Student Diversity = Student Success

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Introduction

European higher education (HE) is going through a series of profound structural changes. The Bologna Process reaches into all parts of the European Union (EU) and beyond, bringing convergence in the structure of HE, and the influence of the Lisbon Strategy places an obligation on the HE sector to recognise its role in supporting economic growth. We argue that these conditions are conducive to a fresh look at widening participation (WP) and student diversity on the grounds of 'business' benefit to individual higher education institutions (HEIs). While concepts of business benefit may not sit comfortably with the commonly held ethos and values of HE, we demonstrate how such an approach may be in the best interests of students and may indeed promote greater success for all students while at the same time providing benefits to the individual HEI. We propose this as a new approach to WP that moves beyond (without in any way demeaning) ethical and social rationales, providing strong drivers for institutions to engage more fully with a WP agenda and to value and promote student diversity.

The European Context

The European Commission has for a long time taken a holistic approach to education that appreciates its direct and indirect links to the labour market. The Janne Report (1973) noted that the Treaty of Rome demonstrates '"awareness" of the fact that the economic…needs for training are not separable from the education system in general' (Janne, 1973, p 11). More recently, work on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning represents a significant move towards a single, unified system of education which does not distinguish between the vocational and the academic. Although separate processes are in place for the harmonisation of Vocation Education and Training (VET) (the Copenhagen Process) and higher education (the Bologna Process) both stress the need for integration. For example the Helsinki Communique (2006) states that 'VET systems should, as part of flexible educational pathways, increasingly enable progression… especially from VET to higher education'. Furthermore, both processes are increasingly aligned to the Lisbon Strategy, aimed at promoting economic growth across the EU. As such, both general and vocational education policies seek to promote wealth through the development of knowledge, thus the distinction between the two is blurred.

A second trend in European educational policy development is an emphasis on diversity within education for economic benefit. A communication from the Commission in relation to the Lisbon Strategy states: 'Mobilising all Europe's brain power …will require much more diversity than hitherto with respect to target groups, teaching modes, entry and exit points, the mix of disciplines and competencies in curricula' (European Commission, 2005). This thinking is reflected in the Welcome Speech to the Bologna Process 5th Ministerial Conference: 'Universities should modernise the content of their curricula…and open up to new types of learners, business and society at large.' (Figel, 2007)

Common to both these trends is a requirement that the higher education sector manage a significant increase in the diversity of its student body. The convergence of VET and general education implies that those applying to higher education will have a diversity of educational backgrounds and HEIs can no longer rely on traditional assumptions about a student's level of preparation for academic study. Furthermore, along with the increased emphasis on diversity, HEIs are being called on to broaden the scope of their curriculum offerings and perceived student markets.

These changes will result in a greater diversity among the student population in Europe and a consequent need for HEIs to embrace and manage student diversity. Thus far the benefits of student diversity for the (European) economy as a whole have been articulated and the benefits to individual students have been well established through the widening access/WP literature. These benefits range from the psychological to the material. Linden West proposes that higher education may allow participants to overcome 'feelings of marginalisation, meaninglessness and inauthenticity' (West, 1996:10) and Barbara Merrill points to similar benefits in terms of increased confidence and stronger identity (Merrill, 1999:118), a finding very much echoed in Marion Bowl's study (Bowl, 2003). Other studies have pointed to the financial benefits that a degree brings over a lifetime of earnings (see PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005 for a UK example) though it is acknowledged that returns may be less for older students and those from groups marginalised in society. However, very little has been done to identify the benefits to higher education institutions of WP and student diversity. Given the autonomy of HEIs in many parts of the EU and the financial risks to which they are exposed, recognition of these benefits is critical. Without a clear understanding of these benefits there is a risk that work to increase and support diversity will rely on the good will of institutions. Within a system of higher education that is increasingly marketised, financial pressures may drive efforts based solely on good will to the margins.

