WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION:
A POLICY OVERVIEW

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Introduction and Background
Increasing and widening participation in Higher Education (HE) in the UK has been a long standing policy interest and goal across the main political parties. In 1960 there were only 200,000 full-time students (DfES April 2003) and very few studying part-time. However, just over four decades later the Higher Education Statistics Agency figures show (HESA 2004-2005) that there was a total of 2,423,590 million students, with an undergraduate population of around one and three quarter million. Nearly six out of ten undergraduates are female, the majority (of undergraduates) are mature (21+) on entry and just over a third are studying on part-time courses. During these decades, the HE sector has been expanded in a series of major steps including the building of the new ‘campus universities’ in the 1960s, the creation of 30 polytechnics in the early 1970s (and the abolition of the binary divide in 1992), and the awarding in the past few years of university status to a range of higher education colleges. The expansion of HE also includes the increasing number of students studying HE level courses in further education colleges (often known as FHEs). There are currently over 130 universities in the UK. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of policy development in relation to widening participation in higher education that can act as a resource for the research project: ‘Non-participation in Higher Education: Decision-making as an embedded social practice’.

Within the EU context, Osborne (2003:5) has noted that, ‘there now exists a greatly expanded mass and in some cases universal system of HE’ in which, on average, among 16 EU countries, four out of ten school leavers participate in tertiary education. In Scandinavian countries, such as Finland and Sweden, two out of three young adults access tertiary level education. The expansion has been a result of:

...a world-wide concern expressed by both international bodies and national governments that there are strong reasons for increasing access and for

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1 ‘Non-Participation in Higher Education; Decision-making as an embedded social practice’ (2006-2008), RES 139-25-0232. is funded by the ESRC through the Teaching and Learning Research Programme
widening the constituency that higher education serves by including those
groups that have traditionally been excluded (Osborne 2003:6)

Slowey and Watson (2003) point out that in comparison with the rest of the EU, the
HE sector in the UK is relatively diverse: particularly with regard to the variables of
mode of attendance and age where it has the highest proportion of part-time
students; the highest average student age and the second highest percentage of
‘working class’ take up. Despite this, the evidence on patterns of participation in HE
amongst social groups indicates that expansion has not led to an equitable
distribution of take up across social groups. Indeed, reviews by Machin and Vignoles
(2004, 2006) indicate that the gap between those from higher and lower socio-
economic classifications has grown. Although the role of HE in developing required
workforce skills has been contested, (see for example Keep and Mayhew 1999, Keep
2003), continuing efforts by successive governments to expand HE as a key policy
response to increasing national economic competitiveness, as well as ongoing
concerns about equity in HE participation, has ensured that policy and research
interest in Widening Participation (WP) in HE carries on growing.

The concept of ‘widening’ participation in HE, as distinct from increasing or
expanding participation, has taken root in the policy discourse relatively recently, and
arguably, in the years following the publication of Lord Dearing’s review of HE in
1997. However, the idea of WP in education more generally has a long and enduring
history and can justifiably be considered as a recurring theme. In this regard, WP in
HE can be viewed as a continuation of longstanding attempts to make educational
opportunities available to more people. For example, there is a lengthy history of
adult education in the UK including the design of policies and provision to develop
learning opportunities for diverse groups of adult learners (Fieldhouse et al. 1996).
Some would argue that the emergence of the great debates on Equality of
Educational Opportunity (Coleman 1966) constituted the bedrock upon which WP
became firmly rooted in many western countries, including the UK. Similarly, links
can be traced between WP and other policy issues which have focused on aspects of
exclusion, inclusion, access and progression in education. It can also be argued that
the idea of WP in HE is a descendent of policy initiatives that sought to universalise
primary and secondary education. Primary and secondary ‘education for all’ in the
UK, as indeed in many parts of the developed world (and some parts of the less
developed world too) has now been attained. In terms of increasing participation in
HE, Tony Blair announced (September 2000) a new goal for his government that 50
per cent of 18-30 year olds should participate in HE by 2010. The current proportion stands at approximately 43 per cent.

WP is a difficult concept to pin down. Osborne, Gallacher and Crossan (2006:527) have characterised lifelong learning as ‘a rainbow concept’ and it can be argued that the label is equally appropriate for WP. This is so because, WP, like lifelong learning, has numerous shades of meanings which are embedded in a spectrum of purposes. In some similarity, Watson refers to WP as a ‘portmanteau concept’ which ‘doesn’t omit much’ (2006: 4). He observes:

The basic point is that widening participation is not just, or even primarily, about minorities. The equation of (class) x (gender) x (ethnicity) x (age) x (location) is a very complex one, and is now being added to by newly prominent variables such as disability. (Watson, 2006:4)

The driving imperatives behind recent UK government attempts to increase and widen participation in HE are both economic and social, as this comment by the Secretary of State indicates: “A failure to improve and widen participation and access to higher education would be bad social policy and very bad economic policy.” (Bill Rammell, February 2006)

In terms of social justice, where the focus is on widening and not just increasing participation, the aim seems to be the eventual achievement of an ideal model where the pattern of participation mirrors the characteristics of the general adult population. In particular, policy makers are exercised by the ‘problem’ of under-represented groups, of which social class is the most discussed. For example, in 2000, just over 18 per cent of young people from manual, partly skilled and unskilled family backgrounds attended HE compared to 48% of those from families with professional and non manual occupations (DfES 2003: 7). Figure 1 below summarises the participation rates by social class groups between 1960 and 2000 and demonstrates that despite the strong increases (from a very low base) in participation by students from lower socio-economic groups (SEGs), the gap in participation between those in higher and lower SEGs is actually growing rather than narrowing.
Figure 1: HE participation rates by social class (1960 to 2000)
(Figures derived from DfES 2003:7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lower SEGs (3,4 and 5)</th>
<th>Upper SEGs (1 and 2)</th>
<th>Percentage gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participation rates for young adults from lower SEGs increased by 13 percentage points over the 40 years between 1960 and 2000. Over the same period, participants from professional and non-manual occupational backgrounds rose by 20 percentage points. While the gap in participation between the two broad classes in 1960 was 23 percent, in 2000, it had risen to 30 percent. Viewed differently however, the same figures suggest that there has been more than a threefold increase in the proportion of Lower SEG students between 1960 and 2000, while there has been less than a doubling of the proportion of Upper SEGs (albeit from a higher base) over the same period.

It should be remembered that 40 plus years ago, overall participation in HE was extremely low. Only about six per cent of the relevant age cohort participated in a small and elite system. Of these the vast majority were white middle class and male (Fuller, 1999). The very different expectations about the purpose, function and availability of university meant that the route was pursued by small minorities of most social groups, and not just those from working class backgrounds. Put another way, it is important to be cautious in making comparisons about people’s participation behaviour across time periods as the historically situated political, institutional, social and economic contexts of educational decision-making changes need to be taken into account when comparisons are drawn.

