

Characterising recent research into widening participation

*A commissioned annotated bibliography and report prepared for the
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by

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Context

This exercise was commissioned as a five day consultancy project for the purposes of unearthing the recent published research in widening participation in higher education (HE) in the UK. The brief pinpointed the areas of participation, retention, and completion as well as the variables of class, gender, religion, age, disability, and race/ethnicity to be covered by the search. Given the rapid timeframe in which this output was to be produced and the wide-range of research that can be considered to fall under widening participation, it can at best only provide a snapshot rather than a full account of the entire body of recent published research. Nonetheless, the report does offer a commentary on the trends within recent widening participation research which it is hoped will help further to inform the Expert Group on avenues where research might be commissioned.

Introduction

Widening participation (WP) to higher education is an area of political, social, and economic importance for the 21st century. In both the Dearing Report (1997) and the White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (2003), increased and widened participation to HE are central foci. In order to carry out the goals embodied in the rhetoric of widening participation, it is necessary to understand the factors responsible for pushing or pulling individuals into higher education as well as those which prevent participation.

As research plays a large role in illuminating these factors, a brief search exercise into recent widening participation research literature was undertaken. The aim of the following report is to describe the process and product of this search, recommend directions for additional development of a literature search and review, and suggest potential areas for research attention.

The meaning of “widening participation”

The term “widening participation” has multiple meanings and applications and can be linked to a wide range of policy, practice, and research. The Dearing Report, for example, focused on a general principle and not a specific definition: “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 . . .” (Dearing, 1997, Report 5, Intro, para 2). In *Strategies for widening participation in higher education: A guide to good practice*, the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) refrains from presupposing a definition of the term. Instead, the report reads: “there is no single

definition of widening participation and we have not tried to provide one. The guide uses the expression widening participation to *denote activities to target the individual groups that HEIs have identified as under-represented and to ensure their success* (italics added)" (HEFCE, 2001). Research into university staff members' understanding of the term is also varied and multiple. In a case study of a new university, most staff members interviewed expressed an understanding of widening participation which reflected only increased entry opportunities for underrepresented groups (Andreshak-Behrman, 2003). Others, however, envisioned widening participation as a concept that permeates the entire student experience, is a staff issue as well as a student issue, is linked to the community at large, and is not limited by statistical underrepresentation.

The research literature search process

Despite the broad nature of the concept of widening participation, much of the theory, research, and practice of widening participation can be conceived of as relating, in some way, to the "student lifecycle". The student lifecycle model consists of at least three major areas: pre-entry/entry; the student experience; and, employment/progression. Research and theoretical approaches to WP flag up the characteristics of students, institutions, and the environment that may be contributory factors to participation or non-participation. These factors have been culled from the existing literature, including US higher education modelling aimed at understanding the choices students make to attend university, which universities they aspire to attend, and whether or not they persist in their studies once at university (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Chapman, 1981; Litten, 1982; Tinto, 1993). Figure 1 illustrates these factors, all of which can theoretically apply across the three themes of the student lifecycle.

Figure 1

Factors Influencing Participation and Success in HE Across the Student Lifecycle

STUDENT-REALTED	INSTITUTIONAL
<p>Background Race/ethnicity Income Social class Disability Age Parent's education Family culture Religion Gender Geographic location</p>	<p>School attributes Social composition Quality</p> <p>University actions Recruitment activities Academic/admissions policies Opportunities for involvement in university life Social support Academic support Financial support Flexibility of learning opportunities</p>

<p>Personal attributes School achievement Self-image/identity Personal values Benefits sought Personality/lifestyle</p> <p>Participation influences Parents Peers University publications/information University staff Advice and guidance personnel Media</p> <p>Success influences University achievement Commitment to goal Attitudes toward finance Institutional fit Institutional commitment Satisfaction with course Academic integration Social integration</p>	<p>University characteristics Cost Size Courses Campus culture Geographic location Type of institution</p> <hr/> <p>ENVIRONMENTAL</p> <p>Employment conditions Economic conditions Cultural conditions</p> <p>Public policy Student financial support (amount, eligibility)</p>
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In terms of the exercise at hand, the “axes” of the *student lifecycle* and the *influencing factors* were taken as the general framework for understanding the current published research in WP in the UK. These factors may be seen as variables themselves in some cases or may represent a series of variables. Keywords were then developed using this framework as well as the sample literature found in the annotated bibliography. Hence, some keywords used (e.g. “teaching/learning”) may not be found Figure 1, but can be intuitively linked to areas of the table depending on the context of the research (e.g. “courses” or “academic support” or perhaps “satisfaction with course”).

Given the vastness of the concept of widening participation, the literature search undertaken and discussed herein represents, by necessity, only one approach and one segment of the overall widening participation picture. Along with the framework described above, the following parameters were used in the search and to create the sample bibliography:

- Published research (including evaluation and meta-research)
- Research published within the last five years (with notable exceptions)
- Research that is focused on the UK

Character of the research and its gaps

In characterising the WP research literature it may be useful to employ the questioning structure shown in Figure 2. In fact, it is probably possible to categorise WP literature as a whole -- that is, research, description of practice, theory, policy development and critique – in terms of this broad structure. With respect to the current research in WP, the majority of it lies in the top box. That is, research that seeks

to determine which factors influence which types of behaviours is fairly common. However, with reference back to Figure 1, the combination, interpretation, and expansion of these factors creates a wide array of research opportunities.

Figure 2

A Questioning Structure for Widening Participation

Q1.	What are the factors that impact upon participation and success¹?
Q2.	What are the interventions, policies, practices, and structures that can counteract factors that constitute barriers?
Q3.	What is the degree of success of these interventions, policies, practices, and structures?

