prospective students to be able to ‘cope’ with the pedagogic methods adopted in a research-led institution. They also placed a heavy emphasis on the requirement to maintain standards. In contrast, other HEIs generally had a broader definition of who could benefit from higher education and supplemented this approach by being more proactive in relation to student support. This is based on the presumption that their students are weaker academically and therefore require more substantial levels of academic support.

These very different rationales reflected cultural differences in these institutions and also the need for HEIs to develop policies that enabled them to play to their strengths in order to survive and prosper in the higher education ‘market’. For example, a Russell Group university is sympathetic to widening participation, but its strength in the market is based on its research and its elevated position in the hierarchy of HEIs. As such, the university’s policy makers are not willing to adopt policies that could damage or threaten this competitive advantage. Therefore, whilst they may make efforts to counteract what they view as stereotypical notions about them being an elite university, they are reluctant to implement policies - such as lowering entry standards - which could threaten or undermine their status. In contrast, the competitive advantage of less prestigious institutions often arises because of their ability to recruit students by adopting more flexible admissions policies. However, whilst they have fewer concerns about the effect of these policies on their status, they are still conscious of being accused of lowering standards – a factor which tends to act as an ‘anchor’ on the extent to which they are willing to be flexible.

Nevertheless, HEIs have very different admissions criteria. For example, the more prestigious institutions generally ask for higher A-level grades and often demonstrate a reluctance to consider students with vocational qualifications. Yet all the HEIs appeared to want to recruit the ‘best’ students (in terms of entry qualifications) that they could.

Moreover, any reduction in entry requirements tended to be determined by the market rather than because of a desire to widen participation. Institutions are, however, then quick to claim that their admissions policies are a key component of their widening participation strategies. As such, policy makers are adept at adopting the tactic of ‘double coding’ (Gewirtz *et al.*, 2004) by arguing that ‘not only’ are they enabling at risk departments to survive by lowering entry grades and recruiting more students, ‘but they are also’ widening participation.

NOTES

1. This is compatible with New Labour ideas about promoting individual choice. The message given to young people by HEIs also appears to be based on the idea that they should make educational decisions on the basis of rational choice where education is seen as an investment that will reap higher lifetime earnings. Again, this sits comfortably with New Labour’s commitment to creating a meritocratic society (see Chapter 4).
2. In particular, what has now become the celebrated case of Laura Spence, the state school pupil who failed to obtain a place at Oxford University, despite predictions of A grades at A-level.
3. Vocational qualifications are supposed to have parity of esteem, but in practice A-levels are regarded as a more academic and superior qualification. This matters in the context of widening participation because students from lower SEGs are more likely to be studying vocational qualifications (see Chapter 2).
4. This even extends to a statement in HEI-16’s Prospectus (2004): ‘The methods of teaching, working and assessment at university are very different to any you will have encountered before, so previous performance need not have much of a bearing on your university career. A recent report from Kings College, London concluded that in 40% of cases a student with worse A levels would do better at university than one with better A levels. This is a new chance to prove yourself. Study what you want and dedicate yourself to it – reap your own rewards’ (p. 25).
5. During the interview s/he obviously regretted this comment and quickly added: ‘There’s nothing wrong with doing that actually – taking people with two Es - as long as you then have the infrastructure in place to support them’. S/he then quoted a study demonstrating there was no statistical correlation between entrance qualifications and final degree classification.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this thesis has been an examination of the rationale behind HEI widening participation policy in relation to social class. Whilst the HEIs in this study often developed policies on widening participation that pre-date government initiatives, macro-level policy remains an important influence. Therefore, the development of government policy was traced from the 1960s to the present day. The response of HEIs to the widening participation agenda was then analysed utilising documentary evidence and interviews with key institutional policy makers, at both the senior and middle management levels.

This final chapter will revisit the process of policy migration first introduced in Chapter 1 (see for example Ball, 1997, 1998; Nixon *et al.*, 2002a, 2002b; Trowler, 2003). It will consider how widening participation policy migrates from government to HEIs. In doing this, the concluding chapter will attempt to integrate the findings of the empirical research reported in Chapter's 4, 5 and 6. This will involve examining policy migration from a more theoretical perspective and will entail a detailed analysis of the factors influencing the way policy is interpreted and developed during this process. The effect on the nature of HEI widening participation policy will then be examined. Finally, some of the implications for government and institutional policy makers will be considered.

