

The Demise of Access in the UK?

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Corporatism as a Cultural strategy:
the demise of "Access" in the UK?

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Mark McFadden, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, NSW, 2795

Abstract

Access courses are offered in Further Education (FE) colleges in the UK and have been, until 1995, funded through grants tied to Section 11 of the Race Relations Act. These courses offer students from 'New Commonwealth' backgrounds - particularly those of Afro-Caribbean and

Asian background - who might otherwise not have the opportunity to access higher education, the chance to enter universities and complete an undergraduate degree program. Throughout the first half of 1994 interviews were conducted in the Birmingham area with a regional educational administrator, a curriculum development manager at an inner-city FE college, the Access course director in the same college (who also teaches on the course) and a range of Access students in relation to the general provision of Access courses. Students returning to mainstream education via the Access route are attempting to influence the course of their lives. The effect of broad government policy, such as the push to corporatism, can have a dramatic effect on the educational options available to people in disadvantaged positions.

As FE colleges move to corporate funding and the source of Access funds from Section 11 of the Race Relations Act dries up it is timely to investigate the likely impact on the offering of Access courses and the consequent effect of students.

Introduction

While on study leave in Birmingham, UK, from February to July 1994 I was gathering information about educational programs available for people who wished to access higher education but who had either not finished their secondary schooling or had not done well enough in their schooling to gain entry into higher education. In Sydney, I had been working on a program for a number of years which had similar aims, targeting people interested in accessing higher education but who were without a secondary school qualification or whose experience of secondary schooling had been less than successful. I was told about Access programs that operated through the Further Education (FE) sector that had as their aim the provision of educational opportunity for:

adults (21 and over) who wish to enter higher education but who do not yet have the necessary qualifications or experience. They may have been away from formal education for a number of years and may not have developed their potential in their previous educational experience (course submission, 1992).

The college from which this particular client description comes is particularly concerned to provide educational opportunities for students from ethnic minorities, from working class backgrounds and for women. Enrolment in general education at the college above (including Access courses) in 1991/92 reflects this concern: 84% of students were black - 32% of whom were Afro-Caribbean and 32% Asian; 16% of students were white; 62% of students were female and 38% male. The enrolment at this particular college made up 11% of the total FE college enrolment in general education in the Birmingham area (Birmingham City Council, 1993). Access courses are run in professional areas

underrepresented by ethnic minorities. There are access courses to: teaching; engineering; nursing and the health professions; science and technology. There is also a general access to higher education course.

Initially, I was interested in why people in these Access courses, usually with negative experiences of schooling, choose education as an option to help provide them with a more satisfying life, and whether their hopes and desires for this changed life are realised or whether previous educational disappointments are reinforced by their course. I was also interested in interviewing students who were now at university after coming through the Access route. I focussed on Access to Social Science courses which articulated with degree programs in Social Studies at Aston University, Birmingham. During interviews with students at a number of sites, with regional and college administrators, and with teachers, the policy issues of corporatisation, changing funding arrangements for students, and changing curriculum structures emerged as 'hot' topics. The common link between these issues is, "the powerful and complex ideology of the market and a linked culture of choice" (Ball, 1993: 3) - original emphasis - that pervades the policy frames of Western governments. All participants, including the students, felt that the world of Access was changing and that incorporation and economic rationalisation, however the process was viewed, would have a significant impact on the provision of Access education in the Birmingham area.

The Push to Corporatise and Rationalise

The Education Reform Act, 1988 led to a major restructuring of the higher education sector in the UK to make it more responsive to market forces. Even though the effects of this restructuring are, "almost completely unresearched" (Walford, 1992: 195), the Further and Higher Education Act, 1992, set out the provisions for the application and

extension of market forces to further education colleges. The Act established the Further Education Funding Council to oversee the incorporation of FE colleges and assist in their reconstruction from centrally funded institutions (at LEA level) to largely autonomous institutional entities able to acquire property, invest money, accept gifts and borrow sums of money. The last occurs with the prior approval of the appropriate FE Funding Council reflecting the nervous tension between deregulation and control at work in New Right policies.

