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Supporting part-time learners in higher education: Equalities and inequalities[i]

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions are working in times of change, including a changing student body, changing demographics, and the challenges of globalization. In the UK and many Western countries, part-time enrolments in universities are expected to rise at a much faster rate than full-time, with the mix between part-time and full-time shifting substantially. Whilst policies and practices have often denied opportunities to part-time learners, the changing landscape of UK higher education – with many similarities to the landscapes in much of the developed world – are opening more flexible opportunities to participate in higher education. However, those possibilities are too often marginal, with full-time and younger learners dominating the discourses and practices of higher education institutions. This paper will discuss ways of supporting academic learning for diverse groups of part-time learners, showing how pedagogic approaches can be developed that enhance and support more flexible and effective learning. Institutions face particular challenges in ensuring that the voices of diverse groups of students are heard. This article will argue that to enhance social inclusion, institutions need to 'speak' to mature students and part-time students – and many currently do not. However, it will conclude that there are pedagogic approaches which enable more inclusive practices in higher education to be mainstreamed.

Keywords: equalities; higher education; part-time; pedagogy; policies; social inclusion

Introduction

Higher education institutions are working in times of change, including a changing study body, changing demographics, developments in technologies, and the challenges of internationalisation and globalisation. In the UK and many 'developed' countries, including Australia, North America and Japan, part-time enrolments are expected to rise at a much faster rate than full-time, with the mix between part-time and full-time students shifting substantially. As a report by Universities UK showed (Ramsden and Brown, 2008), this will also change the demographics of universities, as the majority of entrants to part-time undergraduate degrees are over the age of 30, and are more likely to be women.

Education, including higher education, is often promoted in the name of widening access, social mobility and social inclusion. However, it can become a means of oppression, continually re-creating gendered, social class and other divisions and perpetuating inequalities. Mapping the connections between higher education and social inclusion remain under-theorised (see e.g. Jackson, 2011) in part because, like education itself, social inclusion is a contested territory. Like social justice (Fraser and Honneth, 2003), social inclusion (and its counterpart, social exclusion) is also about the politics of (mis)recognition:

> intimately tied to culture, particularly social patterns of misrepresentation, interpretation and communication, that result in cultural domination, invisibility and disrespect (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 18).

Marginalised groups can become excluded and silenced, leading to the oppression of Others, or to a need to play by the rules of those in power (North, 2006). To be 'equal' or included, for example, may mean having to become part of a dominant group, to move from the 'other' to the 'One'. Equity and inclusion are often located in the realm of power, privilege and oppression.

Whilst discourses of choice abound in discourses of higher education, 'choice' is illusory and the unequal participation of non-traditional students in education is indicative of more structural social and/or institutional exclusion, even if it appears to be traceable to individual choice (Voigt, 2007). What choices are achievable and thinkable are shaped by structural location and identities (Archer, 2007: 646), as well as by the discourses and practices of the academy (Jackson, 2004). Research on widening educational participation in higher education has shown that access to learning must be understood in relation to deeply embedded relations of inequality that operate at multiple levels (Burke and Jackson, 2007). Although there is a dominant policy language about widening participation, justified in relation to social equity and inclusion (Jackson, 2011), critics have argued that widening participation policies will only work to increase participation amongst the same groups who have historically always benefited from (higher) education and is likely to increase the gap between middle class access and working class exclusion (Archer 2007). As Louise Archer (2007) has shown, the causes

and patterns of unequal participation are discursively separated from structures and practices that ensure inequalities, with non-traditional groups pathologised and blamed for (seemingly) not participating in learning (2007:640).

Drawing on current research, the article will discuss ways of supporting academic learning for diverse groups of learners, outlining some of the complex mix of factors which combine to produce the inequalities often faced by learners who are studying part-time. It will go on to argue that there are several inter-related ways to respond to change through developing pedagogic approaches that enhance more flexible learning and teaching, supporting all students in higher education, including those studying part-time.

The article will explore social (in)justice and higher education, outlining some of the expectations and experiences that 'non-traditional' students bring to higher education, including older students studying part-time. It will go on to show how higher education institutions need to adapt to changing learning landscapes, and demonstrate ways in which university teachers can adapt and change their pedagogic approaches, enabling students to facilitate and negotiate active and effective learning. However, it will begin by examining some recent higher education policies in the UK and discussing the implications for part-time students.

