Is Access to University a Matter of Quality? UK and European Experiences of Widening Participation

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Widening participation and the related issue of social mobility are re-emerging as crucial, complex and pressing priorities in terms of the governance and the social and economic effectiveness of higher education in the regions of Europe. Concern about barriers to entry to higher education has been debated across Europe since at least the 1960s, yet there is still disagreement about the extent to which universities should take responsibility for the social effects of access policies and provision. Despite the unifying effects of the Bologna Process, the meaning and status of widening participation action across Europe remain highly differentiated. Enhanced access in terms of numbers does not necessarily correlate with equality of opportunity and planned national responses to access concerns remain under-developed in many member states. This article compares data from the UK with that from six other EU countries: Czech Republic, Latvia, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, and Slovakia collected as part of the IBAR (Identifying Barriers in Promoting European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level) Project. We compare the current status of the UK's national widening participation agenda with findings from the other countries participating in the IBAR project and ask if European standards for quality assurance can, or should, accommodate the very different systems and philosophies which underpin national and institutional approaches to higher education participation.

1. Introduction

Early Europe-wide debates on access to higher education

Concerns about barriers to entry to higher education have been debated across Europe since at least the 1960s. In 1963 the UK Robbins Report on Higher Education[1] established the principle that university education should be available to all who were suitably qualified to benefit from it and indirectly led the way to the creation of polytechnics to supplement existing tertiary provision in the UK. In 1967 a UNESCO conference of ministers of higher education held in Vienna[2] debated the implications of increased demand for higher education places at the very start of what we now recognise as massification of the sector. The extensive list of outcomes from this conference included the recommendation that UNESCO member states sign up to the Convention against Discrimination in Education[3], consider ways of removing economic barriers to secondary and tertiary education and undertake studies into "special topics" relating to access including socio-economic origins of students, linguistic minorities and enrolment and wastage rates. At institutional level, tertiary providers were asked to consider enhanced training for staff in welfare/guidance to reduce wastage rates and to consider ways of recognising entrant attainment "by means of a policy based more on aptitude and factual knowledge more than formal attainment".

The status of access in the context of the Lisbon Process

The 2000 Lisbon Process set a target for 50 % participation in higher education. By the early years of the new century, this rate had been exceeded, achieved or nearly achieved by the majority of countries participating in this study (Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, UK). The Netherlands remains an outlier in this group, having smaller, although growing participation rates. It has set a projected date of 2050 to reach the Lisbon target.

In 2001, the Prague Communiqué of Ministers of Higher Education of the EHEA[4] concentrated on the inclusion of students and the need to

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[1] Robbins Report on Higher Education 1963.
http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/small/cab-129-114-c-173.pdf

[2] UNESCO Conference of Ministers of Education of European Member States on Access to Higher Education, Vienna 20 – 25 November 1967.
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001326/132642eo.pdf

[3] UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Higher Education 1963.
http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/DISCRI_E.PDF

[4] Toward the European Higher Education Area. Communiqué of the European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education Prague 2001.
http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/MDC/PRAGUE_COMMUNIQUE.pdf

make mobility opportunities available for all. In 2003 in Berlin[5], ministers focused more broadly on social cohesion of the student population and social and gender inequalities. In particular, they mentioned the need to remove obstacles related to students' social and economic background based on comparable data. These general and specific commitments to make higher education accessible to all were renewed in Bergen[6] in 2005, emphasising the obligation of governments to help students from "socially disadvantaged groups" to get access.

Despite this repeated reference to the social dimension aspect of building the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), there was no precise and commonly accepted definition of the social dimension in higher education until 2007. In that year in London[7], the ministers agreed on a comprehensive definition and the goal to achieve. Accordingly, ministers agreed "the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations". Ministers at the London meeting also emphasised that "students [should be] able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background".

