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Remaking the elite university. An experiment in widening participation in the UK

Short title:

Remaking the elite university

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Abstract

This article analyses and critiques the discourse around widening participation in elite universities in the UK. One response, from both university administrators and academics, has been to see this as an ‘intractable’ problem which can at best be ameliorated through outreach or marginal work in admissions policy. Another has been to reject the institution of the university completely, and seek to set up alternative models of autonomous higher education. The article presents a different analysis in which the university is still seen as central and participation is seen as an aspect of pedagogy rather than as an administrative process. This is illustrated through a description of how a Foundation Year in Arts and Humanities was conceived, designed and implemented at the University of Bristol. This model is used to consider the problems, risks and successes in challenging received notions of how (and whether) widening participation can be achieved and whether it can reach those who are currently most excluded from elite universities such as those without qualifications. The article suggests how academics can utilise their expertise to solve key challenges faced by universities and reclaim autonomy in central aspects of university administration. At the same time, it demonstrates how change to the current model of student recruitment can also bring welcome - and transformative - change to the nature of elite higher education institutions in the UK and elsewhere.

Is widening participation an ‘intractable’ problem?

The period since 1992 has seen a sharp rise in the numbers of people participating in higher education in the UK. However, this rise in overall numbers has masked significant differences in participation. Despite the expansion of higher education, certain groups remain radically underrepresented: participation in HE continues to be segregated along lines of class, geography, and ethnicity. There are particularly acute differences between different types of institutions, with disadvantaged groups disproportionately represented at non-elite, regional, and post-92 universities. As Vikki Boliver (2013) has shown, working-class and state-school students are much less likely to apply to the elite Russell Group of 24 universities, and those Black and Asian students who do apply to the Russell Group are much less likely to receive an offer than white and privately-educated applicants with the same qualifications. The introduction of a new fee regime in 2012, with most courses charging a fee of £9000, has been followed by a dramatic drop in the numbers of mature and part-time students (Office for Fair Access, 2013). There is also emerging evidence that the fees are impacting drastically on students’ choices of degree and their experience of them, not least as some students struggle to study and work long hours in part-time paid work. (National Education Opportunities Network, 2015).¹

¹ On class, ‘race’, age and choice in HE, see (Reay et al. 2001), (Osborne et al. 2004)

Within this changing landscape, what is the role of an individual elite university, and of larger groups of such institutions? Do they have sufficient agency or does the climate increasingly militate against creative attempts to diversify intake? Representatives of elite universities in the UK are wont to represent widening participation as an intractable problem, which is impossible to solve at university level. It is worth quoting Wendy Piatt, the Director General of the Russell Group at length. Her response to Sutton Trust research on access to leading universities is in some respects typical and has also been influential:

As this report shows the main reason pupils from disadvantaged background are less likely to go to leading universities is because they are not achieving the right grades. But students not only need good grades, they need them in the right subjects. This is especially important because entry into some courses, like Medicine or English, is very competitive. It is also the case that some very bright students are not encouraged to apply for leading universities. We cannot offer places to those who do not apply or who have not done the right subjects to study their chosen course.

Access is an issue for leading universities across the globe – there is no silver bullet to this entrenched problem. School attainment, advice and aspirations must all be dramatically improved if we are to tackle the real barriers to fair access.

All Russell Group universities want to give places to students with the qualifications, potential and determination to succeed, irrespective of their background. We work hard to tackle the access gap. That's why we are pumping millions more into outreach programmes, why we published *Informed Choices* to give better guidance to students choosing their A levels and it's why many of our universities sponsor academies and work with their local schools (Russell Group 2013).

Here, the blame for the under-representation of disadvantaged pupils in elite universities is placed firmly at the door of schools (and the pupils themselves) rather than universities. These students, it is argued, take the wrong subjects (sometimes as a result of poor advice), fail to achieve the required grades, and do not apply to the right universities. Framing this as an external and entrenched problem absolves Russell Group universities from any responsibility to effect change. Universities' 'hard work' and the 'millions' pumped into outreach problems are presented as both altruistic (this is not the university's responsibility, but it does the work anyway), and essentially supplementary/additional to the 'real barriers to fair access', which are to be found in the schools. What is particularly striking is the inflexibility of the universities' selection criteria: students need 'good grades' in the 'right subjects' in order to access 'competitive' subjects. Formal qualifications form a rigid criteria for access to an elite education. This situation is presented as immutable, and yet such use of admissions criteria in historically anomalous. As Tim Blackman has shown, until 1945 entry to university only required six passes at GCE O-level, while since 1969 the Open University has shown that a 'comprehensive' higher education system is feasible (Blackman, 2015).