Policies

Although this article will focus on recent policies in the UK, the article will have implications beyond these boundaries, as the policy thrust is not dissimilar to other countries in the developed world (World Bank, 2003). For example, like the UK, in Australia policies of lifelong learning (including higher education) have given little consideration to the relationship between gender and the knowledge-economy and even less concern regarding social class, race and ethnicity (Webb et al, 2006). Watson has concluded that Australia has failed to produce a society of individuals who are motivated to learn and have the capacity to do so (Watson, 2004). This is exacerbated by political decisions and policy changes.

In examining some key UK policies over the past five years, and their effects, I shall begin with the sudden announcement in 2007 of a new policy in England which meant that state funding was no longer available from the Higher Education Funding Council for England for students studying for an equivalent or lower level qualification than one which is already held. There are substantial numbers of students studying at undergraduate level who are completing certificates or other qualifications at level 4, a significant number of whom already hold higher education qualifications, but who are re-skilling for a return to a changing workplace. This particularly affects those who have taken a break from work, normally for caring responsibilities and normally women. This has had the biggest impact on mature students who want to retrain, including those who may have been out of the job market for a while.

Despite the introduction of this policy, the following year the government commissioned a report specifically to consider the growth in part-time students. The

specific brief was about the development of higher level skills for employment, with recognition that the majority of these skills, developed throughout a working life time, will be acquired on a part-time basis. Whilst the report could have outlined ways in which emerging part-time learner cohorts might use education as a vehicle for social mobility, instead a focus on the knowledge economy emerges. The report concludes:

> In the rapidly changing social and economic world, the need to update and acquire new skills through a working lifetime will become ever more apparent. The demand from employers and learners, both full-time and part-time and for more flexible ways of working will grow. The funding of part-time study, measures of success and new delivery modes are the keys to making the HE sector fit for the future. If we continue to do what we have always done in relation to part-time study we will get what we always got - and we will not achieve our place in the knowledge economy (King, 2008: 12).

Competitive participation in the global knowledge economy became a central focus in successive government's strategies for higher education. In November 2009, the then Labour government published *Higher Ambitions - the future of universities in a knowledge economy.* This set a framework for how universities can remain world class, whilst providing the nation with the high level skills needed to remain competitive in a global knowledge economy. There was an emphasis on universities making bigger contributions to economic recovery and growth, building partnerships with business and industry. Priority was to be given to programmes that met the need for key sectors identified in the government's strategy for new jobs in new industries.

A clear message was developed about the need for flexibility of provision to achieve the objectives of *Higher Ambitions*, including increasing the participation of part-time students. In the Forward, Peter Mandelson - then Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills - stated:

> the next phase of expansion in higher education will hinge on providing opportunities for different types of people to study in a wider range of ways than in the past. The focus will therefore be on a greater diversity of models of learning: part-time, work-based, foundation degrees, and studying whilst at home. (Mandelson, 2009: p4).

Also in 2009, the then Labour government published *Skills for growth: The national skills strategy.* This continued the theme of *Higher Ambitions,* showing the development of skills as a key part of economic recovery. The publication called for the twin objectives of a greater focus on the skills required for the development of a knowledge economy, and wider and more flexible access to skills development, including through more opportunities to study part-time.

The new coalition government in the UK has continued an interest in skills for the knowledge economy, and in part-time students. Published in 2010, and not specifically aimed at higher education, *Skills for Sustainable Growth* has a clear focus on skills, vocational education and training, and employer needs. As Vince Cable, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and John Hayes, Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, state:

> Skills are vital to our future and improving skills is essential to building sustainable growth and stronger communities. A skilled workforce is necessary to stimulate the private-sector growth that will bring new jobs and new prosperity for people all over this country (Cable and Hayes, 2010: 4).

Commissioned under the previous Labour government, but published in 2010 under the new coalition government, came the Browne report, a review of higher education funding and student finance: *Securing a sustainable future for higher education.* For the first time in higher education policy, it argued that part-time students should be treated the same as full-time students for the costs of learning so that a wide range of people could access higher education in ways convenient to them. As the report argued:

> the benefits of higher education are not reserved for those who study full time. Already, close to 40% of undergraduate students in English higher education institutions choose to study part time. Some are young students who opt for part time study over full time study; most are older students who are returning to education after a period in work or looking after children; many of them did not follow the typical route through school, and higher education provides them with a 'second chance'. As economic growth relies more on people with high level skills, it is likely to be through part time rather than full time study that people already in the workforce will be able to retrain and prepare themselves for work in new industries (Browne, 2010: 27).