Influencing factors. One of the most heavily covered factors is that of social class. This is hardly surprising given the underrepresentation of lower social class participants in HE. Social class can be linked, by and large, with school performance and, consequently, school performance with HE participation (Connor, Tyers, Davis, & Tackey, 2003; Forsyth & Furlong, 2000). Of course, individuals can and do overcome this barrier (Mac An Ghail, 1996). However, even when working class students do succeed in achieving entry to higher education, their options for study can be limited by other barriers such as finance and geography (Callender, 2003; Cormack, Gallagher, & Osborne, 1997; Forsyth & Furlong, 2000).

Identity issues have also surfaced through the literature as push/pull factors for participation in higher education. The different “cultures” that individuals identify themselves as a part of can impact their HE choices. This research can centre on class, age, race/ethnicity, and religion (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Archer, Pratt, & Phillips, 2001; Callender, 2003; Mac An Ghail, 1996; Modood & Acland, 1998; Preece, 1999; Warmington, 2003).

An individual’s identity and the values that they hold are thought to influence their level of aspiration toward higher education (Cleaver, Holland, Merrilees, & Morris, 2003; Connor et al., 2003; Haggis & Pouget, 2002; Preece, 1999; Thomas, 2001; Warmington, 2003; Woodrow et al., 2002). A lack of information or awareness of educational opportunity may also contribute to non-participation or enrolment on the “wrong” course (Callender, 2003; Connor et al.,

¹ “Success” is meant to be broadly interpreted here, applying to success in staying the course and achieving as well as to graduating and making a successful transition to the job market or onto another education or training course.

2001; Haggis & Pouget, 2002; Pearson & Koppi, 2002; Preece, 1999; Rhodes, Bill, Biscomb, Nevill, & Bruneau, 2002).

Intervention. Undoubtedly, the words of Basil Bernstein, “education cannot compensate for society”, still ring true. Nonetheless, is it possible to move among the factors and bolster those which are positive contributors and minimalise those which serve as barriers? Moving to the second box in Figure 2, one can theorise and put into practice strategies that seek to overcome barriers toward participation. Of course, this practice includes aspiration-raising activities, awareness raising, institutional efforts to meet the needs of (often very diverse) students during their university experience, and assist students in preparing for the job market². This is an important stage of the questioning structure and is most visible in actual practice and the description of practice. Such description is common in the “grey” literature (see *Areas for further search and review*).

What works? In the third box of the figure, research interests are again paramount; “measuring” the success of a given intervention, policy, practice, or structure is essential in determining whether or not it has any impact on participation. This is both difficult and important. Small-scale evaluation is often carried out which may serve the institution or programme at hand, but may not provide much in terms of rigor or applicability (e.g. Cleaver et al., 2003; Panesar, 1998). The difficulty in determining what is “best practice” is at least two-fold: practice which is “successful” at one institution, department, region, etc, is not always generalisable to another, given the complexity of context; second, establishing a chain of evidence between a certain intervention (e.g. a campus visit for a secondary school student or a supportive tutor) and an outcome (e.g. participation in the first case and achievement in the second) can be less than straightforward. A good discussion of these issues as well as examples of strategies is found in Thomas, Quinn, Slack, & Casey (2003). Nonetheless, this is a vital area of research to pursue. Large-scale, longitudinal research is largely absent in terms of determining “best practice”, but it might be progressed with improved data collection and the consistent use of student identifiers. The ability to “follow” students along their educational paths could provide important insights into “what works”.

² Examples of interventions and strategies are vast and they include: summer schools and campus visits; education fairs; induction and first year experience programmes; modularisation, semesterisation, and credit transfer; bursaries; basic and graduate skills support; student support services; peer tutoring; mentoring; internships; and so on.

Characterising further gaps

Along with the need for appropriate and rigorous approaches to understanding the outcomes of interventions, the present search of the research literature also points to areas which may need further investigation on all levels of the questioning structure:

Flexibility of learning opportunities. Despite the overall recognition of a need for “flexibility” in terms of semesterisation, modularisation, part-time study, and distance learning options, for example, the functioning of these structures as mapped against the needs of underrepresented students may warrant investigation. For example, some research has suggested that the use of technology to influence participation is far from certain (Gorard, Selwyn, & Madden, 2003) or simple (Pearson & Koppi, 2002).

The role of the media. The impact of print media, television, and film on choices in higher education (including intent to participate and type of course) might be examined.

Social integration/academic integration. Some investigation has been carried out into the impacts of institutional factors on the student experience and diverse students (Andreshak-Behrman, 2003; Thomas, 2002; Thomas et al., 2003; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Based on theoretical models (see Berger & Braxton, 1998; Tinto, 1993), studies could be carried out to replicate US studies that attempt to predict persistence (success, retention) patterns based on level of institutional involvement. Although caution need be used when borrowing instruments from other cultural contexts, it may be worthwhile to investigate validated instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (<http://www.indiana.edu/~nsse/>).

Organisational/campus culture. Despite the sometimes “slippery” nature of the term “culture”, work focusing on success at university might take the form of further understanding the impact of the culture of the campus on retention (see Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Macdonald & Stratta, 2001; Thomas, 2002; Trowler, 1998).

University staff. The support and contact students have with university staff before, during (and potentially after) their educational experience may have impacts upon this experience (Boxall, Amin, & Baloch, 2002; Tett, 1999; Turner & McGill, 2000). The issues surrounding staff behaviours and training have not been fully explored. Moreover, research in this area could take a wider view of WP that includes questioning the level of diversity of university staff (Carter, Fenton, & Modood, 1999) and taking this further to understand the possible relationships between staff diversity and the student experience.

Teaching/learning. Considering the theoretical importance of academic integration in retention, relatively little research has been targeted on understanding the impact of the dynamic teaching/learning relationship on student success (Haggis & Pouget, 2002). Additionally, little interest has thus far been taken on curricular content which might address such questions as: Can social justice be reflected in the curriculum? Is a multicultural or critical curriculum a factor in the performance of diverse students?

Areas for further search and review

There exists considerably more depth and breath to the widening participation literature than it is possible to express here. In order to move beyond this initial search and subsequent suggestion of research areas, one logical progression might be to the international literature in that access to HE is a global, 21st century issue. A search and review of the research published by the “usual suspects” (the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, EU nations) could prove particularly useful. At the same time, an investigation into the literature available from emerging nations may offer additional insights.