However, Piatt's narrative is also echoed by left-leaning academics, who bemoan the poor representation of deprived groups in elite universities, but conclude regretfully that, as Mary Beard puts it, 'we really couldn't be doing MORE.' Beard's analysis contains precisely the same elements as Piatt's (and even quotes her): universities are doing their very best; much of the blame must lie with students' poor subject choice; this is a local manifestation of a global problem

(Beard, 2013). The exclusion of poor and working-class students is unacceptable, she accepts, but ‘everyone I know in Cambridge is working as hard as they can to change it’.

In this article, we describe an attempt to create an alternative model for widening participation. Drawing on our experience running the Foundation Year in Arts and Humanities at the University of Bristol, we argue that widening participation does not need to be seen as an intractable problem - in fact, the solutions involve drawing on particular expertise available within higher education institutions. What is more, programmes such as the Foundation Year have the potential not only to bring a more diverse group of students into the university, but also to change the institution itself for the better.

These particular issues around widening participation are also symptomatic of a broader problem. Rosalind Gill (2009) has powerfully articulated a widely-felt sentiment of alienation from the modern university. As the marketisation of higher education accelerates in the UK, many academics feel atomised and powerless in the face of managerial pressures to raise research income and Research Excellence Framework (REF) and National Student Survey (NSS) performance. Key to this sense of disempowerment is a keenly-felt loss of professional autonomy. As Neary and Amsler (2012: 116) put it: ‘We have rather lost control over the form, structure and function of academic knowledge; the determination of the times and spaces in which we teach and learn; the relationships between educational philosophies and the material environments of teaching; and relationships between students and teachers.’ One aspect of this loss of control is the composition of the student body. Who is in the classroom is as important an aspect of pedagogy as what is taught or how. At present, however, academics have decreasing control over admissions. Indeed academics can also collude in that act of neutralising this aspect of pedagogy, as Beard’s remarks demonstrate. Many academics are unhappy with the direction the modern university has taken, but in the face of the erosion of professional autonomy, feel powerless to change it. In this article we argue that these academics have become alienated from tools that are readily at hand. Pedagogical initiatives such as the Foundation Year can help academics overcome their sense of deskilling and atomisation and carve out a creative space within the university.

The Foundation Year in Arts and Humanities is a one-year programme based in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Bristol. The Faculty is made up of 15 Departments, and had 3453 undergraduate students in 2013/14. Programmes range from English, History, Classics, Philosophy, Modern Languages to Music, Drama, Film, Theatre and Performance Studies, and Archaeology and Anthropology. The University markets itself as an academically elite institution, traditionally recruiting high-performing A-Level students. In 2012/13, just under 60% of the University’s undergraduates had been state-educated compared to a national average of almost 90%.² A mere 3.3% came from low-participation neighbourhoods. The Foundation Year originated in a wider review of pedagogy in the Faculty, named Project Arts, in 2011/12 and was the key recommendation of the widening participation workstream of that initiative. The programme launched in 2013/14. The course is designed as a way into university for people with no or few conventional educational qualifications, and aims to prepare them for first year

² See figures from Higher Education Statistics Agency, Table T1a - % young entrants 2012/13 from state schools, lower socio-economic classifications (SEC) and low participation neighbourhoods by HE provider: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/dox/performanceIndicators/1314_U9R5/t1a_1314.xlsx