The most recent (2011) White paper sets out details of the coalition's policies regarding higher education. Whilst it picked up some of the recommendations of Browne, especially with regard to part-time students, it remains reliant on a discourse of marketisation, individualism and the development of skills. At the same time, it places an emphasis on having *Students at the heart of the system*, arguing for greater diversity of provision.

In the next section, I shall outline some of the demographic changes that will impact on higher education, considering how demographic changes and policy changes impact each other, and the implications for supporting part-time students in higher education.

Considering change

This article primarily focuses on part-time undergraduate students, as this is a key area of growth in higher education. Although part-time postgraduate enrolments are increasing, and are expected to continue to increase, this is at a slower rate than full-time. The same is also true for international students (Ramsden and Brown, 2008), who have a higher full-time growth rate. Regardless of level, or country of origin, the focus on part-time students is important, as a far higher proportion of part-time provision compared with full-time is aimed at meeting the skills needs of employers and the economy which, as I show above, is central to much state policy. Although I have focused on UK policies in the section above, as I have indicated this has wider implications as much of the developed world is also predominated by a continuing interest in the links between (higher) education and global knowledge economy (Archer et al, 2003).

Around half a million students in the UK are currently studying part-time. Whilst there is no typical part-time student, the vast majority of students studying part-time are white, female, mature and already hold vocational qualifications (Callender *et al* 2010). Part-time study is an important way in which higher education can become accessible to those who also wish to, or need to, earn whilst they learn, and to those with caring responsibilities, the vast majority of whom are women. There are some signs that the broader population gender gap is projected to narrow slightly over the next 20 years, with a slight increase in the proportion of females at age 18. Overall, the male population is projected to increase by 0.9% and the female population by 1.4% (Ramsden and Brown, 2008). As Ramsden and Brown (2008: 26) show, levels of inward migration into the UK over the next 20 years is one of the key uncertainties in the projection of higher education student numbers, with net inward migration, principally economic migration, into rich western countries likely to increase substantially over the next 20 years, with a potential resultant impact on the demand for higher education.

With Browne (and the subsequent White paper) indicating that part-time students should be treated the same as full-time, financial considerations – including the need to undertake paid work whilst at university - could reduce overall full-time undergraduate numbers more entrants may decide to study part-time rather than full-time. For many part-time students, full-time study is not an option, as there is a real financial need to study part-time whilst continuing to work (Jackson, 2003). Students in lower socio-economic groups are more likely not to enter university because of concerns about finances. Cost is the main reason why people who are offered places in higher education do not take them up, with 40% of potential students put off by cost, and 32% put off by the prospect of incurring debt (Attwood, 2009). It is too early to say whether recent changes in England to student loans and to the cost of undertaking degrees, which will be implemented in 2012/13, will have beneficial or adverse effects.

Whilst there are things we do not know, we do know that things are likely to get tougher in English universities, with direct state funding all but ending for universities to teach undergraduates. Instead, the government will be funding loans for undergraduate

students to study at university, proving they do not already have an equivalent level qualification. The government also wants to see more degrees completed over two years rather than three as a way of easing the funding crisis and to broaden education to a wider range of students, with a focus on vocational degrees both to enhance the economy and social mobility. Although there are indications that increasingly diverse groups of students have been applying for university, the introduction of high fees, coupled with student loans, may reverse this trend. Universities are, then, working in times of change. This includes changing demographics and a changing student body; internationalisation and globalisation; changing meanings of skills and vocationalism; and – with the 2011 White paper - new funding regimes, a changing focus on the student experience, and increased demands for flexibility in universities.

Part-time study is important for the development of a global knowledge economy so important to politicians, making a significant contribution to the continuous updating of skills in a globally competitive market. Research commissioned by Universities UK (Ramsden, 2006) stresses the importance of part-time higher education in meeting the needs of Government and employers. Indeed three-quarters of all undergraduates taking vocational and professional qualifications study part-time. The research reports that part-time higher education is a significant element in the continuing growth of the sector and plays a central role in meeting Government objectives such as the extension of higher-level skills, widening participation, and lifelong learning. It concludes that it can continue to do so, but only if properly supported.

