



# FROM ACCESS TO ENGAGEMENT AND BEYOND

Stuart Billingham



**GREAT DEBATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

FROM ACCESS TO  
ENGAGEMENT AND  
BEYOND

*Great Debates in Higher Education* is a series of short, accessible books addressing key challenges to and issues in Higher Education, on a national and international level. These books are research informed but debate driven. They are intended to be relevant to a broad spectrum of researchers, students, and administrators in higher education, and are designed to help us unpick and assess the state of higher education systems, policies, and social and economic impacts.

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# FROM ACCESS TO ENGAGEMENT AND BEYOND

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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## FOREWORD

I have known Stuart for approximately half of his career, and although we have both lived in and around York for much of that time, we tended to meet in London at various policy-related gigs, or further away from home on the conference circuit. Since his retirement we have met less often, but we have remained in contact as Stuart has continued to play an active role in widening engagement and promoting social justice in and through higher education. Despite our geographical proximity and shared interests, we have taken different career paths: Stuart spent much of his time in a senior leadership role, making a difference to students at York St John University and building partnerships in the local community and internationally. My journey has been less conventional, but has combined researching widening access, student retention and success, and institutional transformation, with the application of my findings to improve student equity (access, experience and outcomes) in higher education. But we have a number of beliefs and values that unite us. First, we acknowledge that gaining access to the academy is not enough; students who have been marginalised and historically under-represented also need to have an affirming experience in higher education, which is relevant, enjoyable and potentially life-changing, and they need to be able to succeed within higher education and beyond in ways equal to more privileged counterparts. Second,

colleges, universities and other higher education institutions need to change; it is not just about opening the metaphorical doors, but it is about embracing, valuing and learning from diversity and transforming the academy. These themes are dominant in the papers Stuart has curated and shared here. Whenever we shared a conference platform, his contribution was always engaging and thought-provoking, and that is exactly what this anthology is.

Although this is a retrospective collection covering the major issues in the field of widening participation over the last 30 years, it is surprisingly contemporary. As Stuart illustrates by sharing book chapters, conference addresses, editorials and blogs, many of the challenges were unresolved in the past, and remain both contentious and frequently more pressing than ever. The first chapter is an excellent example of this: it challenges the exclusive focus on access and discusses the role of pedagogy (i.e. access to what, not just access). In particular, Stuart problematises the concepts of anti-racist education and multiculturalism, which are not the same. Multiculturalism is a sub-set of anti-racist pedagogies, and it involves ensuring the curriculum reflects cultural diversity; anti-racism goes beyond this by challenging these perspectives and processes, and examining the reproduction of racism. It requires us to understand more about how certain knowledge is privileged, while other knowledge is suppressed and ignored – or who and what occupies the centre and the margins of ideas and society – and the higher education curriculum. Such an approach also offers us new ways of knowing, researching and teaching – and can be embraced in all contexts. The contemporary (post-2015) focus on decolonising the curriculum is founded on this anti-racist approach, but is often operationalised as multiculturalism.

Another theme addressed by this collection (Chapter 2) is the role of social processes in learning, and the concentration on the formal curriculum, while the informal curriculum is largely ignored. This is still very evident today, in the actions of managers, staff and students; my own research on commuter students demonstrated this myopic view on the taught curriculum and a disregard for the wider higher education experience. Similarly, my research on independent learning demonstrates a lack of understanding of its purpose by students and a lack of attention by staff to structure and scaffold the learning experience outside of the classroom. Together this creates a reliance on inappropriate and individualistic reproduction and memorising techniques, rather than a rich, immersive and collaborative learning experience. The pivot to online learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic similarly focused on the formal curriculum, and many students did then voice their frustration that they were missing out on the wider student experience. Stuart argues that learning communities and communities of practice are well-understood concepts in the US context, but in the UK in particular they are a missed opportunity to change the structures and cultures of higher education. For example, Lifelong Learning Networks were primarily externally facing and played to institutional strengths, rather than creating challenging and stimulating communities for change.

An enduring theme across this anthology is the idea of widening engagement, rather than more passive ideas of widening access and participation – and central to this is the idea of institutional change. Chapters 3–5 in particular address the theme of institutional transformation and introduce the idea of a whole institution approach. In Chapter 3 Stuart identifies three key areas for change: embedding or mainstreaming widening participation across the institution, employing a non-deficit discourse, and internal partnerships,

particularly bringing learning and student support together. The concept of engagement and institutional change is further explored in Chapters 4 and 5; the idea of in-reach is introduced and the concept of ‘learning reconsidered’. These three chapters draw on Stuart’s experience of marshalling change in one institution, bringing together learning, support and professional services, and considering ways in which students, communities and other stakeholders can shape the experience and outcomes of higher education. These are on-going challenges for higher education institutions, seeking to find effective ways to engage with potential students, families, communities, current students, alumni, employers and professional bodies to create an attractive, valuable and equitable student experience.