undergraduate study in any of the subjects in the Faculty of Arts. This emphasis on few or no prior qualifications distinguishes this programme from many other Foundation Years (which are often routes into the academy for those with lower A-Level grades), although it is in keeping with the longer tradition of Access courses, in various modes, both those within universities and others offered by external providers such as the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). Students are recruited through publicity in the local press and a series of short taster courses run in partnership with local community groups, and applicants both complete written work and are interviewed. The programme offers students both an in-depth grounding in academic skills such as as note-taking, essay writing, and participation in seminars and an overview of the subjects offered in the Faculty of Arts. Foundation Year students take a 40-credit-point unit in each semester, focused around the question 'What Does It Mean To Be Human?' In the first semester, they take a 20-credit-point unit 'An Introduction to Study in the Arts and Humanities', in which students learn the various study skills they need to engage with the academic content on the Foundation Year, but also with the degree programmes onto which they might progress. For their second unit in the second semester, students can either complete an Individual Project or choose from specialist provision in languages or music. Students who successfully complete the year automatically progress to the first year of a degree in the Faculty. In 2013/14, the first year the programme ran, the Programme Directors were Richard Pettigrew and Tom Sperlinger (who had designed the programme and seen it through the institutional approval process) and Josie McLellan. Sperlinger is based in the English Department, with a background in adult and part-time education; Pettigrew in Philosophy; and McLellan in History.

In planning and executing the Foundation Year, we drew on three main responses to the socio-economic limits of participation in HE in the UK. Firstly, recent government strategy has attempted to widen participation at the same time as increasing total student numbers. This has often focused on the implementation of national, target-driven schemes, such as Aim Higher. Universities' responses have tended to be along the same lines, encouraging school-age pupils from low-participation areas or without a family history of higher education to apply. These attempts have taken place in a challenging financial context, as student grants have been phased out and replaced by loans, and tuition fees introduced and then increased threefold. Taylor (2008) suggests that widening participation under the New Labour governments from 1997 was characterised by 'rhetorical advocacy, some achievement but essentially modest progress....There has been, undoubtedly, a rapid increase in the numbers of students in higher education, but the expansion has occurred very largely through greater participation from the higher socio-economic groups – "more of the same" to put it crudely. ...So, *widening* participation in addition to *increasing* participation has been only partially achieved.' Taylor also points to the focus of widening participation policy on learners under 21, and the decline in adult participation in higher education, a trend that has accelerated in recent years. Between 2010 and 2013, the numbers of students starting part-time degrees declined by 40%, and there was a 7.1% drop in the numbers of people starting a degree aged 20 or over between 2011 and 2012. (Office for Fair Access, 2013: 16) Yet for all the limitations of universities' attempts to widen participation, their institutional status and infrastructure remain a potentially powerful resource.

Secondly, an increasing number of academics and activists have attempted to radically rethink the university, through alternative and deliberately autonomous models of higher education outside the physical, curricular, financial and institutional boundaries of the university. Alternative art schools and free universities attempt to offer a free-to-access substitute for paid-for

higher education. IF: This University Is Free, a London-based project, works on a model where lecturers donate their time, and the syllabus incorporates free cultural events. Some of these projects also incorporate a critique of traditional models of pedagogy: the Social Science Centre in Lincoln takes as its starting point the idea of students as producers of knowledge. Here, the distinctions between students and teachers are dissolved in favour of a co-operative community of scholars. Nor does the SSC attempt to recreate the structures of the university. 'It is an experiment....in radically de-institutionalising [higher education] by, for example, rejecting hegemonic forms of evaluation and accreditation in order to appropriate the use-value of critical knowledge while simultaneously reducing its value for exchange.' (Neary and Amsler, 2012: 126) The Ragged University (Edinburgh) adopts a peer-led model, which facilitates the sharing of knowledge outside traditional academic hierarchies. These experiments reject both the economic and the pedagogical structures of higher education.

Thirdly, a longer radical tradition, of extra-mural work, has sought to both critique the university from within and to learn from those outside it. A full history of this tradition - which pre-dates that of most universities in the UK - is beyond the scope of this article. Of particular relevance for our purposes is that from 1924 to 1989, each region in the UK had one university which was a 'Responsible Body', charged with ensuring that a broad curriculum of higher education was available to its communities. This tradition has been critiqued, most recently by Chris Duke (2008) who sees it as having been 'doomed by its high-minded origins and its privileged status' and who saw the old extra-mural tradition as having been 'trapped in protected but marginalised departments'. While Duke's analysis does much to explain the administrative decline of those departments it perhaps pays too little attention to the attendant losses. The extra-mural departments (EMDs), at their most effective, offered a space within elite universities that allowed academics and students to operate at the margins of the institution - and at the margins between it and the external world. The 1919 Reconstruction Committee, which initiated the EMD era, commented: 'One of the greatest evils which can befall education is a rigid uniformity. It inevitably devitalises education of every kind; but it would cause adult non-vocational education either to perish or to seek new channels outside the influence of the uniform system.' (British Ministry of Reconstruction, Adult Education Committee, 1919) This tradition was vital to the thinking that emerged from EMD such as in the work of Stuart Hall, E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams and resulting areas of research, such as cultural studies. Thompson, for example, argued that it was vital to the democratic function of universities that they needed the 'abrasion of different worlds of experience'. (Thompson, 1997: 27) There are also comparable forms of critique in feminist and postcolonial contexts; for example, work by Adrienne Rich (1979), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993) has emphasised how higher education institutions might be restructured to allow for individuals and voices who are currently excluded from or marginalised within them.

