RESEARCH ARTICLE

Getting into Uni in England and Australia: who you know, what you know or knowing the ropes?

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Both England and Australia have displayed strong social democratic traditions in their approaches to higher education expansion in the second half of the twentieth century, but are now continuing that expansion as part of a 'neo-liberal' reform agenda. This paper traces how the rhetoric of widening participation and equitable access to higher education has remained a key feature of policy discourse in both contexts, albeit with different inflections and effects over time and indeed between the two countries. It also shows how the longstanding relationship between higher education and social and cultural reproduction has endured despite a series of 'social democratic' and 'neo-liberal' policy initiatives that have ostensibly sought to weaken that link. It concludes that more needs to be done if the rhetoric of equity and social justice is to impact upon the reality of contemporary higher education in these two countries.

Keywords: England; Australia; higher education; access; widening participation

Introduction

Both England and Australia have struggled to improve access to higher education for socially disadvantaged groups. Some governments faced with similar issues set quotas for entry to higher education institutions from different regions or different social and ethnic groups. Others have legally enforced programmes of affirmative action to ensure fair or balanced intakes to higher education institutions. Recent British and Australian governments have taken a different approach. Leaving decisions about admissions largely to individual universities, they have used a combination of exhortation, KPIs and funding incentives to encourage universities to take a broader range of students, as well as various enabling and outreach initiatives and financial support packages to encourage more applications from previously excluded groups.

Access to higher education is clearly a social justice issue, but one that is considerably more complex than recognised in either 'social democratic' or 'neo-liberal' narratives of reform or indeed in critiques of those narratives. We take the view that, if higher education as currently constituted is taken for granted as a desirable 'good' for some social groups, it should not be systematically denied to others. Yet we do not think that going to university as conventionally understood is necessarily the right thing for everyone. We therefore welcome the renewed discussion of alternative life choices and vocational routes that is now taking place, although we are concerned that they may be used to save money or push some groups into inferior provision.

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The growth of participation in higher education

This paper deals mainly with students who continue on to full-time undergraduate courses straight from school, and not part-time, mature or postgraduate students whose participation raises rather different but equally important issues.

Access to undergraduate education was still very much a minority pursuit until the 1960s. In England, the shift from an elite to a mass system of higher education (Scott, 1995; Trow, 1974) only began just over 50 years ago. The Robbins Report articulated what came to be known as the Robbins principle that:

> Courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so (Robbins, 1963, p. 8).

The economic conditions and meritocratic beliefs of the post-war years helped bring about a substantial rise in participation by the turn of the century.

However, the small numbers of working class students who progressed on to higher education demonstrated that expansion was not enough to ensure equal access. From 1970, there was a considerable and persistent gap in the rates of participation in higher education in England between those from higher and lower socio-economic groups – a gap of 25 to 30 percentage points (Whitty et al., 2015).

In Australia, there was a steady pattern of expansion after world war two with significant emphasis on growth in the 1960s and 1970s. A commitment to actively widen participation developed particularly after the Dawkins declaration in 1990 (Gale & McNamee, 1994):

> The overall objective…is to ensure that Australians from all groups in society have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education [by changing] the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of society as a whole (Dawkins, 1990, p. 8).

Yet in 2004, James et al (2004) found that there had been negligible if any improvement in the participation of students from low socio- economic backgrounds since 1991, despite a huge expansion in the total number of domestic students in higher education (see also James et al., 2008).

In both Australia and England there has been a renewed push to achieve the goal of closing the socio-economic participation gap in recent years. A policy agenda traditionally associated with social democratic politics has now been adopted by the more market-oriented regimes of the so-called 'neo-liberal' era, albeit with somewhat different emphases, thereby 'both creating and constraining possibilities for equity in HE' (Burke & Kuo, 2015, p. 547).

New Labour Policies in England

In England the New Labour Government that was elected in 1997 championed the role of education in developing a high skills workforce and promoting social justice (Wilkins & Burke, 2013). New Labour had two prongs to its policy. The first, *widening participation*, was primarily concerned with narrowing the participation gap in the system as a whole. The second prong, *fair access*, indicated a need to widen participation at research intensive universities whose admissions policies had often been accused of being biased in favour of students from affluent families attending elite private schools (Bekhradnia, 2003).

In 2001, Prime Minister Tony Blair embraced a new ambition to increase the participation of 18 – 30 year olds in higher education to 50% by 2010. From 2002 all English universities were required to develop and publish a Widening Participation Strategy in return for widening participation funding. In 2004 most existing outreach and other widening participation initiatives were expanded and incorporated into Aimhigher, a major national initiative based on local partnerships to increase participation in higher education through outreach work to raise aspirations among previously under-represented groups (Whitty et al, 2015).

