

Growth Without Change? The Limits of Widening Participation

Dr Jocey Quinn j. t.quinn@exeter.ac.uk

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Introduction

- Focus of the day is- whatever happened to the learning age?
- One of the things that happened -emphasis on widening participation/simultaneous reduction in support for community based learning
- So I want to focus on the disconnections between a radical view of adult learning and a policy espousal of widening participation
- I will explore how widening participation has failed to counter social exclusion
- I will use my research with first generation entrants to university to show how widening participation tends to be normative rather than transformative
- I will argue that widening participation needs to learn from adult learning- not replace it

Has widening participation 'swallowed' adult education?

Widening Participation

- For young people
- Linked to formal education
- Requires you to change
- Does not require curriculum transformation

Adult education

- For all ages
- Values informal learning
- Builds on your strengths
- Innovative curriculum essential



WIDENING PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

“HE also brings social benefits...there is strong evidence that graduates are more likely to be engaged citizens” (White Paper, 2003)

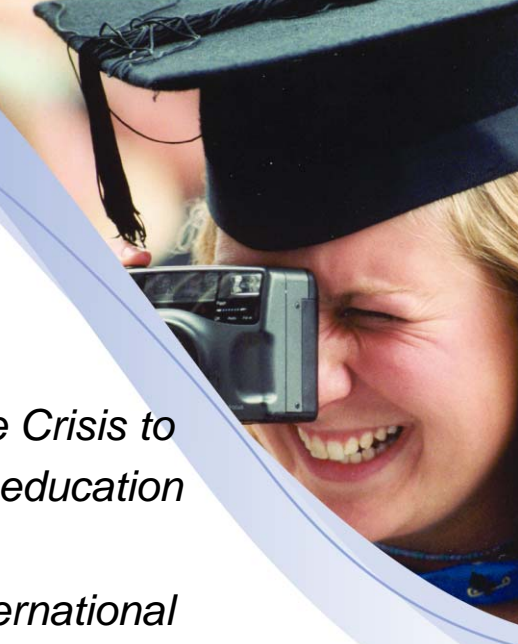
- **Virtually all middle class students will now go to university**
- **Working class participation has grown numerically, but proportionately it has actually dropped since 1960s**
- **Mobility between classes has decreased since 1960s**
- **Access to HE is reduced outside London, particularly in disadvantaged areas**
- **Working class students more likely to go to ‘ex polys’**
- **Less likely to study elite subjects such as Medicine**
- **More likely to do Foundation or HE in FE**
- **More likely to leave early without completing a degree (nearly a 3rd in some universities)**

First generation entrants to university

Drawing on research for Joseph Rowntree Foundation- *From Life Crisis to Lifelong Learning: rethinking working class 'drop out from higher education* (Quinn, et al, 2005)

and forthcoming book *First Generation entry to University: an international study* (Thomas and Quinn, 2006, Open University Press)

- First generation entrants- those whose parents have not had an opportunity to access university education at any time
- International evidence that parental education is more formative of learning opportunities than employment status or income
- But interdependence of first generation entry and social class-parental opportunity for education is partly determined by money/job
- In theory these are the real targets of widening participation-but what happens to them if they do make it to university?



•What happens to first generation entrants?

Research focused on 4 disadvantaged areas in in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and 4 post 1992 universities

Research involved wide range of stakeholders in 4 participative research jury days

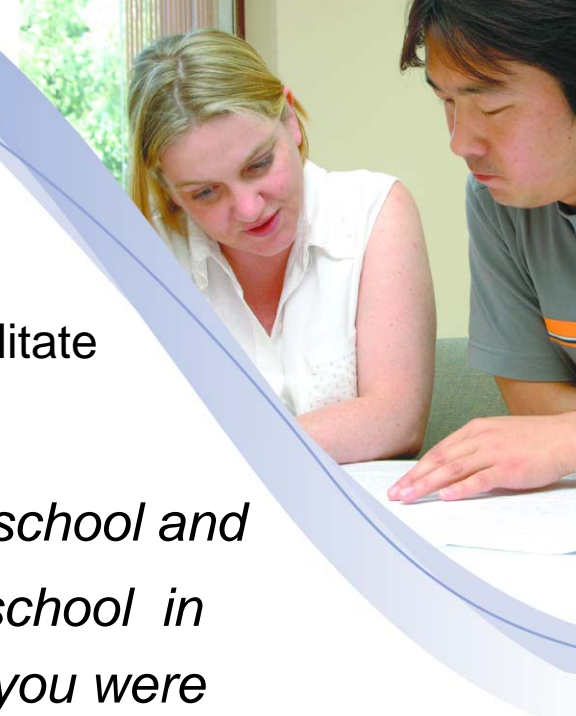
It identified that there was a cultural narrative of working class 'drop out' circulating: this was a self fulfilling story that working class people were feckless, weak and liable to fail at things-including university study

Research then interviewed 67 first generation students across UK who had 'dropped out' of university



Ideals of Transformation

- A key principle of adult education is that it should help the learner realise their potential- on their own terms. The learner transforms themselves **and** the learning space
- Similarly Widening Participation **should** imply a radical revision of what university is/ what constitutes knowledge-should no longer be *'by the educated white man, for the educated white man, an about the educated white man and his world'* (Martin,1994, 224)
- How true was this for the first generation entrants in our study?