The Study

A UK-wide study funded by the UK's Higher Education Academy investigated whether a business case could be made within individual HEIs for embedding approaches to WP and managing student diversity. The study took place between July 2006 and March 2007 and comprised a literature review to draw together existing evidence, and case studies of eight HEIs across the UK chosen to represent different geographic areas, institutional types and approaches to WP and student diversity. Published material from each case study institution, particularly strategic and policy documents was analysed to give an overview of the institution and its approach to WP and student diversity. The research team also carried out site visits in each of the case study institutions for interviews and to record observations. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with different internal stakeholders (including students) in each of the case study institutions. These interviews included a mixture of one-to-one and focus group sessions. Altogether 100 individuals were interviewed.

Widening Participation, Diversity and the Business Case

Over the last fifteen years, a 'diversity discourse' has emerged in the USA (Thomas, 1990) and the UK (Kandola and Fullerton, 1994; Institute of Personnel and Development, 1996) which claims to recognise broader dimensions of inequality than those within the scope of standard equal opportunities policies. Major criticisms of the 'equal opportunities' approach are that it fails to recognise the heterogeneity of target groups and that the articulated list of 'groups' is by no means exhaustive (Kandola and Fullerton, 1994). It may also lead to a deficit model which promotes assimilation rather than celebrating and valuing diversity (Wilson and Iles, 1996). Parallels may be drawn with WP policy, which also frequently has a 'group' focus (Gorard et al, 2006; Greenbank, 2006; Thomas, 2001) and has been criticised on the grounds that it may promote some level of deficit discourse and/or 'victim-blaming' (Billingham, 2006; Jones and Thomas, 2005; Greenbank, 2006).

Alongside the paradigm shift from 'equal opportunities' to 'diversity' (Wilson and Iles, 1996) has been a strengthening recognition that organisations benefit from the diversity among their staff. Where organisations adopted equal opportunity practices in response to external drivers such as legislative requirements or notions of social justice, they have embraced diversity because it provides internal business benefit to the organisation (Kirton and Greene, 2000). Promoting and managing diversity is thus an investment (Littlefield 1995) and is of strategic and central importance (Kandola and Fullerton, 1994).

However, while business case arguments are relatively well developed in relation to diversity in the human resources of organisations, the benefits arising from customer or client diversity are less recognised. About the diversity of students within higher education institutions (arguably a specific case of customer diversity) there is little in the literature and virtually nothing originating in the UK. The most relevant recent discussions concern the effectiveness of different organisational models for successful WP (Thomas et al, 2005; Layer, 2005). These touch on the contrasts between peripheral and embedded approaches to WP, and those that promote a 'join the club' model (Layer, 2005) rather than valuing diversity in a more 'transformative' paradigm (Jones and Thomas, 2005). The link between WP and student diversity is not a simple one. WP policies do not necessarily result in greater student diversity, nor is student diversity always the result of WP. Where WP policy (particularly at the institutional level) targets, for example, high achieving young people from working-class backgrounds the diversity of the student body may not be increased in any meaningful way. These young people have been 'skimmed' (Coates and Adnett, 2003) or 'cherry-picked' (SFEFC/SHEFC, 2005) and may already have attributes in common with the 'traditional' middle-class student body which they are encouraged to emphasise at the expense of their 'working-classness' (Reay, 2001; Archer and Hutchings, 2001). This suggests a model of 'assimilation' rather than one which values diversity.

On the other hand, as outlined above, greater student diversity may result from other, non-WP policies such as employer engagement, an extension of the definition of the University (for example conferring degree-awarding powers on technical, vocational or specialist colleges) or the requirement of higher education qualifications for para-professionals. The diversity that this creates may however be confined only to certain 'strata' of the HE sector (Trow, 1987).

A shift in thinking is thus required if the growing diversity of the student body is to be managed across the whole of the higher education sector and currently under-represented groups are not to be disadvantaged or marginalised within the system. A new approach and policy language is required that goes beyond current understandings of WP to considering how a diversity of students can be welcomed, valued and perceived contributing to the core 'business' of higher education institutions.

