

Introduction to Special Issue on Widening Participation in Psychology: a reflection on current research and practice

Jacqui Taylor, Bournemouth University and Annie Trapp, Higher Education Academy Psychology Network, University of York

This issue of Psychology Teaching Review focusing on widening participation and fair access is timely given that 2010 was the target date set by the UK government for 50% of 18-30 year olds participating in higher education (HE). The policy has had some success. Fewer than 60% of entrants are now 'traditional' students, i.e. those coming straight from school with A/AS levels and studying full-time. In the mid-1990s, one in eight young people from the most disadvantaged areas entered HE. That figure has increased to around one in five but remains far lower than for the most advantaged areas, where well over half of young people now enter higher education (HEFCE, 2010).

Last year, the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS, 2009) produced a comprehensive review of progress on WP. This report showed that the number of students going to University from lower socio-economic groups had risen by nearly 10000 from 2002/3, to nearly 63700 in 2007/08. Similarly, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in 2009 reported that state school entrants have increased from 81% in 1997/8 to 87% in 2007/08; and participation from those coming from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN) rose from 11.4% in 2002/03 to 13.5% in 2005/06. Other bodies have been more critical and show that participation targets have not been met for a number of groups (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2009). The report noted that to achieve the participation target of 50% of 18-30 years olds experiencing HE, Universities need to 'draw more mature students into the system...and parents with young children' (p.26). Programmes such as Aim Higher (Aim Higher, 2010) have been shown to successfully raise aspirations, especially those from low SEC (e.g. Hatt et al., 2008). However, a recent report focusing on the impact of policies on students' aspirations has shown that while aspirations are raised, this is not matched by opportunity (Higher Ambitions, 2009).

Definitions, target groups and approaches differ between the four countries in the UK, but in general all countries are concerned to see improvements relating to entry rates to HE; retention, achievement and progression; and subsequent opportunities in employment and learning.

Defining Widening Participation

Researchers, governments, HEIs, and admissions tutors use a variety of terms and definitions to label, describe and categorise students from non-traditional backgrounds. An early definition from Ijima-Hall (1997) focuses on diversity in HE and includes a comprehensive set of individual differences, such as age, colour, ethnicity, gender, national origin, physical, mental and emotional ability, race, religion, language, sexual orientation and socio-economic status. Zinciewicz & Trapp (2004) use the term 'under-represented groups' and define it as, "those with no family history of HE experience, from low participation neighbourhoods, socio-economically disadvantaged students, students from ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities" (p.5). The term Widening Participation (WP) is more often used by HEIs and government, often with reference to policies and strategies. For example, the HEA focus on policies to attract 'minority and under-represented groups' and 'widen the diversity of the student population', while HESA (2009) focuses on 'improving access to HE'. HESA (2009) defines and evaluates WP with reference to three indicators, which are cross-tabulated for both entry qualifications and degree subject:

- (i) the percentage of entrants who attended a school or college in the state sector;
- (ii) the percentage of entrants who were returned with National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) categories 4 to 7; and
- (iii) the percentage of entrants whose home area (denoted by their postcode) is known to have a low proportion of 18 and 19 year-olds in higher education.

Also, HESA differentiates between young and mature WP students (those who are aged 21 and over when they first enroll on a degree) and for those students in receipt of the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA).

Regardless of the definition, the over-riding theme of WP strategies, researchers and teachers is to develop and evaluate ways to reduce bias in access and participation and to promote inclusion and success for under-represented groups, and these issues are central to the work of many psychologists.

Psychology and Widening Participation

Psychology is uniquely placed to develop and contribute to the widening participation agenda because it links closely to the topics covered within the psychology curriculum, for example stereotypes, identity, confidence, and individual differences. A great deal of research has explored the specific psychological issues facing particular groups of WP students, such as: ethnicity; disability; socio-economic class, mature students and type of school attended before university. In addition, psychologists use advanced theoretical models and methods to evaluate and understand the impacts of being a non-traditional student.

Why students choose Psychology

Psychology attracts many non-traditional entrants; more than other disciplines regarding mature students, but less students from the BME classification. Although, the majority of applicants to Psychology degrees are motivated by a desire to work in the field of Psychology, increasingly Psychology is being viewed as a broad degree which develops a variety of skills to enhance job prospects. This view is leading to more applications from students from non-traditional backgrounds, who see Psychology as a stepping stone to careers other than in the psychology profession.