POLICY MIGRATION AND THE FACTORS INFLUENCING INSTITUTIONAL POLICY

This study highlights how government policy on widening participation has developed in an ad hoc, continually changing and incremental manner, rather than as part of a long-term strategic plan (see Ball, 1998; Pratt, 1999; Kogan, 2002; Trowler, 2002). Despite this approach the government, and in particular HEFCE, appear to be developing increasingly sophisticated widening participation policies. For example, HEFCE is promoting the 'student life cycle model' (see HEFCE, 2001b) which encourages institutions to consider all stages of a student's involvement with higher education - from aspiration raising through to progression into employment. Government/HEFCE policy is also moving away from a deficit or 'victim blaming' model (*ibid.*). As such, universities and colleges of HE are expected to reconsider their approach to student support and pedagogy so that the needs of non-traditional students can be better accommodated.

By encouraging stakeholders to input into policy development, the formulation of widening participation policy at the macro-level, adopts a participatory approach. However, key stakeholders such as those from working class communities, students and ordinary lecturers are often under-represented in this process. HEFCE can also be criticised for maintaining the final say in the determination of what is 'good practice' in widening participation (see for example HEFCE, 2001b). Moreover, HEFCE appears to be attempting to increase its control over policy by proposing the creation of a central facility for storing and disseminating, what it interprets, to be high quality research on widening participation (see HEFCE, 2004a, para. 18, p. 6).

Nevertheless, government and HEFCE are not free to determine policy without external influence. The modification of government plans for the introduction of variable tuition fees provides recent evidence of the complex political process involved in the evolution of macro-policy. Without access to senior policy makers in government and HEFCE it is only possible to gain a limited insight into how such policies are formulated. However, by examining the policy documents of 16 HEIs and interviewing key policy makers within

three of these institutions, this study was able to obtain considerable insight into how widening participation policy is interpreted and developed within HEIs.

From the evidence gathered for this study it appears that there is scope for agency as policy migrates from the macro to the HEI level, and then from senior to middle management. The institution's culture is very important in this respect because it acts as a key influence on how HEIs respond to government/HEFCE widening participation policy. An HEI's culture acts as a mediator between external economic and political influences and institutional policy making. The way an institution interprets and responds to its environment and the policies it adopts is therefore heavily dependent on its culture. This study, for example, has demonstrated how an institution's culture - influenced by its geographical location, history, the values of its most senior managers, and the organisational structures introduced - can predispose it to pursuing strategies to widen participation. On the other hand, an HEI's culture may also act as a barrier to change. As Valentin (2002) points out an institution's culture can make it inflexible and unresponsive to changes in the external environment. Moreover, whilst an HEI's culture represents the values that are shared by people across the institution (Daft, 2000), sub-cultures also exist (Thompson, 1997; Smith, 2000) and individuals often have values that are not completely congruent with those of the institution (see for example Trowler, 1998). In these circumstances, the culture of the organisation can restrict the options available to policy makers by defining what is, or is not, acceptable (Bates, 2002). Therefore, a policy maker may decide to refrain from pursuing a particular policy because of the values that currently prevail within an institution.

Interviews with policy makers also reveal that they felt constrained by government and HEFCE. The government, mainly through legislation and control over funding, exerts a considerable influence over HEI policy (Fitz, 1994). Therefore, the parameters within which institutional policy can be developed are set at the macro-level. One problem identified by policy makers in this study is that government policy is not always clear and is subject to change. This results in institutions adopting a reactive approach, which means they attempt to second-guess government priorities. There is also a tendency for HEIs to 'hedge their bets' (Mackay *et al.*, 1995) by pursuing a number of strategies in different

policy areas. This ‘scattershot’ approach is regarded as less risky than focusing on a specific strategy. Institutions, nevertheless, retain some scope for reinterpreting government/HEFCE policy, and they are often adept at putting a positive ‘spin’ on their widening participation policies in order to deflect political pressure to do more, or adopt strategies that may not be compatible with their underlying values.

INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES ON WIDENING PARTICIPATION

An HEI’s response to widening participation is therefore strongly influenced by its organisational culture and the economic and political environment within which it operates. Whilst all HEIs face the same environment, they have different organisational cultures and resources (financial, human, capital, etc.). Moreover, these cultural and resource differences often extend beyond the broad categorisations (i.e. college of HE, ‘new’ university, ‘old’ university, Russell Group university, etc.) that are invariably used to analyse issues relating to higher education. Consequently, an analysis of institutional responses to widening participation that takes into account economic forces, political factors and the culture of an HEI provides a better, if more complex, explanatory framework within which to work. This model was used in this study to help explain the policies that institutions developed in relation to raising aspirations, admissions and student support.