Chapter 6 revisits the launch of the ‘World Congress on Access to Post-Secondary Education’, an ambitious project to recognise and connect colleagues and students involved in the ‘WP project’ from around the world. This was a pioneering attempt to create an international community of practice, not only for staff but also giving significant voice and agency to students. The approaches to engaging students in process relate to themes in earlier chapters about engagement and connect to current debates about student agency and models of co-creation, as we seek to do widening participation with students, rather than to them.

Chapters 7 and 8 focus to some extent on international students. I have always been surprised how much resistance there is to bringing widening participation and internationalisation agendas together. This may be because, on the one hand international students are largely regarded as a ‘cash cow’ generating a financial surplus for universities, and on the other, widening participation students are regarded as a financial burden (being perceived as more costly to recruit and a higher risk – neither of which is necessarily true). But

‘widening participation’ and international students have much in common, and both potentially disrupt the norms and cultures of the institution, and require structural change to enable them to prosper. Much of the good practice for one group is beneficial for the other. Stuart concludes chapter 7 with the phrase ‘treat all students same, and each student differently’. This idea is unpacked further in chapter 8, giving consideration to ideas of formal equality that advocate treating all students the same, and acknowledging diversity which requires us to take account of differences, and thus results in the ‘same but different’ paradox. These are again, contemporary challenges, about how we deliver a higher education experience which meets the needs and expectations of all students. This chapter provides some useful examples, especially about embedding academic language skills for all students, and questions to promote institutional and individual reflexivity. These practical vignettes help us to move towards an inclusive approach that achieves equitable outcomes, rather than simply treating everyone equally.

Chapters 9 and 10 build on these ideas and offer further critique. Chapter 9 is particularly interesting, suggesting that the terms ‘access’ and ‘participation’ are ditched and replaced by the term ‘engagement’, which is indeed a leitmotif of this anthology. In England the terms access and participation seem to be particularly entrenched. Stuart argues that we need to be brave to embrace a new discourse that is unshackled to the history of the past; engagement conjures up ideas of dialogue, collaboration and action, rather than access and participation which are conservative and more passive. Chapter 10 continues the questioning of language and discourses, this time in relation to disability; in this brief contribution Stuart concludes by wondering if some of our current practices with regards to assessment are actually excluding, rather than including, of students with disabilities.

By the end of the collection the contributions are more contemporary and offer us strands of hope on our journey to transform the academy. While the COVID-19 pandemic was devastating and challenging, forcing learning off campus and threatening the informal, social aspects of higher education, paradoxically it offers widening engagement champions some cause for optimism. Universities and colleges responded rapidly, changing the learning experience overnight, and many of the changes were positive. For example, teaching sessions were shortened, lectures and other resources were uploaded online to be revisited by students as and when required, and there is more awareness of the need to make the most of in-person sessions, and so active and ‘flipped’ learning may be a step closer and more achievable. In other words, the pandemic may be the catalyst to ‘re-think how we do higher education’ and move us closer to a model of social justice. Indeed, the final chapter stresses that the sector in general and institutions in particular will continue to need to change themselves both in response to the external context and greater understanding of the diversity of higher education students, and in particular there will be more emphasis on the intersectionality of students and a move away from categorising students and labelling them.

While this may be a retrospective collection of essays, it provides readers with academic insights, personal reflections and practical tips. In particular, it maps out some of the historical trajectories of many contemporary themes that practitioners, policy makers and institutional leaders are currently grappling with, and in doing so, it sheds new light on many of these issues. It also provides a sort of tool kit to help the current generation of widening participation advocates on their journey. Stuart is modest and would never frame this

volume as a toolkit, tending instead to use phrases such ‘in my view’ or ‘in my opinion’. However, by allowing us to travel with him, he illustrates some powerful tactics, that I have taken the liberty to extract and re-phrase as directives.

- (1) Access is essential, but it is never sufficient, always ask the question ‘access to what?’
- (2) Remember that higher education institutions need to be transformed, always consider how student experiences can be improved and don’t just accept the less contentious approach, although this will be easier in the short term, it will be less effective and just.
- (3) Hold on to the importance of the social dimension in learning and the value of communities of practice.
- (4) Prioritise active engagement with potential students, communities and current students; dialogue and collaborate with others to promote engagement, action and social justice.
- (5) Don’t be afraid to be critical of established and new policies and practices; interrogate the language used to uncover the dominant discourses and underlying ideologies and challenge them, and confront paradoxes.
- (6) Be ambitious and continue to strive to realise your values and beliefs; utilise ideas from other contexts and seize opportunities that arise.