The DfES (2003:2) has argued that ‘raising standards of education and attainment at school level is the best long term strategy to widening participation in HE’. The enduring disparities in attainment at school level between children from different
classes have been noted as a key contributor to differentiated attainment and thus participation in HE. For example, while only 19 per cent of young people from working class backgrounds currently gain two or more A-levels, 43 per cent from non-manual backgrounds gain the same number of A-levels. At GCSE, 30 per cent of children from unskilled professions achieve five or more passes compared to 69 per cent from professional backgrounds (Gorard et al. 2006). In Gorard et al.’s recent review for HEFCE of the barriers to WP in HE, the authors argued that patterns of A-level attainment are a good proxy for social class: They argue that the use of attainment as the key determinant of entry to HE is discriminatory. Developing this logic, Gorard et al. suggest that participation could be radically widened through the adoption of a policy of open access:

…a more consistent policy of abolishing the need for prior qualification and the system of selection in terms of qualification – overcoming (inverse) ageism of the current system – would transform the HE sector. It would truly widen in addition to increasing access (Gorard et al. 2006: 124 original emphasis)

This rest of this overview of WP in HE policy is structured in three main sections. Section One focuses on the rationales that have been associated with the WP in HE debate. Section Two traces the evolution of WP in HE policy since the early 1960s. The final section offers some concluding remarks and emerging questions. The paper is accompanied by three appendices. Appendix A describes the DfES strategy framework (2003) and identifies the initiatives that have been introduced to address the WP problem as it is conceived by the government. Appendix B summarises the main barriers to participation and identifies gaps in the WP research base (this appendix is also relevant to the literature review being prepared on choice and educational decision-making (Paton, 2007 forthcoming). The final appendix (C) presents the HEFCE ‘student life-cycle’.

Section One: Rationales for WP
Five broad and often overlapping rationales for WP can be detected in the literature: political, economic, equity and social justice, lifelong learning and the social capital rationales. These are outlined in turn.

The political rationale for WP
An educated citizenry is considered as an essential ingredient for nurturing a democratic and socially cohesive society. Some of the world’s leading modern democracies such as the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand have very high
records of HE participation, although their records on social cohesion are mixed. Societies often associated with high levels of social cohesion such as the Scandinavian countries have consistently scored highly on literacy, educational attainment and participation over the years. For example, available OECD measures of adult literacy indicate that Sweden and Norway have the highest scores on all measures of literacy across their adult populations (Brown 2000) with Sweden recording the highest literacy rate among its 16-65 age population. In terms of participation in post school education, again Sweden, Finland and Norway have the highest recorded percentage per population of people who complete tertiary level education. The contribution an education citizenry make to the economic and social progress of a country is significant and constitutes a formidable rationale for politicians to invest generously into WP programmes.

While the packaging and careful allocation of educational privilege has sometimes been used as a tool for sustaining class differences, education has long been promoted by international bodies such as the United Nations and UNICEF as a ‘right for all’. In the UK, there has been what Scott has termed the ‘massification of HE’ (1995) which has been underpinned by the desire to foster wider participation. This University of Bristol statement epitomises this view of WP.

WP aims to encourage pupils in local state schools to consider HE and to promote the fact that education should be a right not a privilege for the rich (Bristol WP Policy 2004)

The economic rationale for WP

Given the dramatic changes in society and the economy, and with the emergence of the ‘knowledge economy or information society’ (Castells, 1996), the perceived demand for workers with multiple and transferable skills to engage with complex tasks and technologies has led countries to invest more in HE, and to encourage more of their citizens to participate in HE (Gibbons et al. 1994). The knowledge economy is essentially seen as one in which there is a shift in production from manufacturing of material goods to information processing activities. It should be noted that there are lively debates around the existence and character of the so-called knowledge economy. Some writers, particularly from the labour process tradition, are highly sceptical and argue that the key trend is towards the intensification of work rather than upskilling (see for example, Lloyd and Payne, 2003). However, successive governments have thus developed policies to increase the proportion of the population gaining HE level qualifications as a strategy for
improving national competitiveness, as there is a perceived causal relationship between investment in HE and national economic advantage. This economic rationale has underpinned policy attempts to increase participation in HE in the UK over the past twenty to thirty years and particularly under the Conservative Governments of the 1980s and 1990s (Smithers, 2001); it has also been adopted under ‘New Labour’. Department for Education and Skills (DfES) recent documents, ‘21st Century Skills-realising our potential’ (2003b) and its HE policy document, ‘The Future of HE’ (2003a) argue strongly for WP in HE as the most effective strategy for meeting the new manpower needs for the 21st century economy.

In a fast-changing and increasingly competitive world, the role of higher education in equipping the labour force with appropriate and relevant skills, in stimulating innovation and supporting productivity and in enriching the quality of life is central (DfES, 2003a para 1.3)

**The equity and social justice rationale**

Linked with the political motive, the equity and social justice argument for WP assumes that the life-chances of individuals are disadvantaged by the rationing of educational opportunities, usually to those already in relatively strong socio-economic positions. Achieving greater equity is likely to involve compensatory reform in HE aimed at breaking down existing barriers to participation. This has underpinned attempts to ‘facilitate the access of those socioeconomic and ethnic minority groups which have been traditionally excluded from participation in HE’ (Naidoo 2000:25). In the recent HE White Paper (DfES 2003a), the emphasis has been placed on issues such as Fair Access which the government argues is at the heart of creating social justice and equity in society:

> Education must be a force for opportunity and social justice, not for the entrenchment of privilege. We must make certain that the opportunities that HE brings are available to all those who have the potential to benefit from them, regardless of their background. This is not about preventing active discrimination; it is about working actively to make sure that potential is recognised and fostered wherever it is found (DfES, 2003a: 67)

Under New Labour, therefore, the policy discourse has moved beyond increasing participation to improve economic competitiveness, to include the notion of WP as a strategy for equalising opportunity and ensuring that the potential of groups across all sectors of the population is recognised.
The lifelong learning rationale for WP

Contemporary policy interest in lifelong learning was foreshadowed nearly a century ago in the 1919 Education Act and was clearly articulated as a concept in the UNESCO report of 1972 (Faure 1972). Conceptualised in the context of adult learning, where issues of formal, non formal and informal education and learning dominate, this report called for state support for all forms of adult learning to be made universally available. Essentially this was a call for equal opportunities as existing in the primary and secondary school sectors to be applied to the tertiary level of education. The lifelong learning concept was defined in the report as having the opportunity to learn throughout life. Several themes for lifelong learning were developed which have led to the emergence of policies such as:

- The validation of formal and non formal learning and experience as part of admissions into HE (Accreditation of Prior Learning APL)
- The provision of targeted guidance and counselling to those entering HE through non traditional routes
- Encouraging networking and the development of communities of learning
- The promotion of work-based learning and forms of participation in formal educational provision

The social capital rationale

The concept of social capital is central to the recent OECD publication, the ‘Well being of Nations’ (2001). The report’s authors Healey and Cote suggest that while the concept of ‘well being of nations’ is difficult to pin down, four factors seem to be relevant:

- Sustainable consumption flows
- Sustainable capital stock, physical, natural, human and social
- Access to wealth via resources and income
- Subjective well being and life satisfaction

Healey and Cote then go on to argue that nations with high levels of educated people tend to be placed high on the index of social well being. For example, studies have found that for OECD countries, each extra year of full time education corresponds to a rise in human capital of 10% which, in turn, is associated with an increase in output per capita of about 6% (Basanini and Scarpetta 2001). The social capital of nations in
terms of trust, interdependence, understanding, health, safety and healthy lifestyle choices all appear closely linked to levels of education. Thus investing in WP seems to be a rational policy option for those seeking to increase social capital as a means to achieving national well-being.