As Professor Drummond Bone, then President of Universities UK, has stated:

> The Government wants to see the extension of higher-level skills, wider participation in higher education and lifelong learning; employers require continuous updating of skills in a globally competitive economy. … (P)art-time provision goes some considerable way to meeting those demands. It's crucial that this provision is maintained and built upon – we must be careful not to reduce the opportunities for those for whom part-time study is the only choice (Bone, 2006).

Part-time study is important not just to government and the economy, and for those re-training or upskilling (Jackson and Jamieson, 2009), but also for the development of educational opportunities for non-traditional learners participating for the first time in higher education. Part-time students are far more diverse than full-time students in their motivations to study, as well as in their age, socio-economic background and prior educational experiences. In the section that follows, I demonstrate how educators can develop opportunities for part-time learners. I argue that they can use the demands for flexibility to enhance learning and teaching in universities to adapt their pedagogic approaches, paying attention both to the equalities and inequalities faced by part-time students in higher education.

Adapting pedagogic approaches

Institutions face particular challenges in ensuring that the voices of diverse groups of students are heard. The institution needs to 'speak' to mature students and part-time students – and many currently do not. There are some basic ways in which this could start to happen. For example, in order to attract part-time and/or mature learners, or more learners from disadvantaged groups, institutions could start by looking at their publicity and prospectus. What images are being projected? What are images and text saying about the ethos and the culture of the institution? Universities could also develop more flexible entry requirements and publish possibilities for non-traditional learners. The accreditation of prior experiential learning, for example, would contribute to the positive recognition of the experiences and achievements that older learners have already acquired. Increasing ways to work with diverse groups of students may also mean reaching out to community based students as well as campus based, for example university programmes aimed at mothers in low participation neighbourhoods that are run in children's centres. However, there is a great deal more that can be done. Here I want to consider ways in which pedagogic approaches can be adapted and changed to include diverse groups of students.

In his influential book, *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity*, Basil Bernstein states:

> ..we can ask about the acoustic of the school. Whose voice is heard? Who is speaking? Who is hailed by this voice? For whom is it familiar? (Bernstein, 1996, p7)

It is equally important to ask about the acoustics of universities. For too many students, there is little that is familiar in the acoustics that confront them (Jackson, 2004). They need to recognise something of their current and potential selves both in their choice of institutions and in their participation within the institution of their choice. They need to recognise that they are learners (and indeed that they have things to teach, to which I return below). Learner identities are fluid, intersected and contested, and there are complex ways in which people come to understand themselves as 'learners', or 'non-learners' (Burke and Jackson, 2007). For example, working-class women learners often construct themselves as undeserving of higher education (Reay, 2003; Reay *et al* 2001), and part-time learners in particular have multiple identities which they bring with them into the classroom. Identities are influenced by gender, age, past

educational experiences or attainment, social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and perceptions of their skills and abilities.

Bernstein suggests that for disadvantaged groups to become part of an effective educational democracy, three 'rights' must be institutionalised (Bernstein, 1996, p6/7):

- the right of individual enhancement
- the right to be included socially, intellectually, culturally and personally
- and the right to participate in discourse, practice and procedures.

Although Bernstein was writing about (full-time) learners in schools, I am interested in exploring these rights with regard to part-time students in higher education. As I indicated above, there is also an additional right that is essential for part-time students, the right to funding and equitable treatment. Without this, flexible provision for part-time students cannot be enhanced, a right for which institutions such as my own – which specialises working with part-time and mature students – has had to continually battle with successive governments. This right has been continuously denied part-time students, although the most recent White paper discussed above is at least in part addressing these issues.

As I have shown elsewhere (Jackson, 2004) the first right, that of individual enhancement, is important but problematic. A right for individual enhancement does not bring structural change for all, nor guarantee equality of opportunity or of outcome. Indeed, the enhancement of individual rights for some might well marginalise others. All institutions have some individuals and groups claiming privileges over others and, in many institutions, the right of individual enhancement for full-time students can well mean that part-time students are relegated to the spaces in between. However, Bernstein does say that this right depends on confidence, for "without confidence it is difficult to act" (Bernstein, 1996, p7). Part-time students can all too often feel a lack of confidence in institutions which revolve around their full-time learners. Confidence is certainly an issue for those whose voices are not heard in universities and, as Bernstein states, individual enhancement depends on the confidence to have reached critical understanding; the confidence to consider new possibilities; and the confidence to act (see Bernstein, 1996, p7).