This collection is akin to Janus, the Roman god – it is looking back over the past 30 years, and forwards to the next phase; it provides a doorway to explore the historical context, and provides us with tools and frames to support births, transitions and journeys in the next phase. Whatever your

interest and role in access, participation, engagement and social justice, you will find this volume readable, enjoyable and revitalising.

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York, 17th March 2022

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There are many people who have contributed to this volume. Some are referenced in the chapters which follow. However, others probably have no idea that they have contributed at all. These are the people I have met, discussed and debated with over the last 40 years or so. They are the people who have influenced, one way or another, my thinking on the matters covered in this volume. You are far too many to mention by name, but I do want to make public my sincere gratitude to all of you for the stimulation, the thinking and ideas you gave to me so freely. Thank you.

I also want to publicly acknowledge the support of my wife Dilys, and her enormous efforts transforming the pieces which constitute each chapter into a common format. In their original form they came “in all shapes and sizes” so to speak. At times it was the most tedious of tasks, so thank you, sweetheart, from the bottom of my heart.

Finally, I want to publicly acknowledge the extensive work undertaken by my Commissioning Editor, Kimberley Chadwick, at Emerald Publishing. Following Dilys’ work, Kimberley then worked tirelessly getting the various works into

the required format for publishing, including the extensive references. In my view, Kimberley went ‘above and beyond’. Without her commitment, and always with an eye to producing the highest quality, this volume would still be sitting in a corner of my imagination. Thank you so much Kim.

# INTRODUCTION

The concern of the following piece with discourses of access to higher education and the politics/policy within which they functioned in the 1990s is unsurprising for a number of reasons.

First, the piece is the text of a presentation at a conference in the Czech Republic entitled *State and University in the New Europe: A Liberal Future?* Looking back, just the title and the location should be enough to explain the preoccupation with discourses and ideologies.

Second, though, even as relatively early in my career as 1995, I had realised that practice to widen access to higher education by under-represented groups and enhance their chances of success through pedagogy once there, must *necessarily* consider the ideological frameworks and discourses within which that work takes place.

Third, I was working as a Senior Lecturer in the Racial Equality Unit (known as REQU) at the University of Central Lancashire: the only one of its kind then and since as far as I know, funded under Section 11 of the 1966 Local Government Act. As such, ideologies and their implications for

individual and collective practice were never far from the surface – though to be fair, I don't recall the government interfering directly with what we did. So, what did we do? What were the ideological debates and contexts within which we worked?

First of all, and importantly, REQU was not a research unit. There were units or centres elsewhere in the United Kingdom focussed on research into 'race' and ethnic relations (e.g. at Warwick University) and in Europe, for example at the University of Amsterdam.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, REQU focussed its attention on (1) working with local Black and Asian ethnic communities to promote access to higher education, especially in the University (or Polytechnic as it was before it gained university status) and (2) working with academic and other staff in the university to promote their understanding of issues of racism within their practices, and thereby to promote greater access to their courses by minority ethnic students. In order to assess progress with both these 'arms' of the unit's work, it was also tasked with developing, and implementing annually, a system for monitoring the ethnic profile of the University's student population.<sup>2</sup> It produced a short 'Ethnic Monitoring Report' each year, the picture revealed informing the targeting of work by the unit.

Even a brief consideration of this portfolio of work soon reveals how ideologies of antiracism, multiculturalism and equal opportunities would be likely to form the core drivers of the unit's work. And they did.

---

1 A colleague and I developed close relations with this unit in Amsterdam, facilitating student exchanges to study issues of racism in the respective countries and in education in particular.

2 This was well in advance of any systems for doing this at a national level and attracted considerable interest.

These ideologies were not, however, comfortable in the same bed. Their different emphases and priorities for action; how one should act to promote greater and wider access to the university; and, of course, how one described that work, all featured routinely in the daily work and conversations – very often heated – within the unit.

The following very short extract from a critique of Troyna's (with Selman) research,<sup>3</sup> taken from the 1995 conference presentation which follows, might be worth reflecting upon even a quarter of a century after it was written. Although debates and discourses have, of course, changed and developed over that time (as will hopefully become clear in future chapters), practitioners working to promote wider access *but especially greater successful participation in higher education by under-represented groups*, might still find the following passage resonating with at least some aspects of their work:

*...the relationship between antiracism (...), multiculturalism (...), and ideologies of equal opportunities is treated as unproblematic. This, it is suggested, results from these perspectives becoming disarticulated from ideologies of equality of opportunity during their development in the school sector. However, ideas about ethnic inequality in higher education in the 1980s have been constructed within, even subsumed by, dominant liberal definitions of equality of opportunity and social justice such that the discourses of multiculturalism and antiracism are seen as having little if any relevance to higher education except in so far as they reinforce the concern with access.*

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<sup>3</sup> See B. Troyna (1993) *Racism and Education*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes.