The issue of access soon became tied up with debates about the funding of higher education more generally as upfront tuition fees of £1000 had been introduced in 1998 and from 2006 universities could choose to charge a maximum of £3000 per year. Recognising that one of the risks of this policy, particularly for a Labour government publicly committed to social justice, was that students from poorer backgrounds would be put off higher education, maintenance grants, abolished in 1998, were reintroduced for poorer students in 2004. In the same year, an Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was established and all universities planning to charge the new 'top-up' fees were required to produce an Access Agreement setting out their plans for widening participation (DfES, 2003; OFFA, 2004; Whitty et al., 2015).

Although as implied earlier there was resistance to imposing quotas on universities, each university was given an individual widening participation benchmark which was calculated by taking into account the range of subjects offered at the institution and the entry qualification of the students recruited.

Labor policies in Australia

The detailed picture in Australia is a little different from that in England. Australia envisaged a 40% participation rate for the system as a whole and perhaps put rather less emphasis on entry to the full range of different types of university. Participation by Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islanders was a specific concern (Bradley et al., 2008). The Dawkins policies of 1988-90 were strengthened substantially after the Bradley review in 2008. Subsequent Commonwealth government funding for universities to increase participation, retention and completion by students from low SES backgrounds was part the Rudd and Gillard Labor government's Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). The Partnership element of the program, involving outreach activities in schools and communities to raise aspirations and attainment, had more than a passing resemblance to Aimhigher in England, a resemblance also echoed in the name of the Aim High outreach program at The University of Newcastle.

Performance against targets

English academics have sought to evaluate New Labour's performance by considering the extent to which quantitative inequality and qualitative inequality were reduced during its period of office (Boliver, 2008). In broad terms, the first is a measure of widening participation, the second of fair access.

Quantitative inequality

In 2007, the British government revised the methodology it used to measure the participation gap (Kelly & Cook, 2007). This new measure showed a more positive picture, with the participation gap declining since the mid-1990s and standing at 20.2% in 2007/8. However, other research carried out at that time showed major disparities and differences in participation between diverse social groups when you dug beneath the surface (David, 2010).

It is thus important to consider participation in a more nuanced way than simply comparing participation rates from high and low socio-economic groups or neighbourhoods.

In Australia, largely as a result of the introduction of a demand driven system post-Bradley, the overall intake to universities has been increased by around 20% and the increase has been spread across all SES groups. However, although the market share of low SES students as a percentage of domestic students has risen faster than that of other groups as a result of the post-Bradley reforms, it has so far failed to reach the 20% advocated by the Bradley review (James et al., 2013; Gale & Parker, 2013; Kemp & Norton, 2014).

Some sociologists would seek to explain this via the theory of Maximally Maintained Inequality [MMI], which suggests that disadvantaged groups only gain access when demand from advantaged groups has been satisfied (Boliver, 2010). Arguably Australia is at that point now in the demand driven system and, if so, we might expect participation rates to improve more quickly.

Qualitative inequality

But even if low SES participation rates do increase overall, the so-called theory of Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI) suggests that those groups who had previously had more exclusive access to higher education will maintain their advantage by seeking out supposedly 'better' education (Lucas, 2001). It does not actually have to be better than elsewhere, but people have to believe it is. In England, more affluent families maintain their positional advantage by attending highly prestigious institutions at which low SES students are a rarity (Curtis et al., 2008). As has been said of a similar phenomenon in the USA, 'student access to the system as a whole does not mean access to the whole system' (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003, p. 355).

For England, there is a clearly uneven distribution of students from different socio-economic groups across different types of university. 44% of students from professional families who attend universities go to the highly selective research intensive Russell Group universities, but only 23% of students from unskilled backgrounds do so. Partly these figures reflect the fact that access to such institutions is still dominated by those from elite fee-paying independent schools. 46% of young full-time first degree entrants to the University of Oxford still come from elite private schools (Whitty et al., 2015), a figure that is all the more striking when in England only about 7% children receive the bulk of their education in such schools (DCSF, 2008). Even in state schools, it is usually the more advantaged students who secure the high grades needed for selective universities, so the socioeconomic mix is skewed, regardless of the type of school attended (Sutton Trust, 2008). While there has been an increase in the number of young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds attending the more prestigious universities recently (UCAS, 2014), possibly as a result of the work of OFFA, it is against a very low baseline.