The second right - to be included socially, intellectually, culturally and personally - can be difficult for part-time students. For example, part-time learners are not always able to participate in the social life of an institution due to the many competing demands

on their time; and the culture of the institution is likely to be geared towards full-time students, and in particular full-time younger students living away from home. In particular, those part-time and mature students returning to study or who are first time older learners – for example women who have been caring for children or others as discussed above – may find that their range of experiences are not valued in the classroom, and they can be dismissed as not as intellectually able as those with a more conventional route into higher education.

The third right is particularly important: the right to participate in discourse, practice and procedures. It is, says Bernstein, "the right to participate in the construction, maintenance and transformation of orders" (Bernstein, 1996, p7). Bernstein has shown that there are inequalities in the orientation, distribution and transmission of pedagogic knowledge (Bernstein, 1996, p5). I will go on to examine the constructions and prioritising of particular forms of pedagogic knowledge within higher education. In particular, I am interesting in questions such as what counts as knowledge within the academy, and who has the power to name it? Who claims ownership of knowledge and why is this accepted? Who has the power to decide what is distributed, and to whom, and how it is transmitted?

In much university teaching, there remains an assumption that lecturers are the possessors of knowledge which is to be imparted to students, and that this happens in neutral, impartial and objective ways. However, learning is about making meaning, and learners can experience the same teaching in very different ways. Students (as well as teachers) are part of complex social, cultural, political, ideological and personal circumstances, and current experiences of learning will depend in part on previous ones, as well as on age, gender, social class, culture, ethnicity, varying abilities and more. As Elizabeth Ellsworth has shown, learners need to be enabled to "locate the experience of the learning self as a self not in compliance but in transition and in motion towards previously unknown ways of thinking and being in the world" (Ellsworth, 2005: 16). This type of pedagogic approach is not without its challenges. For example, teachers do not always recognise or value the experiences that students bring with them, dismissing them as irrelevant (see Jackson, 2004). Conversely, discourses of academics as possessors of knowledge - especially if coupled with constructions of social class - are so embedded that some students find it difficult to question or challenge them.

One way to facilitate the success of part-time learners in higher education is to enable them to recognise themselves *as* academic. To do this, teachers need to consider a range of ways to encourage active and participatory learning, and to make subjects

relevant to the lives of their students. All learners have valuable experiences which they bring with them into the classroom, and that part-time students need to be able not just to recognise but to have valued the range of experiences they are currently encountering, as well as those already encountered. Part-time learners have a wide range of experiences and transferable skills. It is important that they recognise this of themselves, and that both teachers and other students recognise this of the part-time and often older learners in the classroom. Whilst some part-time learners have engaged with 'academic' learning in the past, others will be non-traditional 'students'. This is likely to be especially true for women, for older people, for working-class people, and for those from some minority ethnic groups.

All learners approach and experience learning in different ways, and teachers need to understand where learners are starting from, drawing on their prior knowledge, and keeping to the forefront an awareness of the impact of cultural backgrounds and beliefs (Fry et al, 2003). They cannot assume that there is a common understanding by students on the purposes of higher education or the nature of studying, as each student will approach learning from their own perspective, experiences and understandings (Gosling, 2003). Teachers need to adapt their pedagogic approaches to develop modes of delivery that will enhance the learning experiences of all their students, including part-time and 'non-traditional' students

Conclusions

Whilst policies and practices have often denied opportunities to part-time learners, the changing landscape of UK higher education – with many similarities to the landscapes in much of the developed world – are opening more flexible opportunities to participate in higher education. However, those possibilities are too often marginal, with full-time and younger learners dominating the discourses and practices of higher education institutions. Learners are social actors in an academic world, speaking and writing their experiences and performing their identities. This is particularly true for part-time learners, bringing a wide range of past and current experiences, and future possibilities, into the academy. They need to be able not just to recognise themselves as part of that academy, but also to find ways to become 'knowers' by participating in learning through their multiple and socially-situated intersecting identities. They should be encouraged to facilitate and negotiate active and effective learning for themselves, with learners recognizing that they can teach others in the classroom, students that they can learn from each other as well as from teachers, and teachers that they can learn from their

students. Claims to knowledge need to be based on learning beyond the academy as well as within it. Part-time learners, and their teachers in higher education, need to work together to adapt to the changing learning landscapes so that part-time learning becomes a valued and valuable part of that landscape.

Note

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