At the European level, it has been recognised that the drive towards equity and social cohesion has become a clear political goal. The Budapest Declaration of the Council of Europe for example calls for:

A new strategy for social cohesion promoting a more tolerant and just European society based on solidarity, shared values and a common cultural heritage… (Rougaas 2001:10)

This policy steer has led to a significant research effort among academics across the EU to identify what social cohesion means and how education may affect it. Factors that constitute socially cohesive societies have been identified and include empowerment; participation in educational, social and economic activities, associational activities; the existence of supporting networks; collective norms; trust; safety and a sense of belonging. Research undertaken across OECD countries demonstrates that countries and societies with high levels of educational participation at tertiary levels tend to score highly across these measures of social cohesion (Forest and Kearns 2001).

In this section we have identified the range of rationales which are relevant to the push for WP in HE. In the next section we outline the evolution of WP in HE policy since the Robins Report was published in the early 1960s.

**Section Two: The evolution of WP policy since Robbins**

In tracing the development of WP policy in England, Greenbank has recently suggested that the Robbins Report of 1963 ‘set the tone for a more equitable system of HE’ by arguing that expansion needed to embrace the idea of ‘better use of under-utilised potential especially among those from lower socio-economic groups’ (2006: 143). In coming to this conclusion, Robbins was responding to the first principle in the terms of reference given to his National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education:

There should be maximum participation in initial higher education by young and mature students and in lifetime learning by adults, having regard to the needs of individuals, the nation and the future labour market. . .
During the 1960s when the sector expanded through the launching of new campus universities, the age participation index for the 18-23 age group rose rapidly from 6 to 14 per cent. It continued to rise gradually but slowly throughout the 1970s and early 1980s before gathering pace. From the late 1980s to the start of the new millennium the age participation index rose from just under 20 to 33 per cent (Blanden and Machin, 2003). There were at least two important factors that contributed to this increase. First the then Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker (1986-1989), established the principle that university financing would follow students. This encouraged universities to enrol more students as a way of increasing their income. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, the ending of the binary divide in 1992 was accompanied by the introduction of similar (finance follows students) funding arrangements for the ‘new universities’. As a result, the former polytechnics had the financial opportunity to expand to meet growing demand.

The Conservative governments of the eighties and nineties developed policies and financial arrangements which enabled them to preside over a significant increase in student numbers. However, commentators have argued that their approach derived from an ideological argument based on the importance of the market, which was considered to offer the most efficient way of allocating resources ‘with any resulting inequalities being seen as natural and necessary for the economy to run efficiently’ (Loxley and Thomas 2001). As a result of this, concerns about disadvantage and social exclusion were generally absent from government rhetoric (Ross 2003). Instead, the Conservative’s focus was on increasing participation in HE via market driven expansion and creating a more highly skilled workforce for reasons of improving the UK’s economic competitiveness (see for example, DfEE 1994).

Hoggart (1996) has argued that the expansion of HE, ‘confirmed that there was far more talent in the country than we had guessed or were willing, out of class-and-culture meanness, to recognise’ (1996:42). British definitions of human ability and of human educability have over the last century become progressively more generous, and comparisons of participation rates in England and Wales with Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (never mind France or Japan) suggest that elitist assumptions about a strictly limited ‘pool of ability’ have proved to be false. In the words of Patterson: ‘There is no fixed ‘pool’ of potential students: people respond to opportunities that are available.’ (1997:44)
In its 1997 manifesto, New Labour saw itself as offering:

…a different political choice: the choice between a failed Conservative government, exhausted and divided in everything other than its desire to cling on to power, and a new and revitalised Labour Party that has been resolute in transforming itself into a party of the future. We have rewritten our constitution, the new Clause IV, to put a commitment to enterprise alongside the commitment to justice.

The emphasis was on the balance between creating an enterprise economy while ensuring justice and equality. Education was to be the number one priority of an elected New Labour government and its policy in this area was to promote greater expansion of educational provision and raising quality at all levels and in particular to encourage participation especially across the formerly under-represented groups.

_Dearing, the NCIHE Report (1997)_

The Conservative government, supported by Labour, commissioned a new National Committee of Inquiry in to Higher Education (NCIHE) led by Ron Dearing but the Committee reported after the Conservatives were voted out of power in 1997. WP was not a central concern of the NCIHE report with discussion, based on work by Robertson and Hillman (1997), appearing towards the end of the document. The main thrust of the Dearing recommendations relating to WP were based on the premise that students from lower socio-economic groups were failing to access HE because of poor qualifications, low aspirations and flawed educational decision making (NCIHE 1997: 101-113): in other words, their weak representation was attributed to their ‘deficits’. As such, according to Greenbank (2006), the NCIHE focused largely on issues of aspirations, applications and admissions and had little to offer in relation to the later stages of ‘the student life-cycle’ which focus on retention and the transition to employment.

The NCIHE report endorsed greater collaboration between providers as a means of WP and especially interventions which increased the flexibility and range of provision. In particular, it recommended that the expansion of HE should mainly be at sub-degree level with ‘ladders and bridges’ developed to encourage the transitions to full degree attainment and from attendance in FE colleges for sub-degree work to HE colleges for the honours level study. The report also emphasised the need for institutions to embed a strategic planning element into the WP agenda:

HEI’s should devise a clear policy about its strategic aims for participation with particular reference to those groups who are known to be under represented.
and that it should monitor admissions and participation against those aims.  
(NCIHE Paragraph 7.22:107)

In terms of funding, the NCIHE recognised the need for greater funding of HE and recommended that students should make a flat rate contribution to their tuition. It also recommended that means tested maintenance grants should continue to be available for the poorest students. New Labour accepted Dearing’s recommendations on tuition fees but chose to withdraw all maintenance grants. Top up fees were introduced following the HE Act of 2004 and have been implemented in 2006-07 for the first time.