Benefits of Student Diversity

The study found much evidence that the benefits of their work are self-evident on ethical principles to WP practitioners. Issues of corporate social responsibility and social justice were common to all of the case study institutions and cut across all groups of staff in all types of institutions. However, concepts of corporate social responsibility were understood in a sophisticated way, often linked to

such bottom-line issues as reputation, recruitment, market niche and mission commitment. A strong belief in the requirement to serve the needs of their local and regional communities was a dominant theme in the interviews, discussed both in ethical and in practical (e.g. student recruitment) terms. Three of the institutions saw themselves as 'leaders' in WP and student diversity and expressed a need to preserve this reputation both because of its effect on other organisations (e.g. 'feeder' FE Colleges) or because not to do so would be to 'cut(ting) their own throats' in recruiting students from their local communities.

Given the status of most HEIs as public sector organisations, ethical drivers for diversity take on an internal as well as external role in allowing the institution to fulfill its mission and to meet the expectations of its public funders. In the case of student diversity within higher education, internal and external drivers cannot be as clearly separated as the general literature on diversity suggests. Strongly held beliefs in social justice drove engagement in WP across all case study institutions, so that diversity was sometimes pursued in spite of concerns about the impact on the 'bottom line' interests of the institution. Where there was some appreciation of the business benefits of student diversity, ethical and 'social' considerations added genuine weight to these. The literature suggests a range of other benefits of WP and student diversity: increasing student numbers; 'tapping the pool of talent'; improving teaching and learning; generating new roles and markets and/or providing access to new funding streams; and complying with legislation in order to avoid litigation. The case study interviews provided an opportunity to test the hypothesis that these would be the main drivers for engaging in WP, and that the resulting benefits (or risks avoided) might be recognised and articulated. As expected, the potential benefits of student diversity were given different priority by different institutions, linked largely to their history, mission and educational character. To a lesser degree there were differences between different internal 'stakeholders' (i.e. categories of staff) in how benefits were perceived. However, increasing student numbers, 'tapping the pool of talent' and improving teaching and learning appeared to dominate overall, though interpreted differently in each institution. Only the need to avoid litigation arising from non-compliance with anti-discrimination legislation was absent from the narratives. This was a surprising finding, given the recent strengthening of anti-discrimination legislation in the UK placing a 'duty to promote equality' on all public bodies.

Student recruitment

The link between WP and student recruitment is by no means an unproblematic one. Although it has been proposed that 'Where an HEI has a shortfall in demand for places it is likely to be more active in widening participation' (Higher Education Consultancy Group and the National Centre for Social Research, 2003, p 45), the financial costs of recruiting, supporting and retaining students from

underrepresented groups may limit or even outweigh the financial or other benefits gained through the additional recruitment (NAO, 2002; Greenbank, 2006).

In this study, institutions that predominantly 'recruited' rather than 'selected' students were more likely to identify a link between WP and recruitment. As one senior manager remarked, 'we probably wouldn't survive without a non-traditional base'. However even in institutions with high levels of recruitment there was an understanding among the senior management that demographic change and the changing nature of higher education meant that current levels of recruitment could not be guaranteed from traditional 'markets'. There was also evidence of variation at departmental level in how WP was viewed in relation to student recruitment. For example, one mathematics lecturer spoke of the need to maintain the viability of the subject by attracting more students into the discipline, the implication being that WP would deliver the required numbers.