Gale and Parker (2013) have produced data that suggest the situation in Australia is not that different. Their participation figures for different mission groups show that Group of Eight universities, the Australian equivalent of the Russell Group, still recruit fewer than 10% of their students from lower socio-economic groups compared with nearly 30% at those in the Regional Universities Network. This suggests that Australia too has a long a long way to go in reducing qualitative inequalities and ensuring fair access to the whole system.

Current Policies

There is a sense in which the governments of the two countries seem to be competing in higher education policy, as well as seeing each other as laboratories for testing out policies that they may want to introduce.

A key policy of the Conservative-led Coalition government elected in 2010 was to raise maximum university fee levels in England from £3000 per year to £9000 but covered by an income contingent up-front loan to students (Garner, 2009). It also abolished Aimhigher, putting the responsibility back on to individual institutions, though retaining some national funding streams to support equity measures. In order to stop these policies reversing what progress had been made on widening participation, universities charging over £6000 in fees were required to produce more elaborate Access Agreements showing how they would enhance financial support to students, ensure fair admissions, deliver outreach activities to support students from under-represented groups and improve the retention of disadvantaged students (Whitty et al., 2015).

So far, it is unclear what effect these policies have had in practice on widening participation and fair access. Nevertheless, an expected reduction in applications as a result of the new higher fees regime has not materialised to anything like the degree anticipated by its critics and has affected mature and part-time applicants rather than school leavers. There has also been a small increase in the numbers of low SES students attending the more prestigious institutions. However, the recent abandonment of a National Scholarship Scheme may penalise disadvantaged students, especially those with lower examination scores who are concentrated in newer universities (McCaig, 2014).

For now, demand has remained relatively buoyant and, in December 2013, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, unexpectedly announced that student number controls would be ended from 2015/16 onwards. In this case, England was following the post-Bradley policy in Australia. Although potentially welcome news for widening access to the system as a whole, the detailed effects of this change remain unpredictable (Hillman, 2014). One prediction was that traditional institutions with significant research income would choose to maintain their present size, making competition for entry to them even tighter to the potential detriment of applicants from disadvantaged families and schools, but so far this has not proved to be the case. It is also encouraging that a further £22m has been earmarked for collaborative outreach activities to ensure schools have contact with universities, possibly a belated recognition that the abolition of Aimhigher was a mistake (Whitty et al., 2015).

In Australia, even more radical measures were contemplated in 2014 under Tony Abbott, although they were blocked in the Senate and are now under review by the Turnbull government. On top of the demand driven system already in place, the Abbott government had proposed to lift the cap on fees and move to a market driven system in the fullest sense. Some predicted dire consequences for the widening participation agenda, with a return to a two-tier higher education system. Much would depend on how scholarships and bursaries were handled but the initial proposal to leave it to individual universities to provide bursaries from fee income, rather than having a national system with an element of redistribution from high charging, low equity institutions to low charging, high equity institutions, did not bode well.

Barriers to participation and fair access

We now explore some of the continuing barriers to widening participation and fair access with a view to identifying what more might be done to ensure a more equitable system, especially in the context of a market-driven system. Is the inequitable distribution of places at different universities brought about by 'who you know, what you know, or knowing the ropes' – or indeed by the financial resources available to different families?

Student Finance

Although the recent fee rises in England do not appear to have had the disastrous

impact on school leavers their critics predicted, there is an academic literature suggesting that, even for younger students, there may be subtle financial inhibitions to widening participation, particularly affecting those for whom applying for university was a marginal decision. While fear of debt may not be pivotal in the decision on whether to enter higher education at all, it may have an impact particularly for disadvantaged students on location of study, thereby restricting the options for such students (Callender & Jackson, 2008).

Young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to choose to live at home with their parents, which both restricts their choice of university and means that they can miss out on other aspects of the traditional experience of higher education (Davies et al., 2014; Mangan et al., 2010). It is not clear that the financial assistance available to students in England is sufficient where the young person cannot also draw on their parents to cover the full costs of attending higher education away from home. This in turn makes them more likely to seek part-time or even full-time work while studying (Van Dyke et al., 2005).

Survey evidence in Australia suggests that finance remains an issue for low SES students despite equity related support through HECS, HELP and Centrelink benefits. One study found that, not surprisingly, low SES students received substantially less financial support from their parents than their more affluent peers. More of them also regularly missed classes due to work commitments, and more of them were likely to go without food and other necessities (Devlin et al., 2008; Bexley et al., 2013). So finance does still make a difference at the margins in ways that serve to reinforce pre-existing inequalities.