In respect of aspiration raising and student support there appears to be a good deal of homogeneity in institutional practice. For example, all the HEIs in this study visited schools and colleges to raise aspirations and they had similar types of student support, e.g. counselling, careers, etc. This seems to arise because there is a political expectation (often backed by funding) that HEIs become involved in certain activities. In addition, it appears that the uncertainty created by the competitive environment within which HEIs operate is a factor leading to the development of ‘conventional’ or ‘isomorphic’ practices (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Cyert and March, 2002).

However, despite this homogeneity in practice the underlying rationale behind policy often varies significantly. This appears to arise because of the contrasting positions HEIs occupy in the higher education market and the different values underpinning institutional policy. For example, the more prestigious institutions emphasise their desire to encourage the 'gifted and talented' and the need for prospective students to be able to 'cope' with the pedagogic methods employed in a research-led university. They also place a heavy emphasis on the need to maintain standards. In contrast, other HEIs often had a broader definition of who could benefit from higher education and supplemented this by being more proactive in student support activities.

Admission policies also appeared to differ significantly, especially between the more prestigious 'selecting' universities and those HEIs concerned with recruiting sufficient numbers of students. Again economic forces and the culture of the institution appear to be important factors. HEIs are also very aware of the way admissions, has in recent years, become a politically sensitive area of institutional policy.

This study indicates that the more prestigious universities are seeking to preserve their position as high status institutions that only admit the 'top' students. In contrast, other HEIs are concerned with maintaining the financial viability of their courses by recruiting enough students. As a result, the selectors ask for higher A-level grades and are often reluctant to accept vocational qualifications. They justify this approach by referring to the need for students to be able to 'cope' and also their obligation to maintain 'standards'. Conversely, the 'recruiters' have lower entry standards and a more flexible approach to the type of qualification they accept. They are, however, conscious of the need to justify their admissions policies and are mindful of criticisms about lowering standards.

It might be argued that differences in approach are to a large extent embedded in the culture of institutions. The new universities, for example, have a long history of accepting students with lower A-level grades and vocational qualifications. Yet despite the differences in admissions criteria the underlying rationale behind institutional approaches is very similar. In all cases, HEIs articulated a desire to recruit the 'most able' students that they could, and

any diminution in entry requirements arose out of a fall in demand for courses, rather than because of a wish to widen participation. Indeed, the more prestigious institutions demonstrated a willingness to be flexible in subject areas where there is a low demand for places. The market therefore appears to play a more important role in determining admission policies than policy makers are generally willing to admit. Accordingly, policy makers were particularly adept at providing politically acceptable arguments for their admissions policies.

Finally, HEIs appear to have made little progress in developing policies relating to the later stages of the student life cycle. For example, student support remains generic with HEIs demonstrating a reluctance to provide assistance aimed directly at working class students. In addition, institutional policies on pedagogy remain nebulous and under-developed. Whilst there is some political pressure for HEIs to tackle such issues (see HEFCE 2001b; 2002a), there are few financial incentives, and the traditional values that exist within HEIs - especially in relation to pedagogy - make it difficult for policy makers to implement change. Moreover, interviews for this research revealed an almost universal reluctance to discuss social class or to 'label' students in terms of their socio-economic status.

As can be seen from this brief overview, institutional policy on widening participation develops out of a complex combination of economic and political influences, mediated by the values, beliefs and objectives of HEIs. This research has been able to obtain some insights into the factors influencing policy. However, more research still needs to be carried out in order to obtain a better understanding.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The main aim of this research was to gain a better understanding of the rationale behind institutional policy on widening participation. In the process of doing this I have, however, identified a number of issues that I feel are worthy of further consideration by policy

makers. They have been selected on the grounds that they have important consequences for widening participation.

1. Working class students are disproportionately represented in less prestigious institutions and on courses where demand for places is low (Johnston, 2003). This is an important contributory factor to these students being less successful in the graduate labour market (Harvey *et al.*, 1997; Hesketh, 2000). The government is of course attempting to raise working class attainment in schools; HEIs are also actively involved in trying to encourage students from lower SEGs to apply to prestigious universities. However, it appears to me that both government and HEIs have a responsibility to address this problem in other ways. The government should recognise that its funding regime and its policy of promoting competition and measuring 'performance' has contributed to the creation of a more hierarchical system of higher education that forms the basis of institutional discrimination in the graduate labour market. As Read *et al.* (2003) suggest 'much more needs to be done to challenge the cultural and economic hierarchy that exists between academic institutions' (p. 275). This is particularly important if students are expected to adopt 'cost-benefit evaluations' (Goldthorpe, 1996, p. 498) in their educational decision-making. In such circumstances working class students, who are more likely to go to less prestigious institutions and enrol on lower status courses, may quite rationally conclude that the benefits are insufficient to warrant their 'investment' in time and money. For poorer students, who qualify for grants and bursaries, the financial cost may not be as great and they may be willing to accept a lower return on their 'investment'. However, this would have the effect of reinforcing working class disadvantage.