Secondly, there are a great deal of unpublished conference papers or other “grey” research and literature. One good source of such documentation is *Education On-line* (at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/>).

However, it is recommended that *depth* and not simply breath should be considered. As discussed, what constitutes widening participation is very broad and a more specific line of inquiry into the research literature could be pursued at this point. This could take the form of a search addressing influencing factors (Figure 1) that appear to be absent from the keywords in the annotated bibliography. Or, another approach might be that of formulating a set of questions or hypotheses to be “answered” by the research literature. Similarly, ascribing to a particular theoretical or conceptual framework and employing it to “scaffold” previous academic work may prove particularly useful to determine a research route to take.

Conclusion

To recap, this report has focused on a brief search of the widening participation literature on a UK-wide basis in terms of social characteristics and the student lifecycle. Whereas most recent research has focused on determining the nature of factors linked to participation, less has been done to determine the impacts of the interventions employed to mediate them. Much research is needed in

this regard. However, as not all influencing factors (Figure 1) have been sufficiently covered, it is suggested that a more detailed search be carried out to take another look at certain factors and that this should be bolstered by more specific framing questions or concepts.

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An annotated bibliography

Action on Access (2001). Analysis of initial strategic statements for widening participation: Report by Action on Access. UK, Higher Education Funding Council of England: 1-19.

England; evaluation

This report outlines the evaluation of the strategic plans of universities with respect to activities and initiatives to widen participation. The analysis reveals that universities place less emphasis on retention issues and even less on employability issues. Few links were observed between strategies at the university, highlighting a lack of 'joined-up thinking'. Target-setting and programme evaluation were found to be absent in many cases, although this is often because nature of programmes targeted at schools are such that it is difficult to measure the impacts.

Archer, L. and M. Hutchings (2000). "Bettering Yourself? Discourses of risk, cost and benefit in ethnically diverse, young working-class non-participants' constructions of higher education." British Journal of Sociology of Education: 555-575.

Social class; race/ethnicity; barriers; identity

"In this paper, it is suggested that differential rates of participation in HE both result from, and are intrinsic to the reproduction of, social class inequalities and processes of exclusion. However, the reproduction of inequalities occurs in a multitude of ways, across different sites and contexts." This argument is demonstrated through the use of discussion groups involving working class 16-30 year-olds who were not non-participants in HE (no. =109). The participants were of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. The findings section contains rich examples of the qualitative data collected. The authors conclude that although the participants understood the theoretical benefits of participation, they also saw it as "inherently risky". That risk is in the monetary costs as well as a loss of cultural identity. Furthermore, participants regarded themselves as outsiders to HE and "'knew' they would be disadvantaged within the HE structure, and considered themselves as more likely to fail."

Archer, L., S. D. Pratt, et al. (2001). "Working-class men's constructions of masculinity and negotiations of (non)participation in higher education." Gender and Education **13**(4): 431-449.

social class; race/ethnicity; gender; England; identity

This article discusses qualitative research which focuses on "decisions respondents had made about their own education" and "constructions of going to university". Sixty-four working class males from varied ethnic backgrounds who were considered nonparticipants in HE participated in this study. The researchers found that some of the constructions were shared among the men while other constructions were specific to ethnic or cultural group. The research participants held negative stereotypes about male

participants in HE, generally seeing them as inadequate males. Work defined most of the informants and study was seen as risky with no guarantee of a job or money. Additional findings are included that are related to the cultural background of the men which reflect both anti- and pro-participation sentiments. Among the conclusions reached, the authors argue that risks to male identity and social position were such that HE was not considered an option.

Bailey, M. (2003). "The labour market participation of Northern Ireland university students." Applied Economics **35**(11): 1345-1350.

Northern Ireland; employment; gender; religion; barriers

Given the shift from a grant system to a loan system, it follows that students may need to work during term-time in order to support themselves and their studies. The researcher flags up Northern Ireland as an interesting case in that 75% of students live at home during their studies, compared with 63% UK-wide he argues that this fact may impact on the youth labour market. The conclusions reached by the author are: "Female students are more likely to work than male students, that mature students are less likely to work than non-mature students, that Roman Catholic students are less likely to work than non-Roman Catholic students, that students living at home are more likely to work than student living away from home, and that an increase in the actual or predicted wage increases the probability of labour force participation." The author finds that the average number of hours worked per week is 17, and this may have several impacts. Theoretically, working this amount (or more) during term-time could adversely impact a student's studies. On the other hand, it may provide students valuable experience and make them visible to future employers. As for the youth labour market, Bailey questions how the limited youth labour market may be a barrier to higher education for students who need to live at home and work while they study.

Bamber, J. and L. Tett (1999). "Opening the doors of higher education to working class adults: a case study." Journal of Lifelong Education **18**(6): 465-475.

social class; age; barriers; teaching/learning

This article conceives of barriers to participation from the standpoint of "ability and attitude" as well as barriers at the "institutional and situational" levels. The research used to illustrate this point is based on the Lothian Apprenticeship Scheme Trust (LAST), in which "unqualified" individuals participate in a community education course combined with part-time work (hence, the apprenticeship element). Document analysis and interviews revealed: in the face of difficulties, those students who used support systems were most likely to succeed; non-traditional students need materials and courses that are at the appropriate level and develop study skills. They conclude that "class is not an abstract concept but is real and operative in the daily lives of the apprentices."

Borland, J. and S. James (1999). "The learning experience of students with disabilities in higher education - a case study of a UK university." Disability and Society **14**(1): 85-102.

disability

The experiences of physically disabled students are detailed in this study. Data for this study takes the form of student and senior tutor interviews as well as institutional documents and survey data. The framework for the study relies on understanding five areas of "activity and provision", such as support, resources, and the curriculum. Although university attributes influence the disabled students' experiences, the authors found that there are more universal concerns. "Four areas were seen as being the source of the most concern, they were disclosure, access, quality assurance and the moral basis of the institution's 'disability policy'." In terms of "disclosure", the appropriate persons were not always aware of students' needs. Access to the curriculum and to all areas of the campus and beyond remain issues. The quality of support that takes place after the initial set-up phase is a weak area. Lastly, the embeddedness of the "medical model" of disability is perceived as a barrier to full access.