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# ETHNICITY AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE 1900S: FROM ACCESS TO PEDAGOGY<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

In his review of ‘the sociology of higher education’ in the United Kingdom, Walford (1992) notes as follows:

*The main area of strength within the sociology of higher education has continued to be research using the framework of the old sociology of education. There have been many studies of the relationships between social class, educational opportunity and attainment...*

(p. 194)

More recently, he comments, research has

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<sup>1</sup> Originally delivered as a conference presentation at *State and University in the New Europe: A Liberal Future?* A second conference on aspects of liberalism organized under the auspices of University of Brighton and Jan Evangelista Purkyně University, Czech Republic, 2–17 July 1995.

*Broadened its interests from class inequalities to include gender inequalities and the experiences of women both as students and academics...*

(p. 194)

However, studies of the experiences of traditionally under-represented types of student and staff (see e.g. Bryan et al., 1985; Siraj-Blatchford, 1991; Thomas, 1990) remain relatively few. Indeed, despite an acknowledgement of the importance of this qualitative and interpretive focus, Walford's own programme for research in the sociology of higher education also tends to privilege the 'access issue' and even a 'political arithmetic' approach to it. For example, the *first* 'strand' of his research programme suggests a continuing focus upon questions such as: 'Will loans be a greater disincentive to women and people from ethnic minorities than to white men?' Further he urges that, 'there needs to be close monitoring of the social, ethnic and gender composition of subject areas and institutions...' (p. 197). This research preoccupation with access to higher education is curious, especially when considered in the light of developments in the sociology of education since the 1970s, the development of specific strategies to challenge educational inequality and debates about equality of opportunity more widely.

The preoccupation with 'who gets what', and the correspondingly limited attention given to 'what they get' and 'what they feel about it', is curious given the growth in interpretive and ethnographic approaches in the sociology of education. It is also curious in the context of a twenty-five-year history of debate among those working within anti-sexist/feminist, multicultural and anti-racist paradigms which have emphasized the experience of school for women/girls, Black and other minority ethnic groups. Over the same period, the debate about equality of opportunity in areas such

as employment practice has also shifted from an exclusive concern with access *to* work to debates about the experiences of women, minority ethnic groups or the disabled *at* work (e.g. the increased focus on forms of harassment).

Paradoxically, however, these shifts and developments can also help us to understand the preoccupation with access to higher education.

#### WHERE ARE WE NOW, AND HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The Robbins Report (1963) focus upon the under-representation of working-class students in universities fitted comfortably into, and reflected, both the dominant concern (class inequality) and paradigm ('political arithmetic') of the sociology of education in the 1960. It also reflected the wider policy preoccupation with the disruptive mechanisms of the welfare state at that time (see in the following). During the 1970s the so-called 'Great Debate' set the agenda for another re-evaluation of the role of universities, specifically in relation to the needs of industry and the economy. This debate continued in the 1970s, also emphasizing 'access', but re-formulated in the language of neo-liberal discourse (see, e.g. Ball, 1990). Over the same period, the sociology of education was being transformed by the emergence of new critical perspectives including the 'new sociology of education' (Young, 1971), feminist critiques and the development of anti-racist educational ideologies. However, it was not so much a 'new sociology of *education*' as a new sociology of *schooling*. These perspectives were largely ignored in post-compulsory education. Without the emphasis upon experiences provided by the newer perspectives it is unsurprising that most research into,

and debate about, equality issues in higher education in the 1980s remained locked in the 'old' 'political arithmetic' and access paradigm. In any case this dovetailed with, and reflected, the dominant definition of equality of opportunity operating in the sector at the time.

Weaving these threads together into a comprehensive contemporary historical analysis of the relationship between, and development of, policy and research into equal opportunities in higher education would require a more detailed exposition than is possible here. However, even the cursory overview earlier suggests some important themes. First, there is the definition of equal opportunity within which research and policy in higher education has operated.

#### DEFINING EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

Liberal conceptions of equality of opportunity stress that it is about enabling all individuals to compete equally and freely for social rewards. Edwards (1990) refers to this view as the glittering prizes perspective on equality of opportunity. The prizes are allocated competitively solely on the merit principle. Equality of opportunity is, then, about removing morally arbitrary obstacles (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender and age) from the process of competing for these scarce and highly valued social rewards. Such formulations recall the idea of Rawls (1971) and Runciman (1996) on social justice and equality of opportunity which so influenced thinking about the welfare state in the United Kingdom in the late 1960s and 1970s. This conception of equality of opportunity operationalizes a distributive definition of social justice.