Student recruitment cuts to the heart of the financial viability of an institution and therefore is potentially a very strong driver for WP among institutions struggling to enroll students. Conversely, the incentives to engage in WP may be weaker for institutions that find it easier to recruit (Powney, 2002). There is thus some potential for 'a stratified higher education system, with no change occurring in some institutions while others accommodate all the challenges of new student cohorts.' (Gorard et al, 2006, p 120, see also Ayalon and Yogev, 2006) The study found that institutions with more diverse student bodies were investing heavily in student support services because: there is an expectation of a lack of academic preparation (Student support staff, 'recruiting' institution) and that staff were employing broader and more time consuming methods of teaching and learning because: by using traditional methods you are just wasting your time (Student support staff, 'recruiting' institution)

Parker et al (2005) found that staff members committed to WP create an extended 'unofficial' curriculum using their own time and resources. Furthermore, institutions employing WP as a means of student recruitment appeared to run higher risks, with risks including lower rates of retention, risks to reputation and concerns about maintaining standards. This echoes Beck's proposal that within society risks 'adhere to the class pattern' and that 'wealth accumulates at the top, risks at the bottom' (Beck, 1992, p 35). Even where student diversity was not the direct result of WP policy but of a vocational/professional mission, risks still appeared to follow student diversity, with those institutions secure in their levels of recruitment from traditional groups not yet feeling the 'chill wind' of change (Senior manager, 'selecting' institution).

While not all HEIs are interested in increasing student numbers, many are keen to ensure a steady stream of 'talented' applicants. There is a growing realisation that 'talent' is not restricted to certain

sections of society (Ayalon and Yogev, 2006) or even to standard proxy-measures of potential such as school achievement (Greenbank, 2006). As one senior manager in a 'selecting' institution stated:

We want talent. We believe we're missing talent if we don't go into those areas [deprived communities]

However the same manager admitted that 'this is not a big, big driver for [us]'. While the need not to miss out on 'talent' is clearly of importance, it does not have the same direct impact on institutional survival as a drive to increase or maintain student numbers.

For courses of HE that offer preparation for a profession, the drive to recruit 'talent' from diverse communities may be amplified by a drive for diversity within that profession, while still maintaining a strong emphasis on high standards (Langlands, 2005). In practical terms this may result in additional funding streams becoming available to create incentives for such work, e.g. the Aimhigher Healthcare strand in England. In addition, institutions may find opportunities to play out their 'social' mission by working with the public sector to promote diversity in professions such as medicine (Jones and Thomas, 2005).

Teaching, Learning and the Student Experience

An understanding of the benefits of diversity for the academic and social experience of students is better developed in the North American literature, where there are arguably stronger social and political drivers for a robust approach to managing diversity than in the UK. However an initial comparison of the relevant literature from both the UK and North America demonstrates that there is little crossover and virtually no mention of US 'college diversity' research in the UK 'widening participation' literature and vice versa. This is a missed opportunity, particularly for the UK, as there is a growing body of work in North America that demonstrates quantifiable benefits to students of a well-managed diverse student environment. Benefits include positive impact on a range of learning outcomes (Gurin et al, 2002), preparation for future employment (Baron et al, 2007) and meeting basic needs of all students so that they can thrive academically (Higbee et al, 2007). This supports assertions made in the UK literature that diversity may 'enrich' the learning experience (Gorard et al, 2006:115). Studies in the UK have tended to focus on the impact of curriculum adaptation and changed approaches to student support rather than the direct benefits of diversity, concluding generally that such adaptations tend to have positive impacts on all students (Powney, 2002; Warren, 2002). This has interesting parallels with the research around Universal Instructional Design in the US and Canada (Pliner and Johnson, 2004; Higbee et al, 2004).

The study found that many members of HEI staff believe that diversity has a positive impact on students and can cite supporting anecdotal evidence:

I think it enhances and enriches learning experience for all students…it is anecdotal evidence, like students giving feedback. Examples might be mature students in the same groups as younger students and eventually how they both benefit from both sides of what they can offer to the group and get peer support. That has often been said to me. (Academic staff)

The main benefit is that it is 'good for' students to mix with diverse peers. In the case of professional or vocational courses of higher education, it was also suggested that a diverse student body allows individual students to develop their 'professional identity' and to prepare better for work in a diverse society. Indeed the diverse and 'global' nature of the student body in the context of a 'global society' was strongly used by one institution as a unique selling point in the recruitment of students, and there were hints of this in another institution. Academic staff reported benefits to themselves of working with a more diverse group of students. Some staff felt that the experience had contributed to their own professional development and that as a result they were better educators.