2. There also exist within HEIs some deep-rooted views on what constitutes 'merit' and an acceptance that the market should be the arbiter of entry standards. This often leads to inflexibility in admissions, especially in the more prestigious institutions and on high demand subjects. Williams (1997b) points out HEIs often use what she refers to as 'icon' words (i.e. 'standards', ability to 'cope', etc.) as a way of closing down the debate on such issues. In my opinion, institutions should be encouraged to critically examine their approach to entry requirements, particularly their attitude to vocational qualifications. A

body such as OFFA could, if it had more power, play a role here. However, the creation of a less competitive higher education system would probably be more effective in enabling HEIs to be less market focused and more flexible.

3. Despite the fact that students from lower socio-economic groups appear to be disadvantaged at a number of stages in the student life cycle there appears to be some complacency amongst institutional policy makers. For example, the impression gained, especially from interviews, is that HEIs feel they are 'doing enough'. There is also a sense of resignation, with policy makers declaring that they are doing 'all that they can'. In this respect, institutional policy-makers often externalise the 'problem' by pointing to poor academic qualifications amongst working class students as the most important issue to be addressed. A number of writers support such views. For example, Tarrou and Holmesland (2002) argue that in order to eliminate class inequalities in higher education a sustained intervention by government in the educational system, the labour market and the wider economy is required. Similarly, Langslow (1999) suggests that HEIs can do little more than, 'redress a few of the symptoms of what is a much more deep-rooted problem' (p. 183). However, whilst the actions of HEIs may only have a marginal effect, I agree with Anne Phillips' contention that even if we are unable to fully resolve a problem this does not invalidate attempts to tackle those concerns that are within our control (Phillips, 1999, p. 76). Accordingly, there remains a range of widening participation issues that HEIs need to give greater consideration to, especially relating to admissions and the later stages of the student life cycle.

4. HEIs are reluctant to 'label' students or even to refer to social class. There is also some resistance to the idea that social class is a factor contributing to disadvantage. This means that student support is offered to all students rather than particular social groups. Thomas *et al.* (2003) have been critical of these generic approaches, arguing that they fail to meet the needs of particular groups of students. Phillips (1999) goes further arguing for 'equality *through* difference' (p. 25, italics in original). She suggests that a generic approach that tries to ignore differences may actually result in the unequal treatment of subordinate groups because they are expected to adopt the values and behaviour of those from more

privileged sections of society. Indeed, generic approaches are likely to result in the introduction of student support based on ‘deficit’ or ‘victim blaming’ models. This is because there is often an implicit assumption that working class students need to adopt other, often middle class, forms of behaviour if they are to be ‘successful’ (see Gale and McNamee, 1995; Lillis and Turner, 2001).

The HEIs in this study also offer individualised support to students. This, however, assumes there are particularised, rather than collective reasons, for student disadvantage (Williams, 1997a) – a position that effectively rejects social class as a key influence on a person’s values and behaviour (Pakulski and Waters, 1996; Savage *et al.*, 2001; Archer, 2003). Moreover, there is evidence from this, and other studies, to suggest that the take-up rate for additional support amongst working class students is low. There is also no reason why individualised advice will not be predicated on middle class values, especially as there appears to be a reluctance amongst the HEIs to admit that they may be ‘middle class institutions’.

5. There appears to be a need for HEIs (and government) to clearly define the concept of a ‘widening participation student’. There was in this study recurrently no clearly defined or consistent institutional conception of such students. Similarly, both government and HEFCE use various definitions. This is important because the conceptualisation used by policy makers will ultimately determine who benefits from widening participation policy (Popkewitz and Lindblad, 2000).