Overall, the NCIHE had impact on the development of HE policy through recommendations in the following specific areas:

**Raising aspirations:** through HEFCE, money was allocated to institutions to develop strategies for addressing low educational aspirations, raising achievement, and promoting progression to HE and embracing lifelong learning.

**Collaboration:** Additional funds to be allocated to institutions to support young people from families without a history of participation in HE by developing links with schools in disadvantaged areas. A collaborative model was also linked to the creation and development of new Foundation Degrees.

**Sub degrees:** In order to make HE more accessible, affordable and appealing to a wider range of people, government committed itself to a significant level of funding to expand sub-degree level provision through the introduction of two year Foundation Degrees. This innovation was designed to contribute to the WP agenda by appealing people from more diverse socio-economic backgrounds than the traditional honours degree.

**Strategic Planning:** The need for strategic planning was endorsed by the new Labour government and HEFCE. All HE institutions (HEIs) were required to submit institutional WP statements including strategies and action plans which included periodical targets.

**Post-Dearing**
Whereas the Robbins Committee had interpreted participation as the ‘percentage of the age group entering HE’ (1963:12), as part of the NCIHE’s output, Brian Ramsden, the Chief Executive of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)
argued that this definition of participation should be broadened beyond simply enrolling on a course (1997). To understand the ‘total participation’ of minority groups in HE, he claimed, ‘it was necessary to study their achievements, their outcomes and their involvement in the higher education experience as a whole and this includes participation in teaching and in research’ (1997:7). These proposals took the debate far beyond counting the numbers of students from target groups who enrol on courses within HE; they offered, in fact, a redefinition of equality, from equality of access to equality of outcome, a tension which had permeated the huge debate about educational opportunity since the publication of James Coleman’s famous report on Equality of Educational Opportunity in 1966. In this regard, too, they extended the territory on which Dearing had framed the WP discourse and helped to prepare the ground for a more holistic concept of WP to emerge. The key policy expression of this was the development of HEFCE’s Student Life Cycle (Greenbank, 2006), the key elements of which have been designated as the cornerstones for developing strategies for WP and for Total Quality Management of HE (HEFCE various). The life cycle approach provides a basis for illuminating the processes and activities that occur at critical stages and extending from pre-admissions HE awareness through to the successful completion of study and further progression. It can be argued that the cycle is situated within a lifelong learning paradigm (Tuckett 1997)

The key elements of the cycle (see also diagram at Appendix C) are:

- Raising aspirations: aimed at primary, secondary, FE and parents. Many universities now have university experience days, events for parents, school university partnership schemes and school visits to universities.
- Preparation for HE: giving assistance to those preparing to enter HE. Significant examples include the development of access courses and summer schools in many universities.
- Admissions: giving credit to students who complete access courses or summer schools at stage 2. Activities aimed at this phase of the cycle should as much as possible remove barriers to admission.
- Induction: preparing students for learning in HE through diagnostic tests, workshop support, tutorials and peer support.
- Moving through the course: continuous support throughout the course and the development of flexible progression routes for students.
Successful progressing into employment: supporting students as they make the transition from HE to work through career management skills, personal development profiles, work experience, integrated key skills into programmes of study.

Thus HEFCE has begun to encourage a more holistic approach to WP than had been evident in the Dearing report and has fostered this through the student life-cycle and government endorsed allocation of funds to HEIs to develop their WP activities. These included projects designed to attract more young people from under-represented groups and to promote Foundation Degrees as a key vehicle for achieving this goal. Examples of post-Dearing HEFCE funded initiatives included, Excellence Challenge (2000) and Partnerships for Progression (2002) (see Appendix A for details). HEFCE also developed the mechanism of target setting as a policy lever on the WP behaviour of HEIs and subsequently began to publish data on the achievement of Performance Indicators measuring the extent to which the student population has been diversifying (these include, for example, percentage of students from State schools, percentage from lower SEGs, and percentage from low participation neighbourhoods).

Policy development 2003 onwards – moving beyond the deficit model?
Greenbank (2006) has characterised the latest government White Paper on HE (2003) as a reiteration and development of existing policies but as in some ways lagging behind contemporary thinking on WP. In terms of continuity it persists in: foregrounding the importance of aspiration raising by promoting Aim-higher (incorporating Excellence Challenge and Partnership for Progression); reiterating the role of FDs and target setting; and allocating financial support via HEFCE and the LSC to the establishment of regional Lifelong Learning Networks. Overall, WP has been moved to the centre ground of HE policy-making as evidenced by HEFCE (2003) making ‘fair access’ its first strategic objective. In terms of lag, Greenbank (2006) suggests that the White Paper does not sufficiently foreground the Student Life Cycle model, or the notion (being taken up by HEFCE) that the ‘HE offer’ itself must change to meet the needs of a more diverse student population. The White Paper also still carries the suggestion that under-representation (of certain groups) can be attributed to individual deficit rather than being (mostly) a consequence of institutional conservatism. The new policies introduced in the White Paper revolve around ‘top up fees’ and access agreements to be monitored by the newly created OFFA.
Overall, Greenbank (2006: 160ff) offers three main criticisms of the White Paper’s approach to WP:

- policy formation excludes those at whom it is targeted: ie under-represented groups
- policy formation continues to be *ad hoc* and piecemeal
- WP approach is too timid, in particular, OFFA is seen to lack ‘teeth’ as it does not clearly require HEIs to increase the proportion of students from under-represented groups by accepting lower entry level grades.

In a recent paper, Jones and Thomas (2005) argue that there are three broad policy approaches to fair access and WP, and assess where the thrust of government policy lies. The first approach is labelled the ‘academic strand’ and represents a deficit model. Here uneven participation rates are attributed to the low aspirations of certain socio-economic and cultural groups; HEIs are not expected to alter their curricula and organisation of provision to attract and recruit from the under-represented populations: It ‘seeks to attract ‘gifted and talented' young people into an unreformed higher education system’ (ibid, p.615)…In this purview the gifted and talented are defined as ‘those young people with the talent to access universities with the most demanding entry requirements’ (DfES 2005: 16 cited in Jones and Thomas, ibid: 617)

The second approach is described as ‘the utilitarian strand’. In similarity with the academic approach, this strand focuses on the ‘inadequacies’ (eg low aspirations) of under-represented groups but also highlights their weaker levels of educational attainment. Jones and Thomas suggest that: ‘ostensibly this appears to be a kind of ‘double deficit’ model (ibid: 618). The primary concern of the utilitarian approach is the relationship between HE and the economy; strengthening this relationship through increasing the responsiveness of the HE sector to the perceived needs of industry underpins this perspective: ‘very crudely stated, utilitarians blame the sector and, often in practice, potential entrants’ – as both should foreground the requirement to contribute to economic success in their behaviour and decision-making. Jones and Thomas argue that curricular reforms such as the development of work-based HE and the proliferation of higher level vocational programmes are indicative of attempts by some HEIs, particularly those that have gained university status in recent years, to adopt a utilitarian approach.
Finally, Jones and Thomas invoke a more radical model, ‘transformative participation’ to shine a light on what they perceive to be the weaknesses of the first two deficit approaches. They argue:

...a transformative approach to access must stress the idea that higher education should be changed to permit it to both gauge and meet the needs of under-represented groups. Rather than being predicated on deficit models of potential entrants and positioning students as lacking aspirations, information or academic preparation, transformation requires serious and far-reaching structural change...which is to be informed by under-represented groups.’ (ibid: 619)

The approach draws on radical understandings and interpretations of adult education to identify its key characteristics, for example, by referring to Friere’s (1972) argument that the knowledge and interests of under-represented groups should infuse the form and content of provision. Jones and Thomas acknowledge that, as yet, examples of the transformative participation strand are rare and, to this extent, the model can be seen as something which they think policy should aspire to, if a more equitable distribution of HE is to be achieved. They conclude: ‘It can be argued that the White Paper emphasizes the utilitarian strand in combination with the academic approach. There is, regrettably, little or no evidence of a transformative approach.’ (ibid: 623). The effect of the White Paper and the attempts of successive governments to increase and more recently widen participation is likely to be an increasingly fragmented and diverse HE sector. Existing approaches to WP are also associated with certain sorts of institutions with the ‘academic approach’ linked to selecting universities and the ‘utilitarian approach’ to recruiting universities.

Interestingly, there may be something of a tension in Jones and Thomas’ critique. On the one hand they call for a more radical reform of HE provision but on the other they are concerned that more diverse types of provision will reinforce a divided system (even if in absolute terms they attract a wider population in to HE). Hence, they expect the academically well qualified middle class young people to continue to ‘hoover up’ the traditional style of HE experience available from the elite selecting institutions: whilst, those from under-represented backgrounds are more likely to participate in new forms of ‘utilitarian’ HE, designed to appeal to a broader range of applicants but which do not share the same status or currency. There is some evidence that some of the most inventive approaches to recruitment, curriculum design and assessment are taking place in relation to work-based and vocational HE (see inter alia Brennan and Little, 2006; Connor and Little, 2005; Nixon et al. 2006), and through the increasing availability of ‘HE in FE’ or in ‘dual sector’ institutions
(Parry 2006). These developments may be in areas which do not have the status of honours degrees in traditional academic subjects, but which on the other hand may be pioneering the sorts of transformational approach to WP, which may be necessary if in-roads are to be made in to those ‘hard-to-reach’ groups targeted by policy makers and by those concerned with under-representation in HE on the basis of socio-economic disadvantage.

**Section Three: Conclusions**

This brief review of the policy literature has traced how the discourse has changed from a focus on *increasing* to a focus on *widening* participation in HE. In particular, Labour governments since the late 1990s have presented the rationales of economic advantage and social justice as inter-dependent and as mutually important underpinnings of their WP policies. Recent reviews of WP have pointed to the ongoing dominance of deficit explanations for the continuing under-representation of certain social groups. Some commentators have called for a more radical approach to addressing this ‘problem’. For example, Jones and Thomas (2005) call for an approach which locates the ‘blame’ for uneven participation with the sector (particularly the elite universities) and seeks a solution which involves transforming ‘the offer’ in to one which appeals to those who are currently not responding to WP policy initiatives. Gorard (2006) on the other hand, questions whether universities should all adopt ‘open access’ approaches on the grounds that qualifications serve as proxy indicators of social class (rather than merit).

However, shifting the onus for change from individuals to institutions could still be constructed as offering a deficit model of those who do not participate in HE. The underlying assumptions in the approach remains one which privileges the HE route implying, therefore, that it should be experienced by a more diverse population than hitherto. There is little in the policy literature which presents a positive picture of ‘non-participation in HE’, the terminology itself creating a negative image. At best there is a ‘policy silence’ around those who choose not to participate, pursue alternative routes and who have different concepts of what constitutes success.

In a welcome recent study, Watts and Bridges (2006) warn of the dangers of ascribing and determining values on behalf of an unsuspecting generation of young people. They argue that the institutionalised wisdom of schools, imparted both overtly and covertly to young people is that going to university after school is good and anything else is not so good or outright bad. While this may resonate with the policy
discourse, its net impact on young people is that these young people will be more likely to see themselves as failing if they do not embrace a university experience at some point in their life course and indeed especially if they fail to do so immediately after school. Based on a qualitative study of young people in the east of the UK who left school with little or no desire to enter HE, Watts and Bridges (ibid) found that such young people have different, rather than low aspirations and that these different aspirations lead them towards other valued lives and lifestyles. They base their arguments on Michael Young’s seminal writings on ‘The rise of meritocracy’ in which it is argued that people deal with mundane jobs, low status and low esteem by what has been termed ‘counter systems or counter values’ which validated their own lives and provided a source of hope and aspiration denied them in an economically and socially stratified society based on either birth or intellectual merit. Using Sen’s thesis (1999), which argues that ‘educational resources are only valuable to the extent that they enhance individual well being…’ (cited in Watts and Bridges 2006:268), it follows that individuals lead lives that they value and have reason to value. It is probably the value system which encourages non-participation rather than the perceived obstacles that any WP agenda should address.

In the light of this review, our project provides an opportunity to engage with and challenge the contemporary hegemony of the WP in HE policy discourse by contributing to the weak evidence base on the education and career decision-making processes of those currently not applying to or experiencing HE.

The paper concludes by asking some fundamental questions which may have important implications for both the current research and future work on this subject.

1. Given the evidence for and against the key assumptions behind WP, what should be the overarching values underlying research on non-participation?

2. How will these values underpin the design of research instruments, the data collection methods and the analytic frameworks for decoding the research data?

3. In the majority of cases, the individual’s destiny in life is predetermined by their class in society. How far does WP address class issues and how far should the design of our study reflect and draw from non participants belonging to different classes in British society?
4. Does our research have an interventionist agenda and/or will it end with the creation of new understandings about how non-participation manifests itself and develops through networks of intimacy?

5. How could research on WP contribute to current government intentions of introducing vocational HE?
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Appendix A: DfES strategy and interventions post 2003 Act

The shades of meanings associated with WP could be viewed from four broad perspectives which have shaped both operational and strategic decisions at institutional levels in UK HE. Branding these perspectives as the four As, the DfES and Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) have argued that HE institutions could meaningfully contribute to WP by raising **Attainment** and **Aspirations**; reaching out to more students to encourage **Applications** by a wider diversity of students and by ensuring and regulating fair **Admissions** policies and practices.

*The raising attainment perspective of WP*

Figures from Universities UK (2005) show that about 90% of students from all class backgrounds who get two or more A-levels go to universities. This strengthens the argument that the principal way to address the WP issue is through raising learning and teaching standards so as to increase attainment at lower levels of schooling allowing young people to achieve the requirements for university entry. Once this threshold is achieved, HE becomes the most favoured destination for these young people.