First attempts at a European definition of access

Meeting, or indeed exceeding the Lisbon target plainly does not mean that the social dimensions of widening access are "complete" in any nation state. Access to higher education is highly dependent on a huge number of socio-economic and other social factors, some of which are linked to higher education policy, some of which are the result of broader changes to demographics, economic climate or cultural and social perceptions and expectations. In the UK, for example, the impact of the introduction of higher undergraduate fees for domestic students in England and Wales from 2012-13 has yet to be fully felt. Whilst the rhetoric of widening access remains widespread, the effect of average annual university fees of £8500 on students from lower socio-economic backgrounds is likely to be detrimental to the sustainability of fairer and wider access to higher education (Moore et al, 2011). The withdrawal of well-regarded (Hatt et al, 2007) nationally-

Access as a socio-economic concern

[5] Realising the European Higher Education Area. Communiqué of the European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education Berlin 2003.
http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/MDC/Berlin _Communique1.pdf

[6] The European Higher Education Area: Achieving the Goals. Communiqué of the European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education Bergen 2005.
http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/MDC/0505 20_Bergen_Communique1.pdf

[7] Towards the European Higher Education Area: responding to changes in a globalised world. Communiqué of the European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education London 2007.
http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/Bologna/documents/mdc/Londo n_Communique18May2007.pdf

funded widening participation schemes (particularly Aimhigher[8]) has led some commentators (McCaig and Adnett, 2009; Butcher et al, 2012) to view the current time of change in the UK as marking the transition between a "golden age … in which generous resources flowed in support of a national [widening participation] strategy and an emerging austere age in which the infrastructure is being drastically dismantled" (Butcher et al, *ibid*).

In other countries participating in IBAR, universities have enjoyed a certain amount of protection from the market forces impinging on UK institutions by virtue of high levels of state intervention in higher education planning, admissions and funding. However, many national policymakers in Europe have been much less inclined than their counterparts in the UK to pursue systematic widening participation strategies and there is little evidence of local widening participation strategies at institutional level. Evidence from the IBAR study suggests however that increased competition in the higher education sector and concerns across Europe about the relationship between local and cross-border provision as an outcome of the Bologna process may however mean that other countries start to have different conversations about the meaning of access and widening participation within their own national systems.

2.   Context of the research

Supporting data: the IBAR project

This article draws on data collected as part of one part of a much larger project, IBAR[9]. The aim of IBAR is to identify challenges faced by European institutions in implementing the EUA/ENQA Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education Part 1

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[8] The Aimhigher programme was established to encourage progression to higher education. Working through 42 partnerships across England, the programme encompassed a wide range of activities to engage and motivate school and college learners who had the potential to enter higher education, but who were under-achieving, undecided or lacking in confidence. The programme particularly focused on students from schools from lower socio-economic groups and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who live in areas of relative deprivation where participation in higher education is low. http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk/sites/practitioner/home/

[9] IBAR (Identifying Barriers in Promoting European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level) is a three-year project (January 2010 to December 2013) funded by the EACEA Life-Long learning Programme. The project is led by the Centre for Higher Education Studies in Prague and the University of Durham and includes contributions from five additional partner countries: Latvia, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia. http://www.ibar-llp.eu/project.html

(ESG1)[10], which were adopted in 2005 and are currently under review. Qualitative research (comprising desk studies of quality and strategic documentation; interviews with key staff members and students; and focus groups) is being undertaken at 28 European HEIs, 4 in each of the 7 IBAR partner countries. Outputs from the project include description, comparison and analysis of current institutional practice in implementation of ESG1, identification of barriers to implementation and identification of local practice and policies not yet included in pan-European quality assurance guidelines.

Current status of access in the context of European quality assurance guidance

Access, or widening participation is one pan-European concern that is not explicitly mentioned in ESG1. The project team identified access to higher education as an area for potential expansion of ESG1 and one of the work-packages of the IBAR project was dedicated to collecting institutional data on this issue. Data was collected between June and October 2011. Data methodologies included examination and analysis of national legislation or policies and institutional policies on access; individual interviews and/or focus group interviews with key respondents including senior university managers, academic and administrative staff, students and (where applicable) staff with particular responsibility for developing or supporting access policies; questionnaires or short surveys of larger groups of staff and/or students.