Bowl, M. (2001). "Experiencing the barriers: non-traditional students entering higher education." Research Papers in Education **16**(2): 141-161.

transition; barriers; age; gender; race/ethnicity; England; information / awareness

This article details the "stories" of three participants in an ethnographic study of 12 mature women from ethnic minority backgrounds involved in an access to HE course. The main theme that emerges is that of the "frustrated participant". The researcher notes that the women have been involved in education throughout their lives but concludes that lack of guidance, advice, and support from the "official advisors" has made their journeys to HE less than direct. Once in HE, lack of money, time, and understanding are further barriers for the women. Despite its relevance to the curriculum content studied by some of the participants, issues of race and poverty were "not seen as legitimate for discussion in the classroom".

Boxall, M., S. Amin, et al. (2002). Determining the costs of widening participation: Report of the pilot study. London, PA Consulting Group for UUK and HEFCE.

student support; finance

This pilot study compared the situations of two HEIs - one a "red-brick" institution and the other a post-1992 university in terms of the costs associated with educating "widening participation" students. "The findings from this pilot exercise provide substance to the widely expressed view within the HE sector that students from non-traditional backgrounds are significantly more expensive to recruit, retain and progress through their HE careers than

the traditional 'norm'." These costs are not seen to be recouped through postcode funding or other types of funding. Staff reinforced the findings, largely stating that the time and human resources devoted to WP students is greater than that which is devoted to traditional students.

Callender, C. (2003). Attitudes to debt: School leavers and further education students' attitudes to debt and their impact on participation in higher education. London, Universities UK and HEFCE: 206.

finance; attitudes; non-traditional; values; employment; identity information/awareness; barriers

"This study aimed to investigate the impact of debt and perceptions of debt on participation in higher education (HE)." The author surveyed 2000 students who were either about to leave school or students preparing for HE in FE. One set of findings relates to the factors that are most and least associated with the choice to participate as well as those most associated with the position of indecision. Of these factors, it is interesting to note that ethnic minority status is one of the factors that is connected with participation. A second set of findings describes the values that accompany decisions to participate in HE. Unsurprisingly, those respondents in the lower social classes showed more debt-adversity, and their choices of where to attend and which courses were influenced by finance. This author concludes that information on finance issues is in need of improvement as "all prospective students had unrealistic expectations about the actual financial situation of HE students." Other valuable findings and conclusions can be found in this lengthy report.

Carter, J., S. Fenton, et al. (1999). Ethnicity and Employment in Higher Education. London, Policy Studies Institute: vii -77.

race/ethnicity; employment

Institutional surveys, staff surveys and focus groups were conducted to understand racial equality (or inequality) in HEIs in terms of employment. Also, relying on HESA data, the researchers found that certain minority groups are underrepresented, that individuals from minority backgrounds and women in all groups are more likely to be in fixed-term research posts and posts of lower status. Most focus group respondents have experienced some form of racism or discrimination. A lack of clear equal opportunities policy was also noted among institutions.

Cleaver, E., M. Holland, et al. (2003). Evaluation of Aimhigher: The Partnerships' View, DfES.

evaluation; aspiration raising

This evaluation of a government project took into account interview data with 42 partnership coordinators in order to understand the level of success of the programmes. Aim Higher (now combined with Excellence

Challenge) provides a wide range of activities including trips to universities, summer schools, curriculum enrichment for school-aged students. There was little ongoing evaluation of the project, and even this summative evaluation gave little information on Aim Higher's success in terms of promoting participation. The majority of the findings and conclusions are focused on the functioning of the programme, staff, and funding. However, staff perceived that summer schools and the HE visits made a positive impact on students and parents.

Conlon, G. (2001). The incidence and outcomes associated with the late attainment of qualifications in the United Kingdom. London, Centre for the Economics of Education, London School of Economics and Political Science: 30.

employment; age; gender

This report attempts to illuminate the questions around economic returns based on education received. In particular, Conlon focuses on adult learners in that previous research has not distinguished successfully between the returns to younger and "late" learners. This is seen as relevant within the policy context of widening participation and lifelong learning. The author uses available (if not optimal) data to understand the number of hours of additional training received mapped against earnings. The conclusions are not strongly stated, "however, it has been illustrated that there may be a sizable penalty in terms of hourly wages, hours worked and employment outcomes for late learners". The author suggests further research and analysis be undertaken with respect to the combination of vocational and academic qualifications, in that he cites early indications that this may bring the best returns.

Connelly, G. and M. Chakrabarti (1999). "Access courses and students from minority ethnic backgrounds." Journal of Further and Higher Education **23**(2): 231-243.

race/ethnicity; Scotland; barriers

Based on the rationale that access courses in Scotland do not recruit enough students from underrepresented groups, this study addresses ethnic minority participation on these courses. The authors collected data on ethnic minority participation, the process of recruitment, and equal opportunities policies. Some of the explanation of low minority participation is related to higher rates of employment and poverty. At the same time, the study suggests that possible racist attitudes and lack of understanding of the needs of the varied ethnic communities may also contribute to erecting barriers to participation.

Connor, H., S. Dewson, et al. (2001). Social Class and Higher Education: Issues Affecting Decisions on Participation by Lower Class Groups. London, DfEE: 127.