A range of initiatives have been put in place by government to tackle the issue of raising attainment at various levels in society. These include programmes aimed at providing support for very young children and their families such as the **Sure Start Programmes and Early Excellence Centres** established principally in deprived areas. Most of these centres provide one-stop facilities where families can access high quality integrated care and education services. A recent evaluation of the impact on young children and their families of one such centre by researchers at the University of Southampton concluded that:

> the majority of evidence from parents and workers suggested that children using the Lets Play Together (LPT) sessions benefit tremendously... and show improvement in their social and emotional behaviour, language and speech and their readiness for pre-school (Bourne, Maringe, Warren-Adamson & Smith 2006:41)

However, the full impact of these initiatives has not yet been determined although the media in particular has generally been rather sceptical about whether the achievement gap between pupils accessing these services and those from well off backgrounds is being reduced.
Other initiatives aimed at raising attainment in primary schools include the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. Introduced in all schools since 1997, these strategies are reported to have:

… led to significant advances in achievement for all groups at primary school level… but more so for children from disadvantaged homes who have made above average gains in both English and Maths (DfES 2003:8)

At secondary level, the Key Stage 3 strategy was introduced to raise standards for all pupils with a specific focus on providing support for those at risk of underachieving. Reports from the government inspectorate have indicated ‘improvements in teaching and pupils’ attainment in schools that have been utilising the strategy’ (Ofsted 2004:23). Other programmes targeting secondary schools include:

- **The Excellence in Cities** programme, launched in 1999 was designed to offer additional support to schools in urban areas
- **The Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances (SFCC),** which provide additional funds to schools which need extra help
- **The Playing for Success programme,** an initiative which provides out of hours study facilities at top football and other sports clubs, noted as having made ‘significant impact on the attainment of participating pupils, particularly those from less advantaged backgrounds’ (DfES 2003:9)

The 14-19 reforms have also been aimed at improving standards and choices for all young people so that more are able to succeed in their education and progress into skilled employment. To incentivise participation and progression, the **Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)** has been introduced to help keep young people stay in full time education post 16.

Government has thus been highly active in attempts to raise standards of attainment for pupils and students at various levels. Since Labour came to power in 1997, the percentage of pupils achieving five good GCSEs has risen from a national average of 38% to 55% in 2005. Figure 2 below provides a summary of randomly selected GCSE results by Local Authority obtained from Government Statistical releases issued for young people in England for the 2003/04 year. 16 LEAs (about 10%) were randomly selected from approximately 168 across the country.
## Figure 2: GCSE Results by Local Authority

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEAs</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>Percentage increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of 15 year olds achieving 5 or more A* - C at GCSE by LEA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barking and Dagenham</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bournemouth</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambridgeshire</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>57.9%</td>
<td>Due to Local Govt reorganisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devon</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>55.3%</td>
<td>Due to Local Govt reorganisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gateshead</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Havering</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kingston Upon Hull</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>43.1%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincolnshire</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norfolk</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
<td>52.3%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oldham</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>50.2%</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rochdale</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somerset</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
<td>56.1%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southampton</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surrey</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>60.5%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walsall</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
<td>45.9%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wirral</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Adapted from Government Statistical Releases Education at [www.labour.org.uk/filledadmin/admin/labour/user](http://www.labour.org.uk/filledadmin/admin/labour/user) posted on 20 October 2005 and accessed on 10 August 2006

Figure 2 above clearly shows the following:

- Across the LEAs, a net percentage increase was recorded in the numbers of young people gaining 5 or more GCSEs grades A* to C between 1997 and 2005
• In this sample, Southampton and Bournemouth recorded the smallest increases, with figures for Southampton falling significantly lower than the national average*

*This strengthens the rationale for undertaking the study on non participation in Southampton.

The raising Aspirations/Applications perspective of WP

The issue of raising aspirations is much more complex than attainment raising. This is because aspirations, being a social term are more difficult to define, identify and measure in the same way we would identify, define and measure attainment. Some of the more widely used criteria for defining, identifying and measuring educational aspirations have been based on the following:

• Distribution of performance across social classes
• Entry to HE by social class
• Participation in HE by type of university
• Applications and university preferences by social class

Research conducted around these criteria for assessing educational aspirations suggest that a key strategy to widening participation in HE lies in raising students aspirations especially for those coming from disadvantaged background.

Performance, aspiration and social class

One of the longest-established trends in British education is the relationship between social class and educational attainment (Gillborn and Mizra 2000). Put simply, the higher a child's social class, the greater are their attainments on average. Nevertheless, the authors argue that the relationship is not universal despite clear differences in achievement between social classes as inter group differences also exist to a notable extent in many cases. However, although there is widespread agreement among social scientists and researchers on the relationship between social class and educational attainment, there is little agreement on what actually constitutes social class. There are numerous social class classifications that have been developed over time, but three of the most widely utilised are:

• **The Weberian class system**: advanced by sociologist Max Weber is based on a three component theory of stratification which includes ownership of means of production, educational status and political affiliation
• **The stratum models of society**: divide society on the basis of social strata. The simplest are two strata divisions of society differentiate the powerful from the weak; Three strata models incorporate a middle class and multi strata models such as Paul Fussel’s which classifies American society into nine classes.

• **Marxian class model**: Karl Marx defined class in terms of the extent to which individuals or groups had control over the means of production arguing that all human struggles are struggles over the control of the means of production

Indicators of social class in British Educational research have tended to use the following:

- Manual and non manual labour representing low and middle classes respectively
- Eligibility for Free School Meals as an indicator of social disadvantage
- Ethnic origin, with minority ethnic groups generally considered as working class

However, there are clear hazards inherent in any classification system although the bulk of the evidence suggests that inequality of attainment between social classes has actually grown since the late 1980s (DfES 2003). While there is no clear causal relationship between performance and educational aspiration, and if we take educational aspiration to mean a desire and motivation to remain in full time education and progress beyond compulsory stages of schooling, then clearly, statistics on these measures become key indicators of the distribution of educational aspiration among different groups in society.

Sewell and Shah (2004: 559) have argued that:

> It is a sociological truism, evidenced by a number of studies, that children of higher social class origins are more likely to aspire to high educational and occupational goals than are children from lower social class origins.