3. Framing the research

Defining access or widening participation

A recent article by John Butcher, Rohini Corfield and John Rose-Adams in the UK's *Times Higher Education*[11] identifies the "fluidity of discourse" around access or widening participation and the multiple terms and concepts (inclusion, equity, diversity) with which access shares increasingly un-delineated territory. Previous work, the 1992 – 1996 Council of Europe project "Access to higher education in Europe"[12] usefully relates the concept of access to that of quality and

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[10] EUA/ENQA Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education Part 1 (ESG1).
http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20(2).pdf

[11] Rethink the route to goal. Times Higher Education 8 September 2011.
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=417374

[12] The Council of Europe's project on "Access to Higher Education in Europe" was a part of the Council of Europe's regular work programme in education and culture, within the European Cultural Convention, from 1992 till 1996. It was designed to address a major policy concern of governments, who are conscious of the critical importance of a highly educated workforce to the economic future of their countries.
http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/completedactivities/Access_EN.asp

offered a model to link access or widening participation to the wider principles and goals of ESG1. The interpretation of *"access"* agreed by the Council of Europe project group encompasses both quality and equality, within three inter-related elements:

- greater participation in higher education of good quality,

- the extension of participation to include currently under-represented groups,

- a recognition that participation extends beyond entry to successful completion.

4. Greater participation in higher education of good quality

Europe-wide rises in higher education enrolment

One commonality across all of the IBAR countries has been a huge rise in enrolment numbers in recent decades. This is particularly true for Eastern European countries, which have enjoyed a spectacular rise in participation in a short time period. In Poland, for example, participation rates for the academic year 2008/09 were 52 %, compared with about 13 % in 1990/91. Expansion rates over the same period in the Czech Republic show remarkably similar patterns (17.1 % in 1990/01, rising to 52.3 % in 2007/08).

Growth in Western European countries has taken place over a longer timescale. In Portugal, high participation rates of around 52 % have been achieved through gradual expansion since the 1974 revolution. In the UK, rates differ across the countries of the union. High rates of participation in Scotland (around 52 %) are not replicated in other parts of the country. Overall, the official rate for 2010/11 was 47 %. Failure to meet the EU target of 50 % has been blamed on a lack of places, rather than a lack of demand. Similarly, reaching the 50 % participation target has proved to be problematic in the Netherlands and the Dutch government has now set a target date of 2050 to achieve a workforce with a higher education qualification.

From elite to mass systems

Regardless of local variations in the ways in which IBAR countries are meeting the EU participation targets, all of the countries participating in the project can be said to have moved from an elite to a mass participation system. Mass participation can be seen as a corollary of vastly improved access, in the sense that many more people are able to take advantage of higher education opportunities. However, it might be argued that enhanced access in terms of numbers does not necessarily correlate with equality of opportunity and national variations in the nature of participation routes can create additional complexity.

Diversity of institutions

Most national systems offer variant forms of higher or further education to learners who have completed secondary level qualifications. A report published by the UK Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) in August 2012[13] notes the increasingly important role that the UK's further education colleges play in supporting widening participation in post-secondary education. Of particular interest is the extent to which boundaries are increasing blurring between first cycle degree pathways that start at higher education institutions and those which start through the further education sector (often through partnerships with local higher education providers). Further education colleges are perceived as a crucial access point for both school leavers and for continuing learners in "low-participation" areas.

In other national systems, increasing numbers participating or aspiring to participate in higher education have been accommodated in different ways. In some systems (for example, in Poland) legislation now allows private institutions to operate alongside state-funded universities. The Netherlands and Portugal operate binary systems, which retain polytechnics or technical universities alongside institutions offering a broader curriculum portfolio.

Challenges to institutional and personal identity

Across Europe, significant differences between the types of educational experiences offered to students and the perceived value of qualifications from different types of institution perpetuate and call into question the extent to which "access" means the same as "equality of opportunity". Regardless of the volume of national (or government) rhetoric about widening participation, differing views about the meaning of this term have not been resolved in practice and there can be an unhelpful tendency for simplistic views and solutions to emerge (Thomas, 2001). One (perhaps broadly "academic") position is that young people with talent should be encouraged into an unreformed higher education system, regardless of their background. Another is that the higher education system should be reformed to reflect the changing educational needs of society, although these needs often tend to be skewed significantly towards the concerns of employers rather than those of learners. Another position is that the meaning and purpose of higher education should be re-examined, diversity should be celebrated, different learning opportunities should be explored and the burden of change should not be placed on entrants (Jones and Thomas, 2005).