England; Wales; barriers; social class; finance; information/awareness

This report details a study which involves researching the influences over educational choices by potential entrants, current students, and non-participants in HE. All those in the sample are from lower social class backgrounds. The techniques used included interviews, focus groups, and postal surveys. Special attention is paid to students studying part-time instead of full-time. The researchers found that students from lower social classes are more likely to see education as instrumental, i.e. leading to a career and increased income. At the same time, those who do not choose (or have not yet chosen) HE have financial concerns including paying tuition fees, lack of certainty of income after completing a degree, working during term-time, and uncertainty concerning future costs and debt involved with participation. As for part-time students, the study shows that they are "more concerned about academic and financial issues", have "less parental support and more family commitments", and are "more likely to rely on personal savings and earnings while studying."

Connor, H., C. Tyers, et al. (2003). *Minority Ethnic Students in Higher Education: Interim Report*. London, DfES and The Institute for Employment Studies: 179.

England; race/ethnicity; social class; age; gender; aspiration; school achievement

A large sample of HE participants were interviewed for this study which addresses a range of issues along the "student lifecycle". The authors create a picture of minority participation in HE that indicates that although, in aggregate, ethnic minority students are overrepresentative of the population at large, different and more complicated patterns emerge when taking into account variables such as age, social class, and gender as well as choice of course. Aspirations and prior achievement are the biggest indicators of participation, but they are linked with a host of cultural, familial, and social factors. The study also raises the idea of a "new" influencing factor, that of "generation". This research did not find evidence of discrimination in the application process. During the student experience, differential rates of retention were noted among the groups. Higher unemployment at graduation is associated with a greater number of lower-prestige degrees obtained by ethnic minority students, although there is a leveling-out with white graduates after several years of employment.

Cormack, R., A. Gallagher, et al. (1997). "Higher education participation in Northern Ireland." Higher Education Quarterly(51): 1.

Northern Ireland; social class; religion

Available quantitative data and focus group data are relied upon in this article to illuminate the issues in HE participation in Northern Ireland. The analysis highlights the idea that caps on student numbers perpetuates the underrepresentation of certain groups. While less talented students can opt for applying to new institutions in other parts of the UK or the Republic of

Ireland, the cost of doing so can be prohibitive in many cases. The limited places is also thought to impact the participation of less geographically-mobile individuals.

Cormack, R., R. Osborne, et al. (1994). "Higher education participation of Northern Irish students." Higher Education Quarterly **48**(3): 207-225.

Northern Ireland; social class; gender; religion; age

The study is based on a series of student surveys which took place from 1980-1992 and focused on Northern Irish students. The survey data is comprehensive in that it focuses on social class, gender, religion, age, and course. The researchers also provide information on where different types of students choose to study, that is, in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, or new or old institutions in other parts of the UK. Among the conclusions reached through analysis of the qualitative data are: although women participants are the majority, subject choice may be linked to a "hidden curriculum"; low levels of Protestant males are HE participants despite diminishing manufacturing jobs; and, the Catholic working class participates in HE in higher numbers, suggesting they regard HE as "a route to social mobility."

Davies, P., R. Osborne, et al. (2002). *For Me or Not For Me? - That is the Question: A Study of Mature Students' Decision-Making and Higher Education*. London, DfES.

age; barriers; self-image

Within a context of declining mature student numbers, this qualitative study looks into "those subject areas and regions that accounted for much of the decline". Their findings show that the decision-making process for mature students is complex, and students often characterised their experience as one of having to "juggle" many responsibilities. Insufficient information on financial and institutional information serves as a barrier for students. Feelings of insecurity and risk entered into the equation in making the decision to participate.

Davies, R. and P. Elias (2003). *Dropping Out: A Study of Early Leavers from Higher Education*. London, DfES and Institute for Employment Research.

gender; age

Given the WP context, this report tackles the question of student retention. A large postal survey was sent to students who withdrew from HE institutions, and there was a 10% response rate. Follow-up phone interviews were also conducted. Results reveal that across age and gender, "mistaken choice of course" was one of the most frequently cited reasons for withdrawal. "Financial problems" was an important area for males and for mature females. Students said that they did not have sufficient information before deciding to

go to university, felt pressured by their schools, and some believed that they were not mature enough and needed a year off first.

Forsyth, A. and A. Furlong (2000). *Socioeconomic Disadvantage and Access to Higher Education*. Bristol, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and The Policy Press: 58.

social class; barriers; Scotland; school achievement

The issue of the gap in participation between social classes is addressed in this report. A sample of school-leavers in four areas in Scotland considered to be disadvantaged were used in the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. The researchers make a note of the difference between the "level of participation" in HE and simply "participation". In that disadvantaged school-leavers are often studying on less prestigious courses or at sub-degree level, this distinction highlights nuances otherwise masked. Additionally, less well-off students are more likely to study close to home and, consequently, may not be able to enrol on the most suitable course. The report also concludes that irrespective of social class, those "who did obtain suitable qualifications for entry to higher education, the labour market was rarely chosen as a post-school destination." In sum, school performance is a heavy predictor of post-compulsory choices, but the most able disadvantaged young people faced the biggest barriers in terms of geography, level of study, and prestige of course. Also see related article: Forsyth, A. and A. Furlong (2003). "Access to higher education and disadvantaged young people." *British Educational Research Journal* 29(2): 205-225

Gorard, S., N. Selwyn, et al. (2003). "Logged on to learning? Assessing the impact of technology on participation in lifelong learning." *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 22(3): 281-296.

technology; age; gender; race/ethnicity; geographic location

In the absence of empirical data that links information and communications technology (ICT) to widening participation and lifelong learning, this study uses data collection from nearly 6000 households in order to investigate possible impacts. The results of the study indicate that the impact of engaging non-participants is low. In fact, 53% of non-participants surveyed were not interested in taking up learning opportunities despite the accessibility provided by technology. Only 1% stated that distance was a barrier to continued education. The authors state: "Like educational qualifications, access to ICT is a proxy for the other, more complex, social and economic factors that pre-date it". In sum, the authors note that the claims among politicians and theorists with respect to technology as an answer to widen participation and create a learning society may fall short of the mark.