Aspiration and awareness

The positioning of underrepresented groups as somehow lacking in aspirations has been a key feature of widening participation and fair access initiatives to date. Yet research in London found that most first year secondary school pupils knew about university, 75% wanted to attend one, and this did not vary as much as might be expected by socio-economic background (Atherton et al., 2009). This work stands in contrast to the 'poverty of aspiration' thesis, which is popular with politicians. Similar findings have been reported in Melbourne and Central Queensland (Prodonovich et al., 2014).

However, even if aspiration seems to exist across the board in younger children, a key issue is how expectations modify aspiration, particularly as students move through secondary school. Disadvantaged students often have high aspirations, but they may not know how to achieve them and may struggle to maintain them. Such work highlights the importance of relevant information, advice and guidance.

In Australia, Bok (2010) quotes a teacher as saying that students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who aspire to go to university have 'to perform in a play *without a script'*. In other words, despite their aspirations, they don't 'know the ropes'. The ability to navigate educational pathways towards aspirations is seen to be "influenced by student's access to 'hot' knowledge" provided by families and local networks (Bok, 2010, p. 171). This has huge implications for those university students who are 'first in family', especially in terms of entry to 'elite' institutions.

Prior attainment

'What you know' about the system is important but at least as important is 'what you know' through the curriculum. The major formal impediment to students proceeding to higher education is still low prior attainment. In England, while there is still a considerable gap in higher education participation between those from different backgrounds, the gap shrinks or even disappears once prior academic attainment is controlled for (Chowdry et al., 2013). And while participation in 'high-status' universities is also unevenly distributed across

different groups when looking at the raw numbers, this bias towards higher socio-economic groups attending higher-status institutions is reduced – though not entirely eliminated - once other variables are included.

In Australia too there is a very strong link between high school completion, ATAR ranks and socio-economic status (Naylor et al., 2013). But, as in England, the figures suggest that those low SES students who do achieve high academic results have virtually equal access to university. However, there are relatively few low SES students who qualify for entry to selective universities, so attainment remains a key issue.

Schools of course influence attainment. In England, Crawford (2012) suggests that the key school influence on participation is its capacity to produce good examination performance at age 16. The implications is that, in order to narrow the participation gap, the main policies likely to have any impact would be raising the school attainment of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds in all schools or making use of contextual data to identify those students from less advantaged backgrounds, including underperforming schools, who have greater academic potential than their attainment to date might suggest.

In Australia, it is similarly argued that more information on school background is needed to assist universities in identifying and providing opportunities to students from less advantaged backgrounds, including targeting ATAR bonuses more effectively (Pagnini et al., 2014).

The importance of social and cultural capital

Most of the research described above suggests that, using standard measures of deprivation, socio-economic status is relatively unimportant in determining the participation rate once prior attainment is taken into account. But, even leaving aside the fact that levels of attainment at school are strongly associated with socio-economic status that might not be the whole of the story.

Bourdieu (1986) has highlighted the role of social and cultural capital in enabling and restricting engagement with education. He used the term 'cultural capital' to means forms of privilege, specifically in terms of education and broader cultural taste, passed down through families. In studies of contemporary education it is often used when considering how affluent parents "play the system" and get their children into the most prestigious secondary schools. The combination of well-informed, educated parents, high achieving schools and a peer group with similar expectations tends to result in higher attainment. Alongside that is social capital, which crucially includes social networks that can be drawn upon to perpetuate privilege.

Although we are seeing a growing orthodoxy emerge among economists that there is little or no difference in university entry between students from different socio-economic groups once prior attainment is taken into account (e.g. Anders, 2012), social and cultural capital affect school attainment from an early age and certainly enter the picture in that way. Furthermore, other work suggests that there may be social and cultural capital influences on decisions to participate in higher education even if they do not show up in crude indicators of socio-economic status, although this does not mean they are necessarily independent of 'social class' (Harrison & Waller, 2010).

Noble and Davies (2009), for example, found that attainment was still the most powerful predictor of participation, but cultural capital did appear to have an independent impact. They considered such factors as whether the family home was rented, the number of siblings in the family, the books in the home, and the level of parental education. Davies et al.

(2014) have subsequently concluded that it would make sense for widening participation initiatives 'to identify students with non-graduate parents, low levels of cultural capital or low graduate premium expectations as less likely than other students to go to university' (Whitty et al., p. 48). They suggest that 'awarding reduced fees or offering participation in 'Outreach' activities on the basis of income indicators seems less sensible than using more targeted indicators like these.