Quality standards as an equality mechanism

Our data suggests that increased de-regulation, fewer state controls on admissions and increasing competition to attract students across Europe will lead to greater institutional differentiation and that (generalising from the UK experience) different types of institutions are likely to

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[13] Widening participation and non-continuation indicators for further education colleges; Overview of Trends. HEFCE August 2012.
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2012/201220/

adopt different definitions of access as part of distinctive mission statements unless their freedom is constrained by legislation. One question as yet unresolved is whether it is ever possible to create equality of experience for students in a widely diverse institutional landscape. Although ESG1 can be understood as a mechanism for smoothing student experiences of education across Europe, it is much harder to smooth outcomes (for example, the value of a qualification from an elite institution versus one with a less prestigious reputation).

5. Extending participation

The social justice dimension of access

Greater learner numbers do not necessarily deliver greater diversity in the student population. In the UK, almost all school-leavers from middle class backgrounds now attend university, but working-class learners remain seriously under-represented (Archer et al, 2003; Greenbank, 2009). Whilst issues of gender inequality have largely been overcome (in the UK, women outnumber men in higher education and similar patterns are visible across the EHEA) issues of social mobility across Europe remain highly problematic. In the broadest sense, widening participation can be understood as a long-term activity that raises the aspirations of generations within previously excluded social groupings, rather than a short-term intervention in the life of a single individual.

Challenges in the UK higher education system

One UK interviewee spoke at some length about the need to convince senior management of the added value benefits of widening participation to the whole institution, particularly in a time of financial constraint:

> "There's been a lot of investment, but demonstrating what has changed [as a result of widening participation] has to be thought about more carefully. We need to include both quantitative and qualitative stories and be much more subtle about our message ... but you sometimes just don't feel able to have these sort of debates when you're fighting for survival".

At another institution, one interviewee described the tendency for academic departments to contest the interpretations of data made by senior management or by staff members responsible for monitoring and supporting widening participation:

> "Causation and correlation are difficult ... we often hear 'we are a busy academic department and we have better things to do'. There is a perception that some years are just better than others. Trend data is important, but no one really knows past 2012 what the 'typical' demographic will be and how we can prove that we are special".

A number of UK interviewees described the emotional, or personal nature of the access or widening participation agenda. To challenge often deeply held beliefs about "fairness", "equity" or the role or purpose of higher education in society, the types of data needed might be different. Case studies of success and personal narratives from people who have entered higher education through non-traditional routes are perceived as highly effective, but there are sensitivities associated with their collection and use. As one interviewee explained:

> "We need more examples [of success] that we can publicise but we don't want to make people into sideshows at the funfair. People need to get on with their lives".

Perceptions of the social dimension of access across Europe

In most other systems, rhetoric about extending access is generally less developed than in the UK and there is much less evidence to suggest that universities either choose, or are encouraged by national policy, to pursue strategies to extend the availability of higher education to formerly under-represented groups. Typically, institutional policies on access are in line with national equality legislation frameworks, which state that higher education must be available to all prospective learners, regardless of gender, ethnicity, disability, social background etc. Fair access is widely conceptualised as a corollary of equality of treatment in both national legislation and university admissions processes. In Latvia, for example, entrants are judged solely on secondary attainment and admissions interviews or other selection activities are rare: "open access" institutions are those that do not apply additional entrance exams of other forms of local selection. Data on disability, ethnicity or social background is not considered as part of admission criteria: to collect and use data to inform admissions activities is more likely to be perceived as encouraging discrimination rather than as a mechanism to support affirmative action. Universities may however offer discretionary bursaries or reductions in tuition to students facing economic hardship. There is an explicit assumption that access to educational opportunities is enshrined in national legislation, is based on merit/academic achievement and that universities are not required to play any kind of role as agents social equality. Similar arrangements are in place in Slovakia, although here there are more anxieties about the status of minority ethnic groups and legislation is in place to ensure that significant minorities (Hungarians, Romanians etc.) are able to access education in their own languages. Of particular concern is the Roma community, who account for 1.7 % of the Slovak population and tend to suffer exclusion from secondary education, which affects their ability to access higher qualifications. At least one Slovakian university has created dedicated departments to focus on the development of Roma teachers and social workers to address these challenges but in general, special measures to support university entrance for learners from the Roma community are not in place.