Haggis, T. and M. Pouget (2002). "Trying to be motivated: perspectives on learning from younger students accessing higher education." *Teaching in Higher Education* 7(3): 323-336.

non-traditional; teaching/learning; Scotland; aspiration; information/awareness

The study portrayed in this article is predicated on that fact that research into how young students (in particular) are impacted by teaching and learning in HE is thin, particularly within the WP context. Various data collection techniques were used to gather information on a small group of students who participated in an access to HE course targeted at young learners who did not achieve high enough grades on their Scottish Highers examinations. This was a pilot programme designed to provide students with the extra push needed to be successful in HE. Throughout the course, many students carried on feelings of "injustice and alienation" brought about through negative school experiences, but many overcame this negativity once beginning their undergraduate course. The researchers also note that students were not at all aware of what would be expected of them in terms of workload or what it takes to succeed. "Relationships and support" were also important to the students as well. These findings are interpreted in terms of how mass higher education implies a need for change to curriculum and teaching and learning processes.

Hall, J., S. May, et al. (2001). "Widening participation - what causes students to succeed or fail? I did all the assignments but I didn't hand them in because they were rubbish." Educational Developments 2(1): 5-7.

England; non-traditional; race/ethnicity; age; finance; self-image

The authors consider "who we can realistically widen participation to, what the triggers are in persuading these people to return to study and what factors affect their ability to stay on course" within the context of South Thames College/London Guildhall University. Sixty first-year students (who all had dropped out of the education system at some point) were interviewed in order to understand their thought processes throughout the course. All students were studying at HE level in an FE college. The authors cited overcoming self-doubt as a factor in staying the course, and that receiving this was aided by feedback on a first assignment.

Holloway, S. (2001). "The experience of higher education from the perspective of disabled students." Disability and Society 16(4): 597-616.

barriers; disability; awareness

"The purpose of this study was to find out from disabled students themselves about their experience in order to consider the implications for practice". Six students were interviewed, and university documentation was analysed with respect to the commitment and support given disabled students. The barriers that students must overcome to participate in HE include: sufficient personal and institutional funds; help from external organisations; and support at the departmental level. The experiences varied from student to student (and department to department). Although the ability for departments to "afford" certain types of support needed is an issue, a greater issue appears to be the lack of understanding of needs and the

willingness to meet them. The equal opps statement is seen to be "ambiguous", and although in other documentation there was evidence of a commitment to disabled students, the "lived experience reflects a different reality".

Johnston, V., G. Raab, et al. (1999). "Participation in higher education in Scotland: A geographic and social analysis." Higher Education Quarterly **53**(4): 369-394.

Scotland; social class; geographic location; culture

Geodemographics is used to illustrate HE participation by region in Scotland in this study. The measures used to predict participation were social class, level of education, housing tenure, male unemployment, car ownership, and use of public transportation to work. The findings show that, with the exception of car ownership, "all the socio-economic indicators . . . had a different predictive effect on participation." Areas of high participation were determined to be in conurbation locations of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dundee. Low participation is characteristic of Glasgow city, and the Central Belt and the South West, in part. Unlike in other areas where proximity to an HE institution is reflective of participation, in Glasgow this is not the case. The research concludes that low achievement in education is responsible for the Glasgow result. Further, the "results indicate that at the aggregate level, both economic and cultural factors influence participation and that to exclude on is to diminish the complex interactions of the two dimensions."

Mac An Ghail, M. (1996). "Class, culture, and difference in England: deconstructing the institutional norm." Qualitative Studies in Education **9**(3): 297-309.

social class; gender; race/ethnicity; teaching/learning; values; identity

This is an ethnographic study taking place over several years and in which the research participants were considered "school failures". It examines the complex identities of diverse students with a focus on working class "cultural values, attitudes, and orientations". The participants are Mac An Ghail's A-level sociology students who then proceed to university. This study is rather unique in that the research participants are also conducting research during the course of the study, and they are able to discuss issues from sociological as well as personal perspectives. The students evaluated the use of images and text in the depiction of the working classes and working-class students. Mac An Ghail's interpretations of the students findings indicate that the denial of social class realities and "discursive power" arrangements reinforce the class structure. The author also highlights the fact that this study is an example of how "socioeconomic conditions do not necessarily produce predictable outcomes" in that the participants moved from being "school failures" to successes in HE.

Macdonald, C. and E. Stratta (2001). "From access to widening participation: responses to the changing population in higher education in the UK." Journal of Further and Higher Education **25**(2): 249-258.

teaching/learning; non-traditional; age

MacDonald and Stratta's (2001) investigation of tutors' perspectives of non-traditional students finds that the past focus on pre-entry initiatives may have little impact on internal dynamics. The interview data reveals an approach to non-traditional students that equates equality and equity of treatment, focuses on similarities not differences, and one in which the institution is poorly equipped to target certain students. They conclude: "The response of the case study institution was to make a quick, strong policy commitment to the issues of widening access. The main practice following this was the modification of the admissions policy . . . There was little evidence that these changes might have other internal effects."

Modood, T. and T. Acland, Eds. (1998). Race and Higher Education: Experiences, Challenges and Policy Implications. London, Policy Studies Institute, University of Westminster.

race/ethnicity; gender; school achievement; England; values; identity

This edited volume relies on empirical data to "produce a clearer picture of the complexity" associated with "race and educational attainment" "by focusing upon a range of different key variables and their interactions". The book includes chapters that relate to: the experiences of ethnic minority youth in schooling; a closer look the "overrepresentation" of minority participants in HE by addressing "ethnic group differences"; the intersection of gender and race; institutional response to diversity in HE; and, ethnic minority student perspectives on the HE experience. The editors conclude with an insightful last chapter which ties together the results of the research discussed in previous chapters, commenting that changes are needed within the HE structure in order to provide a more just experience for minority participants.