It is submitted that these issues require further and more detailed consideration by both HEIs and government. Moreover, these should be tackled by institutions actively engaging in a dialogue with their stakeholders, i.e. students, parents, employers, local communities, etc. (see Gale and McNamee, 1995; Thomas, 2001b; Bowl, 2001 for similar comments). The task of government should, in my opinion, be to facilitate such processes. Rather than attempting to direct institutional policy from the centre, the government ought to allow

HEIs the autonomy to develop policies without the over bureaucratized system of planning, monitoring and control that currently exists.

CONCLUSION

This research represents my interpretation of how macro level widening participation policy has evolved. I have also presented my view of the way HEIs have responded to the widening participation agenda and the factors influencing institutional policy. Finally, a number of issues that I believe need addressing have been outlined. This chapter represents the culmination of a particular stage of my research into widening participation. It is not, however, the end of the process because the topic researched is complex and demands further study. As Bourdieu (1988) argues:

The logic of research is an intermeshing of major and minor problems which force us to ask ourselves at every moment what we are doing and permit us gradually to understand more fully what we are seeking; by providing the beginnings of an answer, which will suggest new, more fundamental and more explicit questions (p. 7).

This study, therefore, represents a platform for further research into institutional responses to government and HEFCE widening participation policy. The way HEIs introduce variable fees from 2006 will form a key element of my research over the next few years. In addition, Haggis and Pouget (2002) suggest that the implications of widening participation policy on teaching and learning have not been extensively researched. This study also indicates that pedagogical issues form one of the least well developed aspects of HEI policy on widening participation. Accordingly, a second strand of research will involve carrying out collaborative action research (see Greenbank, 2004) into the introduction of more inclusive methods of teaching, learning and assessment within my own institution. In particular, Bourdieu's ideas (see Robbins, 1993; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1994; Bourdieu *et al.*, 1994;

Bourdieu, 1997) about the way the curriculum, the organisation of learning and the 'language of teaching' disadvantage working class students will be investigated.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

CASE STUDIES AND DETAILS OF THOSE INTERVIEWED

HEI-3	HEI-10	HEI-11
<p>This is a small specialist college located in a city and surrounded by a large rural area.</p>	<p>This is a Russell Group university located in a large city.</p>	<p>This is a very large new university located in a large city.</p>
<p><i>Interviewed:</i></p> <p>Principal</p> <p>Member of the Senior Management Group (SMG) with responsibility for widening participation</p> <p>Manager of Aim Higher (HEI-3 is the lead institution in a partnership that also includes HEI-2 and HEI-15)</p> <p>Careers Adviser</p>	<p><i>Interviewed:</i></p> <p>Pro-vice-chancellor with responsibility for widening participation</p> <p>Head of Widening Participation</p> <p>Head of Careers</p> <p>Director of Aim Higher (HEI-10 is the lead institution in a partnership that also includes HEI-5, HEI-8 and HEI-9)</p>	<p><i>Interviewed:</i></p> <p>Vice-chancellor</p> <p>Head of Widening Participation</p> <p>Head of Student Services</p> <p>Project Manager</p> <p>Senior Careers Adviser</p>

APPENDIX 2

INTERVIEW GUIDE

One interview guide has been included as an example. Whilst the guides were similar in nature and contained certain key questions, they reflected the position of the person being interviewed, and information that had already been collected through documentary research and interviews with other people. In the example provided the Head of Widening Participation, the Head of Student Services, a Project Manager and a Senior Careers Adviser had been interviewed prior to the interview with the Vice-chancellor.

Interview Guide

Vice-chancellor HEI-11 (30/6/04)

Introduction

Could I thank you for allowing the time for this interview to take place. Your help in this research is much appreciated.

Can I stress that what you say to me will be treated as confidential and when my thesis is written up HEIs and individuals will not be identified by name.

Is it OK to tape the interview as this will enable me to keep the interview as short as possible and it will ensure I have an accurate record of what you say?

[Switch tape recorder on - check everything is OK]

Overall policy

In your Strategic Plan you state, 'The challenge is to marry our objectives with the national agenda, and stay on track *with our own defined path*'.

How difficult is it to deliver what you want in the type of environment HEIs have to operate in?

[i.e. continually changing, uncertain, dependent on government funding].

- Autonomy/control over policy
- Extent to which you simply have to react to government/HEFCE policy
- Threat of a change of government

Do you feel you operate in a very competitive environment?

[Managers lower down often don't have that sense of competition]

- 'Business'/ 'Chief Executive'
- Economic versus social objectives

Organisation

You appear to have a fairly flat and devolved organisational structure.

What are the advantages of this?

Are there any disadvantages?

E.g.

- Variability in practice/success

Are there any areas where it is important to have a strong *institutional* policy?