However, as improvements in attainment have grown across all social groups over time, so too have participation and progression rates. Three broad theoretical frameworks in sociological research literature have been used to explain differences in educational attainment, participation and progression (Jaeger and Holm (2005). The first is the socio-economic perspective which suggests that parental effects, especially father’s occupational status, class position, and income provide the strongest and most stable influence on young peoples’ educational attainment and aspiration (see for example Treiman and Yip 1989, Shavit and Blossfeld 1993, Muller and Wolfgang 1993, Goldthrope 1996 and Jaeger et al. 2003). The second is a
cultural reproductionist perspective Bourdieu (1977a, 1977b, and 1984). The cultural capital of the home is comprised mainly from parents’ levels of education, cultural tastes and aesthetic dispositions (Bourdieu 1984). It is argued that cultural capital is significant in that it conveys to children a practical as well as a normative depiction of the value of education. Children, as well as their parents, thus tend to choose the types and levels of education with which they are most familiar and which appear to have the most positive normative inclinations (Bourdieu 1977b). The third is what is referred to as the cognitive ability perspective (Jaeger and Holm 2005) which basically argues that intellectual ability and motivation of the individual are significant in determining educational attainment and progression. There is however some disagreement whether cognitive ability alone influences educational attainment. While some studies have indicated that cognitive ability has a strong influence on educational attainment (see for example Savage and Egerton 1997, Bond and Saunders 1999 and Heckman and Vytlacil 2001), others have only established a non causal relationship between the two (see for example Hauser and Huang 1997, Breen and Goldthrove 2001).

In the Universities UK publication ‘Social class and Participation’ (2002) the point is made that the greatest challenge for universities is to reach out to pupils especially those from lower social classes in schools to make applications to HE. This comes on the back of findings which suggest that it is the process of applying itself rather than institutional admissions policies which create a socially differentiated enrolment and participation landscape in UK HE. For example, while 66% of students from upper class backgrounds with 30 A-level points apply to Russell group institutions, only 58% from low class backgrounds apply to the same institutions (UCAS Performance Indicators 2002). There is a tendency amongst students from low class backgrounds to submit applications to the less prestigious institutions regardless of the fact that their A-level performance is equal to or better than that of their counterparts from advantaged backgrounds. While this may be due to a variety of factors, it clearly signifies differences in aspiration between groups of students from different social class backgrounds.

Regarding raising aspirations as an aspect of the WP agenda, government has put in place a range of initiatives of which the Aim Higher programme is the most prominent. As its name suggests, the Aim Higher initiative was developed by government as a strategy for raising students’ aspirations to participate in university level education. In the scheme, schools and colleges are provided extra government
money to enable them to work with universities to give young people a taste of university life, benefit from master classes and student mentors and have opportunities to attend university summer schools. The Royal Bank of Scotland and NatWest also sponsor a road show which gives clear information to students in schools and colleges about the benefits of HE.

In addition, HEFCE and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) have joined forces to establish the Partnership for Progression initiative which creates regional networks of partnership, building on the work of the Aim Higher programme to further widen participation. Since 2004, the Partnership for Progression has been incorporated into Aim Higher.

The DfES has also established the Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth based at the University of Warwick to provide for the most academically able students aged 11-16. However from 2004, the programme has been broadened to include students up to age 19. The Connexions service was set up to provide advice and guidance through tailored one on one help to enable young people make the right choices and decisions post 16; with a particular emphasis on ensuring or encouraging participation in education, employment and/or training.

The creation and development of parallel vocational qualifications in schools needed to have a reciprocal development in HE in order to encourage progression. Since the majority of students taking vocational subjects in schools tend to be from the lower class backgrounds, failure to create university level learning programmes for them would be equal to imposing further restrictions to opportunities to participate in HE. The upgrading of former polytechnics to university status was partly aimed to create such opportunities. However, government is investing heavily into new high quality vocational Foundation Degrees to provide full or part time learning opportunities for adults in the work place who wish to further their education and enhance their careers and progression opportunities.

Further measures by government designed to encourage participation by students from low classes include the establishment of a Higher Education Grant of up to £1000 a year for students from low income families. This will be discussed in more detail in a later section on the new fees regime taking effect this September 2006 in universities across the country.
The fairer Admissions perspective

Since 2004, over 470,000 people apply to universities and HE colleges every year (UCAS data sets). As expected, each of these applicants wants to be sure that their application is considered fairly. While A-levels will remain the gold standard for admission to universities, increasingly, it is being recognised that they do not always provide a foolproof guide to the potential of a student to succeed in HE. Indeed for some, A-levels act as a barrier to participation in HE. There is thus a growing recognition that, at least for the more mature students, other criteria should be used to demonstrate ability to benefit from HE such as completion of access courses, or other forms of written work including personal statements.

Given the new HE fees economy, in which students will be expected to contribute significantly to their HE experience through payment of increased fees, albeit through income contingent loans, the importance of fair admissions policy becomes central to bolster the confidence of the new HE consumers and in aiding their choice and decision making about places to study and courses to pursue. The Vice Chancellor of Brunel, Professor Steven Swartz was commissioned by government ‘to lead an independent review of the options that English HEIs should consider when assessing the merit of applicants or their courses and to report on the high level principles underlying those options’ (Swartz 2004: 2). In its attempt to develop fairer admissions guidelines for HE, the commission examined a range of issues including:

- The uneven awareness of and response to the increasing diversity of applicants, qualifications and pathways to HE
- The dependence of university offers on predicted grades which are not confirmed by results
- The need to identify and seek to remove any barriers to application by prospective students

The commission recommended that fairer admissions should be based on the following key principles across all HEIs in the country.

- A transparent admissions system which offers clear guidelines to applicants and is open to scrutiny by interested parties
- Admissions based on a combination of achievement and potential
- Admissions based on valid and reliable assessment methods
- Admissions which seek to minimise barriers to applicants
• Admissions to be administered by a professional admissions framework
In particular, the commission recommended that students should apply to universities
when they have received their A-level results to allow them to choose the most
appropriate institutions and study courses. Professor Swartz commented:

It is hoped that the system would encourage bright students from non
traditional backgrounds, those without a history of going to university to apply
for prestigious universities already armed with high grades (BBC news online
2004 Tuesday 14 September).

The recommendations have been broadly accepted by the HEIs although critics,
among them student bodies and university tutors consider the post results
admissions policy as less fair as they will force institutions to focus admissions on
performance at the expense of other criteria. Mathew Andrews, secretary of the
Admissions practitioners group commented:

We will be driven to look purely at grades rather than taking account of a
broader application…we won’t have time to do that, in fact we won’t have any
reason to because we will have the students’ actual grades. It will be a
quantitative rather than a qualitative decision (BBC news online 2004
Tuesday 14 September).

The above provides a broad perspective through which the idea of WP can be
conceptualised. The four perspectives of attainment, aspirations, applications and
admissions discussed above have provided a platform upon which the UK HE sector
has interrogated issues of WP. It is equally important to review some of the key
arguments which have been advanced in support of WP, not just in this country but
more broadly as well.
Appendix B: Barriers to WP and gaps in research evidence base

Gorard et al. (2006) have compiled the most comprehensive and up-to date review of WP research and the barriers to participation in HE. They begin by arguing that the persistent inequalities in participation characterising lower levels of education in terms of socio economic status, gender and ethnicity among other characteristics are largely reproduced in HE. They however bemoan the lack of clear data sets to substantiate these widely acknowledged relationships. The concept of barriers is also brought under substantial scrutiny, concluding that:

The metaphor of ‘barriers’ to participation is an attractive one that suggests an explanation for differences in patterns of participation between socio-economic groups and contains its own solution- the removal of the barriers (Gorard et al. 2006:5).