Whitty (1994) has shown how these conflicting tensions are at work within New Right discourses of educational change. The policy context Whitty chooses to illustrate the workings of these tensions is the decentralisation of school management structures. On one hand, he

says, there is the neo-liberal market oriented frame with its tendency to economic freedom and deregulation, and on the other, the neo-conservative frame with its tendency to tradition and control. These tensions are most evident, he says, when contrasting the deregulation of financial controls and management systems in schools with the centralisation of curriculum structures.

From the beginning of 1994 FE colleges were 'freed' from the restrictions of centralised (LEA) funding. In the government's terms they were, "given new freedoms and flexibility in running their own affairs" (Major, 1994: 37). The government presents its view in terms of choice and opportunity:

... colleges have been galvanised by a new emphasis on choice, quality and sharp accountability for results (Major, 1994: 30).

Others see this 'freedom' as related primarily to the New Right agenda of economic efficiency and rationalisation of educational provision throughout the Further Education sector (Reeves, 1993).

Part of the push for quality and indicative of the neo-conservative control tendency of the government is the establishment of national vocational training and education award frameworks (NVQs and GNVQs) 1. These frameworks are at present being implemented across further and higher education and are an attempt to open up pathways within and between further education and the higher education sector using achieved skill level rather than academic ability as an arbiter of merit and value (see O'Brien, 1994 and Raggatt, 1994). Although the implementation of such frameworks has the stated intention of providing parity of esteem between vocational and academic courses (in rhetorical terms of creating choice and diversity) it is tied to guaranteed funding of courses defined in narrowly technicist terms as 'vocational'. Demaine (1992), argues that this is more likely to drive an institutional funding wedge between these vocational programs and programs, like Access, that are nominated as general. Given guaranteed funding in an era of financial stringency, Demaine believes that FE colleges will opt to provide courses for which funding is assured rather than run the financial risk of providing those courses which may satisfy a local need or a particular community.

Ball (1993) has referred to the government drive to corporatisation and related economic rationalist policy movements as a class strategy which uses market forces as a basis to reproduce inequality. Ball does not suggest that the disadvantageous consequences of the push to apply market forces are intended, rather, he argues that the entrenchment of what is now a clear policy favourite with governments across the Western world has led to an avoidance of critical reflection by education market policy advocates. They fail, he says, to develop a "grounded analysis of the particular conditions of a market in educational services", and to "fully explore the real potential

inequities arising within an educational market” (1993: 3).

This study of the impact of FE college incorporation and related New Right policies is an attempt at such a grounded analysis and contextual exploration, and suggests a much deeper cultural attack on the provision of educational opportunity. Ball hints at such an attack:

... the implementation of market reforms in education is essentially a class strategy which has as one of its major effects the reproduction of relative social class (and ethnic) advantages and disadvantages (1993: 4) - original emphasis.

Access: What the Students say

Access courses were set up initially by FE colleges using grants tied to Section 11 of the Race Relations Act which sought to increase the participation of people from ‘New Commonwealth backgrounds’ - particularly those of Afro-Caribbean and Asian background - in education and training, including higher education. These courses have created “a sizable alternative route to GCE A levels for adults seeking to enter higher education” (Reeves, 1993: 270). It is useful to quote at length a recent report by Birmingham City Council which referred to the use of Section 11 funding to effect change in educational provision for the city’s black population:

Over the last three years, about 10,000 students have benefited from this resourcing in areas as diverse as access to higher education, English Language Support and Black Business Development.

The success in the access to higher education project is about 70% in terms of those going on to higher education and work. Up to 50% of Afro-Caribbeans who go on to higher education in 1991 do so via the special access route (sic).

A substantial part of the increase in the number of ethnic minority students in City Colleges - 13000 to 18000 between 1990 and 1992 - is directly related to the use of Section 11 resources (Birmingham City Council, 1993: 23).

This presents an interesting systemic backdrop to the views of the students now engaged in Access courses about the usefulness or otherwise of their course. Even though the concept of Access was to encourage wider participation of black people in education and training, other groups with similar educational claims have ‘colonised’ the area (Leicester, 1993). Women, as a group, have made better use of the opportunities which Access provides than have their male counterparts. The women in Access courses see education as crucial to

developing their full potential. Those interviewed, regardless of class or cultural background, had similar stories about how they were affected by low educational expectations for women, by early marriages and early pregnancies. Access for them is in many ways a pathway out of various forms of entrapment. Sue, a white middle class woman in a Women's Access course reflects the views of others in her situation about the attractiveness of Access education.