Panesar, J. (1998). "Widening participation for Asian women." Adults Learning **10**(4): 25.

evaluation; race/ethnicity; barriers; age; England

This article reports of a feasibility study and programme evaluation involving the return of Asian women to education. The author begins with a lengthy list of barriers derived from visiting local education providers to understand the state of play within the Asian communities in Newham (East London). These barriers include: lack of awareness/understanding of opportunities and the system; language, finance, and family barriers. Hence, appropriate education and training fairs were run with the objective of engaging Asian women in HE. The Asian women and stall holders who attended took part in questionnaires to evaluate the event. The feedback was positive in both cases. However, it is noted that external factors (e.g. family

and financial matters) could not be solved by attending the fair, although the space to discuss the issues and the presence of legal and other services were seen as helpful. It is not clear if the author will be able to trace participants and measure outcomes in terms of enrolment.

Pearson, E. J. and T. Koppi (2002). "Inclusion and online learning opportunities: designing for accessibility." Association for Learning Technology Journal **10**(2): 17-28.

disability; technology; barriers; information/awareness; teaching/learning; evaluation

The rationale for this study lies in the belief that technology can aid in the teaching and learning processes for disabled and non-disabled students alike. Technology, however, can also be a source of obstacles. This study is an evaluation of the use of WebCT, a courseware package. Students in 30 courses evaluated the use of WebCT with respect to their disabilities. The problems encountered include: use of pdf files and certain symbols that a screen reader cannot process; traditional course materials simply "shoveled" on-line; use of colour not always appropriate for those with certain impairments. The staff survey revealed that they were not always aware of what made for accessibility and/or did not know in advance if they would have disabled students on their course. The authors conclude that tutors need structure and support in order to develop inclusive courses.

Preece, J. (1999). "Families into higher education project: an awareness raising action research project with schools and parents." Higher Education Quarterly **53**(3): 197-210.

race/ethnicity; religion; England; identity; employment; aspiration; information/awareness; parents

Given the uneven distribution of ethnic minority participants in HE, this small-scale study looks at why ethnic minority students choose to participate in HE and does so by engaging Muslim families in England through their children's schools. Most of the parents had never been to a university but believed that success in the job market now requires a university degree. However, parents also expressed a fear that the religious and cultural background of their children would be muted by a university experience. This "targeted intervention" aimed at raising awareness and possibly aspirations of the parents for their children was seen as successful in that it allowed "cultural space" to discuss issues and resulted in less anxiety about the negative impacts of HE on Muslim children.

Reay, D., S. Ball, et al. (2002). "'It's Taking Me a Long Time but I'll Get There in the End': mature students on access courses and higher education choice." British Educational Research Journal **28**(1): 5-20.

age; race/ethnicity; social class; gender; barriers

Reay et al state: "One of our aims has been to examine the dynamics of social class, ethnicity and gender in choice processes." This study documents this process for 23 mature students on an access to HE course. The researchers uncover that, unlike younger students, the mature students are more likely to find the process of education as important as the outcome of the degree. Finance, child care, and location of institution are also important factors for the students in the study. Gender and marital status play an important role, as well, in that these burdens are often an offshoot of associated responsibilities. These students often also search for a place they feel they "belong" and benefit from supportive relationships with peers. The authors give evidence of the relationship of gender with class and ethnicity.

Rhodes, C., K. Bill, et al. (2002). "Widening participation in higher education: support at the further education/higher education interface and its impact on the transition and progression of advanced GNVQ students - a research report." Journal of Vocational Education and Training **54**(1): 133-146.

awareness; transition; age; gender; race/ethnicity; barriers; information/awareness

This study focuses on the transition from GNVQ to undergraduate study based on support and skills issues. A group of 85 students were surveyed within further education colleges on business or leisure and tourism courses. Interviews were held with staff. "Cultural inertia, lack of communication and lack of money" appeared as barriers to progression. Further education staff did not seem current with the skill demands or (lack of) support structures within HE. The author recommends better communication and interface between FE and HE staff to overcome these barriers.

Stammers, N., H. Dittmar, et al. (1999). "Teaching and learning politics: a survey of practices and change in UK universities." Political Studies **XLVII**: 114-126.

teaching/learning; finance

This paper discusses results of a study which examined changes in the teaching and learning of politics amid rapid student growth and resource constraints. Seventy-seven departments of politics were contacted to take part in a survey to understand these changes. The researchers found that very little change has taken place in teaching/learning despite student numbers and resource issues. In fact, resource issues had less impact than student numbers. Overall, "broadly traditionalist approaches to teaching and learning" remain, although new universities were more likely to adopt "alternative pedagogy" than old ones. No direct reference is made to the change in the composition of the student body or to the differences in student intakes among institutions.

Tett, L. (1999). "Widening provision in higher education - some non-traditional participants' experiences." Research Papers in Education **14**(1): 107-119.

social class; barriers; race/ethnicity; disability

Tett reports on a research project dedicated to understanding the experience of non-traditional students involved in the Lothian Apprenticeship Scheme Trust (LAST). "The LAST programme was designed to enable community activists to work in their own communities whilst studying part-time." The data collected includes interviews with student participants, staff and other stakeholders, as well as documentation on the prior experiences of students. The findings were consistent with the literature which addresses institutional and cultural barriers that prevent students from participating in HE or cause them to withdraw from HE. The author asserts that the LAST project overcame barriers by focusing on "social change through education targeted at working-class communities which has prioritised the development of critical awareness and understanding" and "recognizing the value of their [the students'] lived experience". The researcher indicates that the programme did this by providing a "culturally compatible higher-education course environment" by engaging in proactive recruitment and flexible scheduling and delivery so students can combine study and work and family, for example.

Thanki (2000). "The Ulster way? Student support systems and choice under devolution." Regional Studies **34**: 889-893.

Northern Ireland; meta-research; finance

Thanki uses several sources of research data to discuss the impacts that tuition fees is having on HE participation. Paradoxically, there is a negative interpretation to small increases in applications: this may mean that students need to study closer to home to combat increased study costs. A University of Ulster survey reveals that 62% of students who work believe that working during term-time has a negative impact on their studies. The students "feel it has affected their academic performance", as working "impinges on available study time, attendance at lectures, the ability to complete assignments and on examination preparation. There are also physical effects such as tiredness and stress." The author suggests that policymakers look at ways other than student fees to fund HE in order to increase social inclusion.