Psychological theory to explain WP impacts

Psychological theory has great potential to explain impacts and issues involved in widening participation. Perspectives from Developmental Psychology, such as lifespan models, have been used to understand the changes that WP students go through as they enter the educational system. From Social Psychology, social identity theory has been used to explore the

way that students from different socio-economic classes and ethnic origins categorise and compare themselves with other learners. Theories of personality, within the area of Individual Differences, have been used to understand issues relating to motivation to study for WP students and differences in learning style, academic confidence and aspirations.

Methods from Psychology to evaluate WP

Methodologically, Psychologists have developed a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods and analyses which are being used to explore the impacts of WP. Qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and diaries have been used to collect personal reflections of the impact of HE for non-traditional students. Experimental studies and surveys have been used to explore intervention strategies and empirically compare matched samples of traditional and non-traditional students. Psychometric tests can be used to help students understand their learning style or identify strengths and weaknesses in their competencies and skills.

Introduction to Special Issue

In this issue of Psychology Teaching Review authors both celebrate successful outcomes and reflect on experiences arising from widening participation. The idea grew out of the 2009 BPS Annual Conference in Brighton where a BPS DTRP symposium attracted presentations and subsequent discussion that illustrated a rich set of experiences deserving of a wider audience. Co-organised by Dr Jacqui Taylor & Dr Paul Sander, the symposium attracted around 25 participants from all areas of psychology education. The symposium was proposed specifically to address the Annual Conference theme of 'Psychology and Social Disadvantage' and the aim was to identify and reflect on the experiences of Psychology teachers and lecturers in addressing and implementing Widening Participation programmes over the previous eight years. The symposium consisted of five presentations followed by a discussion facilitated by Annie Trapp. Subsequently a call for papers was distributed to BPS members and more widely to psychology educators in the UK, resulting in the nine papers published in this special issue.

Several themes run through the papers and these have been used to group the papers, although there is clearly crossover between them. The themes are: curriculum design (two papers); the student experience (five papers), and social justice (two papers).

Curriculum design

The authors of the first two papers propose that issues relating to widening participation be included within the core undergraduate psychology curriculum. The first of these papers from Patrick Hylton relates to the teaching culture and diversity and Naomi Craig discussed accessibility and mental health.

Patrick Hylton proposes that including the teaching of issues relating to culture within the curriculum would increase participation by those in Black and Minority Ethnic groups by providing role models, representation and visibility, which as psychologists we know affect motivation and identity. He argues that as it taught now, the psychology curriculum is 'culturally cleansed' and that only by covering issues such multiculturalism, diversity and ethnicity will the discipline become more relevant for a multi-cultured world and in so doing improve the lives of all citizens. Naomi Craig's paper focuses on accessibility issues relating to teaching about mental health to undergraduate psychology students and draws on evidence of the student experience from the Improving Provisions for Disabled Psychology Students (IPDPS) project. Naomi provides some useful examples for psychology teachers of ways in which learning and teaching about mental health can be designed from an inclusive and accessible perspective.

The student experience

Five papers focus on understanding the experience of students within specific types of WP category, including: BME students, students with mental health, learning or physical disabilities, and mature learners.

Jenny Mercer draws on lifespan psychology to understand the processes of self-development encountered by a sample of first generation adult returners

to HE from an area of high deprivation. Using interviews and a grounded theory approach, Jenny explores both the positive growth in self-development as well as the conflicts experienced, such as between the fear of failure and academic success, and the balance between home and university. Jenny shows that using models from lifespan psychology can enhance our understanding of the issues that non-traditional students face, together with the strategies used to overcome them in order to facilitate self-growth and development. John Richardson discusses the causes and consequences of the 'attainment gap' in students coming from black, minority and ethnic (BME) groups. Despite the higher levels of participation from BME students in UK HE, compared to white students, students from BME groups are less likely to obtain 'good' degrees (first or upper second-class honours). John provides data highlighting this attainment gap in traditional and Open University courses and across a variety of disciplines, including psychology. John concludes by cautioning that this pattern may apply to other WP groups and that it is premature to promote WP in such groups unless they can be guaranteed equity in terms of their attainment. Jacqui Taylor & Becky House present data from their exploratory study on the motivations, identity and concerns of different types of non-traditional psychology students. Previous research has either investigated all types of non-traditional students together, or focused on one category and their study aimed to look at differences across WP categories, using a cross-sectional sample of students from all years. The qualitative data identified some interesting differences in the concerns of different WP groups, e.g. financial concerns were more often stated by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds; and mature students were more concerned about academic issues, while younger students expressed more social concerns. The observations are discussed with regard to the level and type of pastoral support available to support different types of non-traditional students.