Widening participation

In your Strategic Plan (2003) the second objective is to 'exceed our benchmarks in widening participation'.

- SEGs, low participation neighbourhoods, state schools?

Would you say, therefore, that this is the focus of your widening participation strategy?

Do you have to work hard to meet these targets?

What are the implications of failing to meet these targets?

The Corporate Planning Statement (2003) notes the need to attract sufficient funding to continue with WP strategies.

- Conflict between social objectives and the need to maintain the financial viability of the institution?
- To what extent do staff have to be 'entrepreneurial'?

What are the key influences on institutional WP policy?

- HEFCE
- Personalities (Middle-mgt, Head of WP, PLs in WP)
- Institutional culture (polytechnic background)

Student life cycle

Could I look at each stage of the student life cycle in terms of your institutions approach to WP?

- Raising aspirations
 - o Funded mainly through Aim Higher?
 - o If Aim Higher funding was not available?
 - o To what extent is this under your control? Is there only so much you can do as an HEI?

- Admissions
 - o Prospectus discusses a flexible approach to admissions/but need to maintain standards?
 - o Institutional autonomy (OFFA, Schwartz)
 - o Holistic approach

- Preparation for HE /First steps in higher education
 - o Diagnostic tests/study skills
 - o Generic rather than targeted
 - o Accepted that students may not be ready for HE when they enter?
 - o Values (working class versus middle class?)

- Student support
 - Strong emphasis on student support (generic v. targeting).
 - Balance between preparing students/changing the institution (especially in relation to pedagogy)
 - Financial (tuition fees)

- Progression into employment
 - General support (Careers)
 - Responsibility ends?
 - Targeting?

General issues on widening participation

If you were in my position looking at different institutions – how would you judge whether an HEI was taking widening participation seriously?

Should widening participation be concentrated in particular types of institution?

Conclusion

What do you think your institution is doing well in terms of widening participation?

What do you think the major challenges are, in respect of widening participation, for the HE sector?

Thank-you for giving up your time to be interviewed.

Interviewer's notes and comments

Comment on the interviewee's level of interest and manner.

Any other comments?

Issues to be followed up.

APPENDIX 3

EXAMPLE OF A MATRIX

It is important to note that this is a very simple example of a matrix. This is because most of the matrices constructed for this study involved extensive written comments which make them unsuitable for inclusion in a thesis.

Admissions policies as identified in prospectus

HEI	Holistic approach	Account taken of socio-economic background	Comment
1	×	×	
2	×	×	
3	×	×	
4	×	×	
5	×	×	
6	×	×	
7	×	×	
8	√	√	Strong statement including reference to social background.
9	×	×	
10	×	×	
11	√	×	Prospectus makes a statement about adopting a holistic approach, but it is very weak. Also no reference to social background.
12	×	×	
13	×	×	
14	×	×	
15	√	×	Weak statement in prospectus, no reference to social background
16	×	×	

APPENDIX 4

PARTICIPATION OF UNDER-REPRESENTED GROUPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION (Young full-time entrants 2000-01)

HEI	From state schools and colleges			From social class IIIM, IV, V			From low participation neighbourhoods		
	Bench- mark (%)	Actual (%)	+/- %	Bench- mark (%)	Actual %	+/- %	Bench- mark (%)	Actual %	+/- %
1	96	99	+3	36	45	+9	21	32	+11
2	92	96	+4	31	34	+3	18	18	-
3	95	100	+5	30	37	+7	19	19	-
4	92	96	+4	30	30	-	17	15	-2
5	94	98	+4	34	39	+5	21	23	+2
6	85	92	+7	24	22	-2	12	11	-1
7	83	88	+5	22	20	-2	12	11	-1
8	94	96	+2	34	39	+5	20	26	+6
9	92	95	+3	31	33	+2	17	21	+4
10	83	82	-1	23	21	-2	13	13	-
11	93	94	+1	32	33	+1	18	18	-
12	78	76	-2	20	19	-1	11	11	-
13	83	80	-3	23	22	-1	12	11	-1
14	92	94	+2	31	33	+2	17	18	+1
15	94	97	+3	32	31	-1	19	16	-3
16	93	98	+5	33	34	+1	16	19	+3

Source: HEFCE (2002) *Performance indicators in higher education 2002*, www.hefce.uk/learning/perfind, Table T1b [accessed 10/7/03]¹

1. Note that more up to date figures are available, but these use the new socio-economic classification developed by the ONS (see www.hesa.ac.uk/pi/).

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