Normative Realities

The realities of contemporary HE pedagogy do not facilitate individual support, reflection and transformation

“We weren’t prepared for the transition between school and university and I went to a thing called a summer school in there as well. That gives you a false impression- you were in a small class and you had a teacher and then when I went to university there were 300 of us sitting in a lecture hall.”

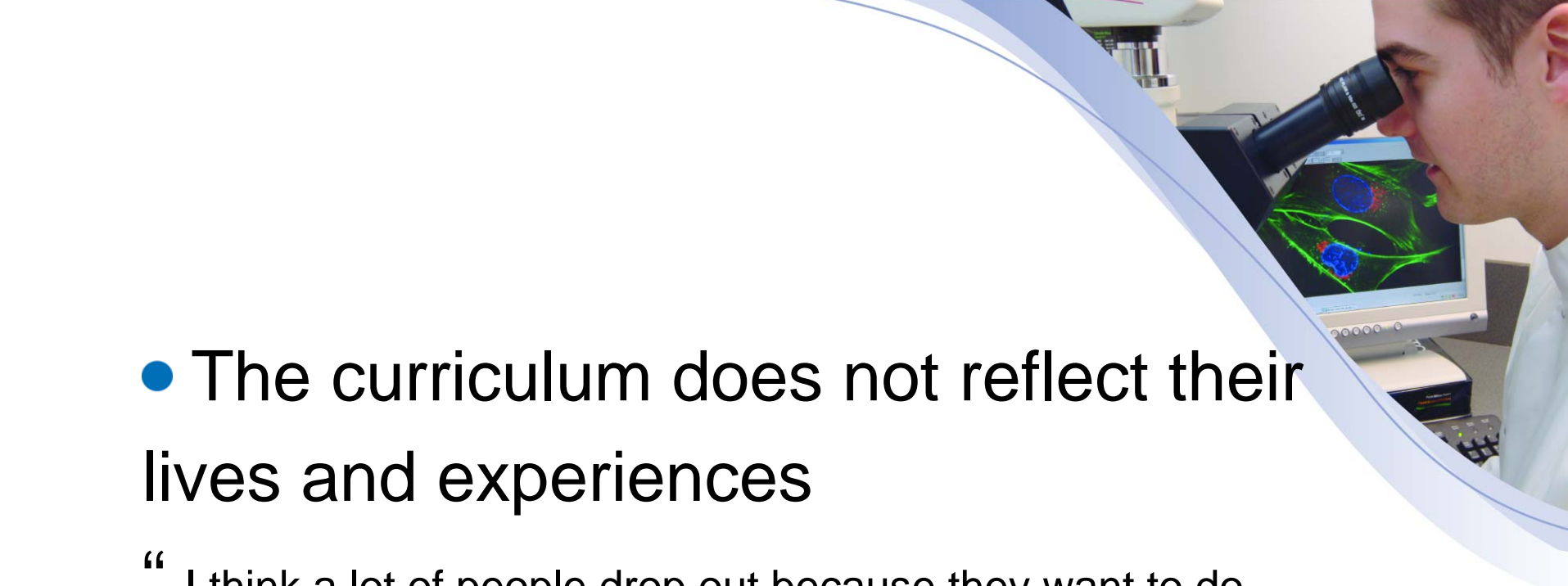
“I’d go to a lecture, they would teach me and that would be it. You cant have any kind of one to one”

“ the class sizes were very big. I enjoy studying but there was no personal contact”

Students were expected to fit the norms of the university

“the people who lived in halls in the university were part of the environment, whereas I felt like a bit of an outsider. Even though I lived around here and it was my town.”

“One thing that was particularly strange was students were expected to be out every night of the week kind of thing. The first day it was the folks from the Students Union came along and that was the first presentation and I found it a bit strange to encourage you to get down the Students Union and get as many drinks down your neck as possible”

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- The curriculum does not reflect their lives and experiences

“ I think a lot of people drop out because they want to do something and make a difference...for a lot of people I think its all meaningless, where is this going, what is it really doing”

(voluntary sector worker, research jury day)

Their informal learning is ignored

“Did they encourage you to go to university from school?”

“No I went to a Careers meeting. I told them I wanted to make films for a living. They said to me I could never do it. They got me to fill out a big form with tick boxes. The computer suggested the number one job was Stonemason, then Police Officer, then mechanic”

“When I left university I worked full time for about 8 months. As soon as I left that I started making films again. I have done better since I’ve been unemployed really. I am working on a Western being set in Glasgow. We wrote it and filmed it and are looking for funding”

Changing the Norm

- Students themselves resisted the norm of 3 year continuous study- They wanted flexibility to change course, go part time leave and return, build on interests and enthusiasms
- But even the flexibility that does exist they were not encouraged to access and withdrawing was constructed as failure
- *“I think the university is a long way from being a genuine lifelong learning university. It has a preoccupation with full time study and it would require a major change in direction to be regarded as a lifelong learning institution-its shape would need to change significantly and the structure of funding from central government would have to facilitate this change”* (Admissions officer)



Conclusion

- Lifelong learning policy increasingly recognises the role of informal learning in ‘hooking’ people into learning and acknowledges the need for “a framework” that recognises and values learning that does not lead to a qualification” (DfES, 2002, p28)
- **But** funding, guidance and structures all channel learners into narrow formal frameworks and valorise HE at the expense of other learning contexts
- Learners themselves have more vision -we need to follow their lead in rethinking and reshaping a Higher Education that builds on adult education, rather than replacing it