However, due to the long term nature of the determinants of participation and non participation, learning trajectories of young people are ‘both shaped by and constrain learning experiences’ (ibid: 5). This, in the opinion of Gorard et al. suggests that life course approach to analysing and understanding participation and non participation is a more efficient model than using the barriers metaphor. Despite these arguments, a wealth of research evidence has been accumulated over time which has utilised the barrier metaphor to examine participation and non participation.

The most widely used classification of barriers to participation is that by McGivney (1993) who has identified three groups of influences on participation in HE. The first are situational barriers. These include direct and indirect costs of going to HE, opportunity costs, including loss of time, earnings and career progression, distance from learning opportunity created by individuals personal circumstances. The second category includes what have been termed institutional barriers. These include admissions policies and practices, timing and scale of provision, and a general lack of institutional flexibility created by the structure of available opportunities. The third are called dispositional barriers. These describe individuals’ motivation and attitudes to learning which may be a result of previous educational experiences or indeed a lack of suitable learning opportunities to suit individual learners and their learning needs.

Hudson (2005) has examined barriers at department levels in universities and found the following as negatively impacting on institutional WP agendas:
• Traditional assessment procedures
• Staff fears about lowering standards
• Staff lack of awareness about diversity
• Organisational resistance to change
• Buildings not suitably adapted to handle disability
• Lack of transport for rural students
• Psychological distance and separation from families

Archer and Hutchins (2000) interviewed about 100 non participants in an inner city deprived area of London and identified the following as the key barriers to WP from the perspective of the non participants.

• working class culture of resistance to participation
• HE culture as alien and middle class
• Vocational and educational advice
• the hierarchy of UK universities
• do alternative routes widen participation
• differential participation by gender
• history of family non participation
• conceptions of success and happiness
• differential risks of participation
• financial barriers to participation
• debt aversion
• racism
• retention of working class students
• graduate employment prospects

Few studies have focused on qualitative analysis of the experiences of non participants. Bowl (2004) has conducted a longitudinal study with 37 adults who were considering returning to HE utilising semi structured interviews and group discussion to elicit participants’ perceptions of their school lives and the shaping of their educational and career aspirations. Bowl found that non participants talked of the experience of difference in their early school experiences. The differences related to where they were usually sat in class, how they were meant to do low-level work and their own consciousness of racial prejudice. Difficulties with schooling were also cited frequently in the stories of these participants, including unrecognised and misrecognised dyslexia, bullying, and the fact that most of these difficulties went
unnoticed by the teachers. A third category of experiences involved family information and support. Many of these non participants did not have strong family support, were children of migrant families or had parents with little understanding of English education system. The lack of support also spilled to aspects their schooling especially the careers advice and guidance. Many non participants felt that they were pushed to do vocational subjects, damaging their aspirations in the process and later finding themselves in less well paid and more insecure work.

*Strong Research Findings*

Research by Bahram (2003) on behalf of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) claims the following as fairly well established research findings on WP and non participation.

- children from better off backgrounds are far more likely to participate in HE than children from poorer backgrounds
- children from poorer backgrounds tend to enter HE later and are more likely to study part time
- however, in terms of likelihood of participation, in 1970, the young people from higher social groups were 6 times more likely to go to HE while in 2000 the ratio has decreased to 3 times
- once pupils achieve A levels, students from all social groups are more or less equally likely to participate in HE
- demand for HE is relatively insensitive to price
- the most important reason young people from poorer backgrounds decide not go to HE is the desire to earn money followed by a feeling that HE is just not the sort of activity engaged in by people in their social class
- young people from poorer backgrounds believe strongly that the returns from HE are strongly associated with type of institution and many believe that they will not be able to secure a place in a relatively good institution. This provides a link between concern for WP and fair access

Similarly, Universities UK (2002) has identified what it calls myths about WP. These include the following:

- Access strategies are and should be located only in particular kinds of HE institutions (they should be in all institutions)
• The pursuit of access strategies is the last resort of institutions desperate to recruit
• Entrants from lower social groups present a threat to the maintenance of standards in HE
• By helping students across the board, participation by young people from lower social classes can be widened
• Cherry picking only gifted and talented children from low income groups will widen participation
• Part time study is more appropriate for young people from lower social classes

Although the fairly well established findings associated with WP have a relatively strong empirical basis, there is a growing concern among academics and researchers alike that some of the key assumptions behind WP do not stand up to scrutiny.
Appendix C: The HEFCE Student Life-cycle

- Awareness raising
- Preparation for HE
- Fair Admissions
- First steps in HE
- Flexible progression
NON-PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
Decision-making as an embedded social practice

A team from the Schools of Education and Social Science at the University of Southampton has been awarded research funding as part of the ESRC’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme’s focus on widening participation in higher education (HE). The two year study (April 2006-March 2008) will examine the extent to which HE is conceived as ‘within the bounds of the possible’ for non-participants and will explore how attitudes to HE and decisions about non-participation are embedded within ‘networks of intimacy’, consisting of family members and close friends. It hypothesises that such networks provide a critical context within which individuals' thinking about participation is embedded.

The research involves two overlapping parts: stage one will draw on existing large-scale survey data to develop a macro-level account of (non-) participation in the general population and a critique of the extant literature on educational decision-making. The implications of the emerging issues will be explored in the qualitative study (stage two). This will involve case studies of sixteen networks of intimacy. We will identify non-participating adults at different stages in the life-course and who may, or may not be economically active, to provide ‘entry points’ to each network. Each case study will involve an initial structured interview with each ‘entry point’ individual to determine educational and employment histories, household and family composition, and details of their self-defined network of intimacy, followed by semi-structured interviews with each of these individuals plus five ‘network members’ who are identified as sources of influence in the decision-making process. The focus at the macro and micro levels on non-participants and on adults at various stages in the life-course make this research distinctive, as existing widening participation research has tended to focus on non-traditional applicants and students, and particularly on adults below the age of 30.

The geographical focus of this study will be the Southampton and Hampshire area, which offers a mixed picture in terms of HE participation. Southampton has one of the lowest rates in the country; only 1 in 10, 18 year olds entering full-time undergraduate courses, whereas in parts of Hampshire the rate is much higher. The research will provide opportunities for representatives of local, regional and national organisations with a direct interest in participation issues to be involved in the development of the research through involvement in the project’s advisory panel. To maximise impact, the study’s findings and recommendations will be communicated through a series of targeted events for policy makers and widening participation practitioners.

Project Team
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NON PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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