Thomas, L. (2000). "'Bums on seats" or "Listening to voices": Evaluating widening participation initiatives using participatory action research." Studies in Continuing Education **22**(1): 95-113.

evaluation

This paper argues that widening participation (WP) activities must be underpinned by research and evaluation which is non-positivist. The research addressed in this article focuses on an evaluation of a strategic partnership involving a variety of educational institutions in a particular area. The participants in the partnership employed "link workers" who served as a link between the local communities and the colleges. The research undertaken is considered participatory action research (PAR) in that the link workers served

as active participants in the evaluation of the project. The paper evaluated the effectiveness of the PAR "as a mode of evaluation in the context of widening participation". The authors conclude that PAR is a valuable tool in the evaluation of widening participation activities in that it shares values with WP in that it is inclusive and promotes "learning and empowerment" among participants.

Thomas, L. (2001). "Power, assumptions and prescriptions: a critique of widening participation policy-making." Higher Education Policy 14(4): 361-377.

non-traditional; barriers; aspiration; social class

This article examines assumptions made in widening participation policy and uses research evidence from interviews and surveys with stakeholders in an Excellence Challenge programme which focused on playing and performing music. The programme was intent on raising aspirations of young people who might not otherwise consider HE. However, the programme was open to all students. Over 400 students returned surveys and some students participated in focus groups. Staff were also interviewed. The research found that students who are already achievers are able to take more advantage of the opportunities the programme offered, as they are more inclined to already be familiar with a musical instrument and have encouragement from parents. The main conclusion is that programmes like Excellence Challenge can in fact benefit middle class students more than the target group, thus widening the gap between them. Policy makers are cautioned to regard with care such initiatives which are reliant on false assumptions, which in this case, equated equality (the ability for all students to participate in the programme) with equity.

Thomas, L., J. Quinn, et al. (2003). *Student Services: Effective Approaches to Retaining Students in Higher Education*. Stoke-on-Trent, Institute for Access Studies: 87.

student support; non-traditional

The theoretical basis for this report lies in the connection between the "integration" of students into the life of the university and student success. The study produced a set of case studies of interventions at UK universities which were highlighted as "best practice" in self-reports requested by the researchers. The study also looks at common themes that developed throughout the data collection process in relation to student services. The overall findings relate to themes such as: "the changing role of student services; resource implications; staff needs; diversity of student need; incentives for HEIs to deliver high quality student services; disincentives". The authors caution that the ability to generalise the results is difficult on two counts: 1) the context-bound nature of approaches does not permit generalisable conclusions; and, 2) given the complexity of variables that contribute to retention, it is difficult to make a direct link between any particular intervention or type of intervention and student retention.

Turner, R. and P. McGill (2000). "Innovation in continuing education: guidance of part-time students." Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning **2**(1).

age; Scotland; evaluation

This study features a student survey of guidance services for adult students. As it is often assumed that adult students have more complexity in their lives, they may value accessible guidance services. Adult students who are users of the service were sent a postal questionnaire. The authors found that the "widely distributed publicity" made guidance accessible. The respondents indicated that guidance "gave them confidence" and clarified study and employability options.

Warmington, P. (2003). "You need a qualification for everything these days. The impact of work, welfare and disaffection upon the aspirations of access to higher education." British Journal of Sociology of Education **24**(1): 95-108.

aspiration; age; England; social class; identity

This study is focused on the question of why mature students take part in access to HE courses. The author rationalises that although there have been attempts to understand why students drop-out of such courses, less effort has been put into why they begin them. The researcher interviews mature students as they progress through the access course, and finds that the students "might be more accurately characterised as *disaffected workers* than disaffected learners" in that low-paid employment or reliance on the State featured as motivation for undertaking the course. Also, the study reveals that students on the course believed in the rewards of gaining qualifications and felt the effort was necessary to avoid the transmission of "a culture of poverty and exclusion to their children".

Woodley, A. and J. Brennan (2000). "Higher education and graduate employment in the United Kingdom." European Journal of Education **35**(2): 239-249.

employment; meta-research

Given the context of massified higher education, the authors examine the early destinations of university graduates using HESA and Institute for Employment studies data and other research. They highlight findings including the following: unemployment rates of graduates are linked to the subject studied at university; students who have had work experience are more likely to have an offer of employment before graduation; and, there is a skills gap between the expectations of employers and the skills that graduates possess. They conclude that monitoring graduates is complex and is growing more in accordance with diversification of the job market and internationalisation. Further, Woodley and Brennan note that most employment studies are output driven do not take into account the *input* that has taken place prior to higher education (cultural capital). By the same

token, over time many graduates will pursue postgraduate education or training and then what is assumed to be the impact of the first degree becomes more diffuse.

Woodrow, M., M. Yorke, et al. (2002). *Social Class and Participation: Good Practice in Widening Access to Higher Education*. London, UUK, HEFCE, EAN.

social class

A follow up to *Elitism and Inclusion* (1998), this report compares current conclusions to those reached in 1998. The data is in the form of case studies of "good practice". The conclusions reached fall into areas such as: funding, aspiration raising, part-time education, collaboration, quality, and student issues.

Yorke, M. and L. Thomas (2003). "Improving the retention of students from lower socio-economic groups." *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* **25**(1): 63-74.

England; geographic location; social class; non-traditional; teaching/learning; barriers

This study is an analysis of six English institutions performing better than the benchmarks set for them by HEFCE in terms of WP and retention. The analysis reveals factors that are seen to be "common denominators" across these institutions. These factors are student-centered and included: a commitment to 'the student experience'; a focus on the importance of teaching/learning; the universal involvement of staff in student support issues and activities. Further factors of importance appear to be: diversifying the curriculum; placing importance on induction and first year students; formative assessment; personal tutoring; dealing with student finance issues; supporting the "exit" of HE into the workplace; staff development.