Sue For a lot of us, it (Access) fits in with our lifestyles. You can pick the children up after school. Like I've got 2 small ones and I was able to get them into the creche here and it's pretty well centrally situated.

Shana, an Asian woman in the same course (who characterised herself as lower middle class) married and had children immediately on leaving secondary school. She expressed similar views but also recognised the need in her situation to provide her own pathway to higher education.

Shana The kids are growing up fast and at the end of the day, the way I see it... there's a push into higher education.

Both males and females come into the Access courses as a result of retrenchment or redundancy. Peter, a working class Afro-Caribbean male is indicative of this group who see Access providing an opportunity for a more satisfying working life and as a way to broadening career options.

Peter I was working up until last year. That's when I seized the opportunity to do this ... I was made redundant and I'd always wanted to further my education and as soon as this came along I thought yeah. Like, I've had a chance to go back to work since, but now that I'm doing this like I'm going to finish it.

Many Access students view their course as a real second chance but, ironically, many do not actually believe they deserve this second chance (although they are appreciative of it) and doubt their own ability to succeed. Many see education as a young person's right. They believe that if success eluded them when they were younger it may do so again now. Dianne, a middle class white woman who has come through the Access route and is now at the end of her first year of university expresses the view succinctly.

Dianne Access is a way of, the only way at my age type of thing, of getting back or even having a chance to sort of see if I could've done it then.

For the vast majority of the students in this study, Access provides the chance to do something different with their lives. Jan, a working

class, white woman, and David, a mixed-race male express the views of many:

JanIt's a way out of poverty isn't it. To improve your own life around you.

David... you are factory fodder to the employers. You just don't merit any status at all and you become nothing. I just got fed up with that and thought, well, I'm going to do something with my life, and this was a means to do it.

The Impact of Incorporation and Economic Rationalist Policies

In an assessment of the impact of the Educational Reform Act, 1988, on racial equality of opportunity in FE colleges Reeves concludes:

... the measurement of performance and, therefore, the allocation of resources, are unrelated to (and positively discouraging of) equal opportunity outcomes. ... a new form of institutionalised racial discrimination lurks unrecognised in the use of general performance measures and management information systems which ignore, or at best de-emphasise, the considerable variations in student educational need and the resources needed to satisfy it (1993: 263).

The interviews I conducted in the Birmingham area focussed on general Access provision in the region and specifically at one of the inner city FE colleges. At a regional level I interviewed an administrator responsible for the initial development of Access provision in the LEA, who was at the time serving as the region's general advisor on further education. I also interviewed the Curriculum Development Manager of one of the local FE colleges, and the Access course director in the same college. Each expressed reservations about the narrowing space available for Access provision in the changing world of corporate management models and rationalised funding.

The regional advisor on further education believes that, "Access has been one of the most successful curriculum initiatives in the history of education in the Birmingham area". Access provision, he said, because of its success, had been colonised by groups for which the courses had not initially been intended.

SteveIt has been mainstreamed, particularly by middle class white women ... They are already well qualified, articulate and write well, they just need a year to prepare themselves.

The lever which administrators had used in the past to attempt to limit the 'colonisation' of the program was a regulation that at least 70% of places had to go to people for whom Section 11 funding was initially targetted. Interestingly, from 1995, as part of the drive to efficiency, Section 11 funding ceases and with it goes the administrative lever.

Steve That lever will disappear. So, in all the colleges, except for Handsworth (because of its predominantly black population) it will disappear. ... The conservatives do not believe in equal opportunity and the ethnic minority student could easily drop out of the equation.

Steve summarised his view of the new equation thus:

Steve Colleges will not rate Access courses very highly. They will get a negative rating because of drop-out rates. They will be more selective about their students. They will emphasise initial assessment to get the students that they want and will probably run pre-Access courses. They will want to ensure positive outcomes.

At the curriculum development level within Handsworth college the curriculum development manager had some reservations about how Access courses fitted with the government's agenda to control curriculum structures and offerings within the sector. Importantly he pointed to the connection between changed funding arrangements for students, changing curriculum structures and institutional management.

Mike The government froze student grants 3 years ago. They (the students) have to take out loans now. There is pressure for fees. ... It will be a matter of time before students have to pay a top-up fee for their courses. What we're being squeezed towards more is a part-time system of higher education which would fit more within this modular system (the move to NVQs and GNVQs). It's like climbing a frame made up of units and modules, progression up is based on demonstrating achievement of learning outcomes.