Both the case study interviews and the UK literature pointed to significant benefits to be gained from a diverse student population and positive approaches to managing diversity. Less clear was whether these benefits currently constitute a genuine driver for student diversity in all its aspects, or whether they are merely unintended consequences. However literature from the US (such as Hurtado, 2001 and Higbee et al, 2007) provides much clearer evidence of the recognition of other benefits to learning, teaching and the student experience.

There is potential to develop stronger drivers for engagement in WP activities by HEIs and more sophisticated approaches to increasing and managing student diversity. From a European perspective this is timely given the twin themes of the convergence of vocational and academic education and a call for student diversity based on economic rationales. The ability to work in a diverse environment is a skill increasingly required in the modern workforce. HEIs are concerned with linking students to the labour market – either directly through specific programmes of vocational higher learning (including learning in the workplace) or indirectly through a concern with the future employability of their students. Thus the ability to provide learning enriched by a diverse environment may prove attractive both to students undertaking their initial education and employers looking to Universities for the professional development of their staff. Some HEIs are already promoting their diversity as a unique selling point to potential students, though in practice this tends to focus on more visible aspects such as ethnic diversity.

Conclusions

In 2000 the founder of the EAN, Maggie Woodrow, wrote:

…whatever widening participation strategies are used by HEIs, they will make little progress towards social inclusion unless they can effectively challenge traditional approaches to admissions and to the conventional culture of higher education (Woodrow, 2000)

Challenging the 'conventional culture' is at the heart of a managing diversity approach. It entails a critical examination of institutional policies and practices and a questioning of underlying assumptions. For HEIs this may mean questioning whether the status quo assumes that students will have particular characteristics or backgrounds that are not directly linked to their intellectual potential.

The implications of change could and should affect every aspect of an HEI's operation. There will be costs involved, risks to face and barriers to overcome but there are also benefits to be gained. The essence of a business case is the weighing up of costs and benefits, but this can only be done if they are clearly identified and understood. Thus far the majority of the literature dealing with the implications for HEIs of increasing student diversity has concentrated on the costs (JM Consulting Ltd, 2004; NAO, 2002; Boxall et al, 2002) without balancing this with the potential benefits.

Significant changes are taking place within the higher education sector in Europe. A harmonisation with vocational education has the potential to bring in new groups of students from different backgrounds and with different expectations; a stronger push on diversity through the Bologna Process underlines the importance of WP; and a focus on HE involvement in workforce development (particularly in the UK) is challenging the status quo. Increased student diversity across the higher education sector is occurring regardless of whether individual institutions consciously choose to pursue it as a strategy. Though associated costs are well articulated, thus far the institutional benefits have not been fully recognised. WP – as a holistic, embedded strategy – now has an opportunity to move into the mainstream on the back of these changes through a sophisticated weighing up of both financial and 'social' benefits and costs.

At the heart of the business case for diversity is the notion of student success – ensuring recruitment is balanced by considerations of matching the students to the best program of study, providing a curriculum that promotes success for all students, offering universal services that meet the needs of all with specialist services on an individual level, and above all recognising and building on the benefits of a diverse student body for the student experience itself. HEIs have always competed for students on the basis of the quality of the student experience and, hand in hand with the

opportunities to attract more students (whether to achieve 'talent' or merely to increase numbers) this suggests a powerful combination of benefits for individual institutions. Student diversity is no longer a duty, it is big business.

Notes

See Archer et al, 2003 and Archer & Hutchings, 2000, for a discussion of Beck's arguments about risk in relation to individuals' views of higher education.

Acknowledgements

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