Outreach and aspiration-raising across Europe

In most systems, however, there are mechanisms for publicising programmes of study to prospective students and many institutions undertake outreach activities at local schools. For some institutions, this represents a conscious strategy to raise the aspirations of local learners. For example, one university offers a school outreach programme, which has been designed to give school pupils from under-represented groups an insight into degree-level study with no obligation to proceed to a degree course. From January to March each year over 500 local high school pupils participate in interactive workshops, meet university students, enjoy subject tasters, receive campus tours, visit the University's Student Union and work with pupils from other schools. Participating pupils are required to meet at least one of the following eligibility criteria:

- Little or no parental experience of education post-16.

- Limited family income.

- Unskilled, semi-skilled or unemployed parent(s).

- Living in neighbourhood or other circumstances not conducive to study.

- Educational progress blighted by specific family events at critical times (e.g. bereavement, illness or family break-up).

- Other exceptionally adverse circumstances or factors specified by [school] nominator.

The university sees these kinds of activities as central to its mission as a civic institution with responsibilities to its local area and staff members who are involved in these activities are proud of their achievements. However, there remains a frustration that social background and school experience remain such a strong determinant of academic and economic success.

At other institutions, the aim of schools outreach is less overtly about raising aspiration, but instead offers the university the opportunity to attract more potential candidates to its programmes, especially those which tend to be under-subscribed in some systems (in particular, sciences and mathematics). However, it seems likely that school-level learners participating in, for example, the Chemistry summer schools, open days and competitions organised by one of the universities participating in the IBAR project in the Czech Republic are also likely to enjoy raised aspirations and ambition as a side effect of these activities. In fact, science-based outreach activities appear to be a common feature in most systems, suggesting a widespread European anxiety about the attractiveness of tertiary science provision to young learners.

6.   Supporting completion

In all of the UK universities participating in the IBAR study there is recognition that access is a broader issue than merely the management of enrollments. In some cases the admissions process could be understood as "aspiration-raising at 10 or 11" (UK respondent) when school pupils are first exposed to careers or to continuing education advice. One UK interviewee remarked that it might be even better to work with younger children in primary education to expose them to the possibility of a university education before other social barriers take hold. Patterns of funding for university places in the UK mean that universities are significantly incentivised to ensure that as many students as possible complete their chosen course of study. Participants in the IBAR survey described typical institutional retention strategies that include the following types of activities:

Not just admissions, but retention

- ensuring that incoming students have been accurately informed and appropriately advised on their choice of programme, and are aware of the demands that higher education will place on them;

- supporting students in their transition to university studies, ensuring that they are aided in the development of appropriate study skills;

- providing social and personal support to facilitate integration into the University community;

- ensuring that a range of student services, including financial and personal support, is accessible to students;

- monitoring student progress and achievement and to identify, and where possible to reduce, barriers to retention;

- ensuring that staff are aware of the factors influencing student retention and can implement appropriate strategies for improving it.

Participants in the IBAR study commented on the difference between "widening access" which can be seen as removing barriers to entry, and "widening participation" which can be seen as supporting the whole student journey from enrollment to future employment and encompasses support for retention, progression and all aspects of the student experience.

Widening access versus widening participation

A common theme across those institutions operating widening participation strategies is the perception that students who may have entered the university under special access arrangements should not be singled out for special attention or otherwise differentiated. Whilst the very specific needs of some students with particular disabilities are carefully managed, the overall perception is that opportunities for successful study should be available to all students regardless of their access

Targeted support or mainstreaming activities?

route and that concern for retention and progression should permeate the institution's educational and student experience provision. Support might take many forms, including the design of the curriculum, and might not be immediately visible or identifiable as a "widening participation" initiative. This creates dilemmas for staff members with particular responsibility for widening participation activities. Mainstreaming support for learning and providing the best possible experience for all students is a highly desirable ambition, but there is a real danger that "widening participation" as a strategic, and separately-funded, endeavour might get lost as a result.

Access and withdrawal

In many systems, high withdrawal rates, particularly in the first year of study are recognised as a significant problem. In systems with particularly low levels of institutional control over admissions (Portugal, Netherlands, Poland, Latvia), participants in IBAR report difficulties with low levels of motivation amongst students who find themselves at institutions other than their first or second choice, or studying on programmes that are a poor fit with their interests or employment expectations. These difficulties can be compounded in systems where there is a perceived low level of fit between funded programmes and national economic demand for graduates (for example, in Poland) or in systems with poor articulation between secondary and tertiary educational benchmarks (for example, in Latvia).