The final two articles in this section are written from a reflective stance. In 2006/07 eight percent of undergraduate students studying in the UK reported a disability and, of these, fewer than five percent reported having a visual impairment. Lucy Betts and Amanda Cross reflect upon their experiences of supporting a visually impaired student through a nine-month level two

undergraduate biological psychology module. They developed a number of strategies that could be easily replicated and transferred to supporting other students with a visual impairment, to students with other learning requirements, or to all students. Lucy and Amanda make some perceptive observations and draw on the student's thoughts and it would be interesting in later work to include a reflection from the student being supported. In such a way, Paul Sander & Stella Williamson consider their experiences in education as people who can't spell, using a methodology known as evocative auto-ethnography. The first part of the article includes an individual reflection from each author on how they have become the people they are through the ways others responded to their Dyslexia or Dyslexic type aspects of their writing. Their article then follows a conversational pattern, whereby they question each other about the significance of their experiences and the implications both for education and the social construction of identity. The aim of this article is to support dyslexic students and to ask teachers to take a more supportive approach and to be more aware of the impact that they can have.

Social justice

The two papers in this section highlight the important ways that Open University (OU) and Access courses are encouraging non-traditional students to study Psychology. The OU, more than any other organisation in education, is all about widening participation; being set up to attract students who were not able to or did not want to study in a traditional way (full-time over three years at a campus). As a result of the open admissions policy and the flexible nature of the teaching, learning and modular assessment, the OU continues to attract huge numbers of non-traditional students (and has more psychology graduates than any other HEI). Similarly, Access courses allow students with no prior education experience or attainment to study for a first level qualification in psychology. Because Access courses are often part-time and take place in local schools or colleges, students are able to study alongside employment or family commitments.

The contribution of introductory level psychology courses to a broad spectrum of other qualifications at the OU is discussed by Troy Cooper. Troy provides data showing that psychology courses recruit well from mature students, women, and those with low levels of previous educational achievement and living in low participation neighbourhoods (LPN). However, students with lower educational qualifications or from LPN have lower pass rates and progression to higher levels of study than other groups. Troy discusses the factors involved in this and the initiatives being used to improve progression. Liz Winters used semi-structured interviews to gather views from teaching staff and students associated with a Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE) in Psychology course. Participants were invited to give their views upon why a declining number of people from 'wider participation' or 'socially disadvantaged' backgrounds were applying to study for this CertHE. Liz then uses students' interpretation of these concepts to define and distinguish between WP students and students of a socially disadvantaged background. The themes that emerged are considered and their implications for WP in the undergraduate study of psychology is discussed.

Summary and Future Directions for WP

At the time of writing, the future of widening participation in university education is uncertain. Financial cuts of 5% across the HE sector are already resulting in a reduction of both teaching and support staff and it is reasonable to suppose that there will be reduced time to support less independent students. The rising number of applications to university education (correlated with rising unemployment figures) is likely to raise the entrance requirements for popular subjects like psychology and unless careful consideration is given to the 'contextual data' in applications, educationally-disadvantaged students will find it harder to be accepted onto courses. Another threat comes from campus closures resulting in less local access to study – an important factor for many widening participation students. Given that access to higher education remains significantly correlated with parental income and wealth -

reductions in scholarships and bursaries will disproportionately affect widening participation students.

It is likely that the focus on widening participation will shift from encouraging school-leavers to enter higher education to encouraging more adult participation in higher education through the provision of more part-time, work-based and foundation degrees focusing on vocational subjects. Such a shift will create further challenges for psychology educators.

Thank you to all the contributors to this special issue, who were also the blind reviewers. We hope readers will gain from the valuable insights into supporting widening participation within psychology provided by these authors. Thanks also to Paul Sander for co-organising the symposium with me; to Annie for her role as a discussant in the symposium and in writing this introduction; and to Stella Williamson and the BPS P4P team for their help in pulling this together for publication. I would welcome any feedback prompted by the issues raised in this special issue and if there was sufficient interest the DTRP committee could arrange a further symposium.

Correspondence

Associate Professor Jacqui Taylor
Bournemouth University
jtaylor@bournemouth.ac.uk

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