Ball et al. (2002) suggest that the very process of deciding whether or not to go to higher education is significantly different for those from different backgrounds. The 'embedded chooser' is someone who is more likely than not to go on to higher education whereas the 'contingent chooser' is less likely to progress on to higher education. These categories are broadly related to family and community circumstances. If more contingent choosers are to enter higher education, an area which is particularly important is the support, advice, guidance and encouragement given to students in applying to university.

This is especially crucial for those young people whose family does not possess relevant cultural capital and social networks to provide appropriate support and guidance. In England there is a big difference between private and state schools in this respect. So it may still be that who you know - but crucially 'knowing the ropes' – is still what is important here. Families that lack past experience of higher education often do not have easy access to the sorts of networks that help provide advice and support for second generation university families.

Equity might seem to require that such knowledge should be acquired through school-university links rather than being solely dependent on family background and social contacts. However, working class suspicion of official knowledge (Ball & Vincent, 1998) means that schools and universities need to develop strong community links, so that potential students are matched with successful students from similar backgrounds to themselves.

School as well as parental background can be particularly relevant here. Some English research (BIS, 2009) showed that, while there were significant differences between the proportions of similarly qualified students attending prestigious institutions from different types of schools, this seemed to be due to disparities in applications rather than any bias from admissions tutors at the point of entry, which is the usual accusation against Oxbridge in particular. This suggests that extra support is needed in some schools to encourage students who want to apply to more prestigious universities. A number of projects are exploring ways of doing that in England, and similar issues are being addressed by outreach programs such as Aim High in Australia.

It seems then that these quite complex interactions between home, school and university cultures pose a considerable challenge for those seeking to widen participation in higher education and these help to explain why only limited progress has been made to date. It is too easy to blame 'deficits' in students, families and communities. There are significant deficits in schools and universities that need to be addressed.

Where next?

Policy directions

While there has been some progress in getting these issues onto the agenda and in widening participation generally, we now need to make more progress in actually achieving equity in access to all types of university, not least because some commentators are suggesting that current policies may herald 'a retreat from WP' (McCaig, 2014).

Writers like Burke (2012) and Gale (2015) are undoubtedly right that widening

participation needs to be reconceptualised as a project of social justice in the widest sense. Past policies, whether social democratic or market-oriented, have not seriously addressed the deep-seated structural and cultural inequalities that continue to influence patterns of higher

education participation. At the moment, however, there is little appetite within any of the main political parties for innovations like entry to selective universities by lottery or taking the top students from each school. There is even less enthusiasm for radical redistributive policies, although that could possibly change in England following the recent election of Jeremy Corbyn, a traditional democratic socialist, as leader of the Labour Party.

Meanwhile, there are some actions that might be taken within existing policy frameworks to encourage more individuals from non-traditional backgrounds to consider entry to all forms of higher education and acquire the means to do so especially through what they know and knowing the ropes. These include a focus on narrowing attainment gaps and supporting aspiration much earlier in pupils' educational careers; radically improving the quality of information, advice and guidance that young people receive about higher education and its different forms; ensuring that school-university links are developed for all schools; and planning joint activities on a more regular basis.

In addition, funding for carefully targeted mentoring, including academic mentoring, needs to be provided to keep young people in education longer and to support students from non-traditional backgrounds through higher education, while parents and communities need to be involved in universities' outreach activities to encourage and sustain interest in higher education. For the time being, contextual data about student backgrounds should be used as part of the toolbox for making admissions decisions, especially at highly selective universities.

Research priorities

Meanwhile, policy makers and institutional leaders need access to more sophisticated research and datasets if they are to monitor performance and act to enhance equity in all its manifestations. Data sources are relatively rich in both countries, but one of the major challenges lies in linking up different data sets. There is an even bigger challenge when comparing counties, as can be seen from the incommensurability of some of the data presented here.

Research into higher education participation needs to draw on qualitative as well as quantitative data, and to utilise a range of theories from across the disciplines. It should also be clear from what we have said earlier that research into higher education participation and progression requires the involvement of researchers who are interested in schools as well as higher education. More research on the relative effectiveness of different approaches to widening participation and ensuring fair access is also needed. Including, for example, studies of what sort of outreach activities are most effective with different groups.

Last but not least, we also need more alternative and critical perspectives that question the assumptions underlying many widening participation activities (Southgate & Bennett, 2014). However, although we would like to see more alternatives to traditional university education as advocated by its critics, that will take time. Knowledges and pedagogies currently excluded from or marginalised in the academy certainly need to be given greater prominence. But we should surely not accept that in the meantime certain groups will be effectively excluded from higher education. We need to improve access to what exists *and* change what people gain access to. In our view, social justice demands both.

Acknowledgements

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