Many universities are able to take local steps to address low retention rates. Typical responses include stronger profiling of programmes and enhanced information about programme content and learning opportunities to help students make informed choices; enhanced study and pastoral support for all students, with (in many cases) tailored support for students in "at risk" categories (for example, Turkish women students in The Netherlands). In some systems (notably Latvia), there is evidence of a prevailing assumption that withdrawal is a result either of poor teaching at secondary level which leaves students ill-prepared for university study, or a lack of motivation on the part of individual students. In some Latvian institutions, the proposed strategy is to limit numbers of entrants in order to offer enhanced contact time and smaller class sizes to assist students who need to catch up in order to meet required standards of progression.

7.   Complexity and barriers

Agreed definitions

All of the countries participating in the IBAR project are signatories to a variety of European directives, including the Bologna Declaration, which have implications for the accessibility of higher education. 'Access' remains a poorly defined term in the context of European higher education systems and subject to considerable variation in the way it is articulated through national legislation and institutional policy and practice.

University agency

A number of contextual complications either influence or limit university agency. As Tinto (2005) and Longden (2006) have identified, student achievement in higher education is predicated on a number of conditions and expectations, some of which are created by universities, and some of which are already present in learners and highly influenced by their previous educational background and experiences. Secondary schools play a significant part in the creation of study commitment and expectations and in students' capacity to become involved learners. If we understand "access" not just as an enabler for entry, but as a range of approaches which are designed to facilitate success, we may also need to look more closely at the expectations and behaviours that are generated in earlier phases of the educational cycle.

Dilemmas for policy makers

Our data exposes at least three major dilemmas that face policy-makers developing pan-European guidelines intended to function at European level. Firstly, there is enormous variation in the extent to which institutions in different systems are able or willing to take local responsibility for the implementation of European initiatives to promote access to higher education because of varying levels of national planning and control of admissions, differing levels of institutional autonomy in developing admissions strategies, and widespread lack of national incentivisation to pursue widening access agendas at local level.

Secondly, there remains the question of the extent to which higher education institutions should be expected to be agents of social justice. Eurydice examined the social dimension in the European Higher Education Area (EACEA/Eurydice 2010[14], 2011b[15]) and concluded that very few countries have set specific targets related to the social dimension of higher education and monitoring of the participation of underrepresented groups across Europe has not yet been developed to any significant degree. While special measures to assist specific groups based on socio-economic status, gender, disability, ethnicity, etc. exist at institutional level in many systems, these are rarely a central element of higher education policy. The IBAR data supports these conclusions, but it also raises the question of whether, even when national steering demands attention is paid to widening participation (as in the UK), institutions will readily accede. Although widening participation remains high on the national agenda in the UK, high levels of institutional autonomy and high levels of institutional differentia-

[14] Eurydice Focus Reports. Focus on Higher Education in Europe 2010. The Impact of the Bologna Process.
http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/12 2en.pdf

[15] Eurydice Focus Reports Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Funding and the Social Dimension 2011.
http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/13 1EN.pdf

tion mean that this agenda is played out in very different ways in different universities and it is therefore hard to point to a unitary view of universities' role as agents of social change.

Thirdly, even when the national climate supports widening access activities at local level, access remains highly contested territory. Although the UK staff interviewed as part of this study were all passionate and committed to the activities they organise, there is a recognition that WP schemes are expensive, can often only target a small number of individuals and that there are "huge problems of aspiration" in some parts of UK society that universities alone might not be able to challenge. Even in institutions where the idea of widening access is very well established, there is a perception that the territory needs to be regularly re-defined, and that "the battle needs to be regularly re-fought" (UK respondent).

The "success" of widening participation activities is often highly subjective and by definition hard to measure (Thomas, 2011). Whilst a number of UK participants in this study spoke about the long-term social effects of their activities and the difficulty of measuring impact over long time periods, senior managers and other key stakeholders are much more likely to be interested in short-term, quantitative data. There is concern that quantitative data (for example, on enrollments, progression, degree classification, employment) should be enriched with qualitative data to give a better picture of the real experience of students and a richer data set in which to base future activities. Widening participation initiatives can also be costly: in a time of widespread fiscal constraint across Europe, high cost activities with hard-to-measure results may be a difficult concept to "sell".

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