M Where does Access fit?

Mike Well, Access is interesting, because at the moment you would have people that say, well Access, they're self-validated courses which are equivalent to A levels. But over a period of time Access courses will have to pull in to this GNVQ framework.

Access courses which at the moment service local needs will be pulled in to the web of national benchmarks and nationally accredited course structures. As such, there is the real danger that the colleges providing Access will see national constraints and pressures overriding the initial community based intention of the courses.

Even though the political rhetoric about change in further education is self-management and autonomy, experience has shown that the funding arrangements can change overnight. Mike gave the example of a shift in emphasis in 1992 in the university sector away from the humanities and towards the training and education of science and technology students.

The shift in emphasis was associated with a 20% funding cut in the staffing budgets allocated to the humanities.

Mike They're trying to use funding methodologies to actually ration or allocate places.

This occurred after universities had been staffed for the upcoming university session and led obviously to a sense of destabilisation and a perception of the government rhetoric as empty.

The Access course director at Handsworth is quite pessimistic about the likely impact of government policy on the make-up of her Access students in the near future. She believes that as funding arrangements become tighter, particularly with grants giving way to loans, drop-out rates will grow. This, she felt, would have an obvious knock-on effect on course and institutional funding arrangements. Indicative of the effect of changed financial arrangements for students was the fact that some of them at the college were able to claim a locality allowance of £500 in the form of a bursary. These students were obviously far less concerned about financial pressures than they were with their workload.

For other students, one of their prime considerations was how they were going to continue to afford their studies. A funding irony, which both the course director and the students pointed out, was that as an Access student one could stay on social security, including housing allowance and school meals for children. Once at university, and therefore as an Access success story, you became significantly worse off. Although you gain access to a grant - and remember, even that is to go - you lose your social security. The course director summed up her frustrations thus:

Kay It's (Access) got a lot of people in (to university) who would never have dreamt of going to university. And it's got easier! Now it's got easier, the finance situation has changed and these people aren't going to be able to afford it. ... I'm actually not optimistic about the next 5 years. I can't see any of the students I've had as being able to afford to remain at college because of changes to the grants system.

For Kay, the most difficult pill to swallow about policy moves in further education was the fact that through experience and hard, collaborative effort across the region, which included forging links with higher education institutions, it was becoming "easier" to get

students both through Access and into higher education. Now that this was a reality for her, policy changes were going to affect future successes.

Conclusion

The comments above reflect the often unintended consequences of policy action and illustrate the real pressures which people, at a range of institutional levels, face in providing community-based courses which service a significant local need. It is the view of all those interviewed that corporatisation of the Further Education sector, and the related economic policies of rationalisation and efficiency, will have a major impact on the capacity of colleges to provide quality courses for the students that Access provision was originally intended for. This will be particularly so for those of Afro-Caribbean and Asian origin who may not be perceived by college administrators as likely winners in the new funding game. It will also have a significant impact on women, not only from Afro-Caribbean and Asian backgrounds, but for middle class women returning to mainstream education who have come to see Access as a viable and relevant alternative route to higher education.

At a regional administration level there is a fear that nationally

accepted performance indicators of efficiency and effectiveness like course completion rates and staff - student ratios do not have a measure of equity built in and will tend to discount the relative successes of Access courses. At both the regional and local level there is a fear that the pressing necessities of stringent financial times will lead to the picking of winners, rather than the supporting of those for whom the race is longer in the first place.

Underlying the concerns above is the fear that homogeneity and elitism, under the guise of excellence and choice, will be emphasised in a corporatised FE world rather than difference and real diversity being both celebrated and catered for. This study indicates that incorporation may mean that the type of people interviewed in 1994 may no longer be attractive to colleges seeking to maintain their budgets and maximise their outputs. Perhaps I am lucky that my study leave was in 1994 and not 1995. The same FE colleges will no doubt be there, but the clientele may well have changed.

Notes

1. More information about NVQ and GNVQ frameworks is available from:
National Council for Vocational Qualifications
222 Euston Road
London, UK, NW1 2BZ

Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the people involved in the study.

Key to transcripts

[]Background information

...Pause

(...)Material edited out

___Transcription from different section of the interview follows

*From field notes

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