The Foundation Year draws on elements of all three responses. Like government and institutional widening participation initiatives, it seeks to increase the numbers of students from nontraditional backgrounds on undergraduate degree programmes. Like experiments outside the university, it questions the existing structures and premises of higher education, and attempts to place questions of participation and experience at the heart of teaching practice. And like the radical tradition of adult education within the university, it attempts both to engage communities outside the university, and to change the nature of the community inside the university itself. This article will argue that, within a mass higher education system in which uniformity is

increasingly emphasised (and necessary for administrative purposes), there is an urgent need for forms of pedagogy that resist and revitalise the dominant university culture.

This article has been co-written by three academics from very different disciplines. One experience we have all shared -- and which seems common to most academics in the UK at present -- is a sense that we move between very different discourses within our roles as researchers, teachers and in how we function within an increasingly bureaucratic system. This can involve adopting quite different languages (or 'selves') and can lead to a feeling that one's energies are scattered or atomised. The Foundation Year is an example of this, in that it involved us engaging in dialogue about institutional priorities, finances and structures, while also maintaining a sense of the larger pedagogic aims of the project. By writing about both the practical tasks that were involved in setting up the course and its larger theoretical contexts and consequences, our hope is that the article also makes its own argument that it is possible to reclaim these different 'selves' as part of a more unified or holistic approach. In that sense, to 're-make' the university means to reclaim its disparate energies: this pedagogic task, like so many others, is thus at once a recovery and a renewal.

This article, then raises some key questions about the nature of the modern university: is widening participation an intractable problem? Can elite universities be changed from within, or is radical change only possible by creating new structures and institutions outside them? Finally, can a small-scale pedagogic initiative such as the Foundation Year have wider-reaching implications for a university as a whole? This last question is a vital test of whether universities continue to function democratically, since there is a risk that outreach and widening participation initiatives function mostly as an exercise in meeting statutory requirements or in public relations. Only if those entering the university through a route of this kind have an opportunity to change the institution - by bringing new forms of knowledge and by having a representative voice in decision-making -- can the university be said to function still in a genuinely democratic mode.

From widening participation as process to widening participation as pedagogy

Currently, in many elite higher education institutions in the UK, widening participation is treated largely as an administrative issue. The vast majority of widening participation efforts are directed and executed by non-academic staff housed in the institution's administrative centre. The job of creating a more diverse student body is approached by expanding the outreach programmes that are created to advertise the institution to prospective students, tweaking the admissions processes that are used to select amongst those who end up applying, and improving the financial packages that are available to students who are offered a place. This is widening participation as a recruitment and admissions process. The Foundation Year grew out of an attempt to find an alternative approach. The existing model, with its focus on process, has failed substantially to increase the representation of many under-represented groups in Russell Group universities. Moreover, while there are some under-represented groups amongst whom participation has increased a little (e.g. students from low participation neighbourhoods), there are others amongst whom it has not increased at all (e.g. Black British students); and there others again amongst whom it has decreased (e.g. mature students).

There are a number of reasons for this failure. For example, while many outreach projects -- such as summer schools -- sometimes increase university participation amongst the students who attend, they rarely increase participation at Russell Group universities by anything like the same proportion. Another reason for this failure is that there is a tendency to target schools almost exclusively. In many ways, this is motivated by a diagnosis of the problem of widening participation offered by Wendy Piatt. This diagnosis has a number of effects: it excuses the Russell Group universities for not taking significant institutional risks in their widening participation strategy, for not making serious efforts to understand the ways in which universities can help to address the problem, and for not being creative in their response. Indeed, it delivers the reassuring corollary that universities themselves need not change to increase their widening participation cohorts.

WP as process is also a consequence of the increasingly target-driven culture in universities. Certain groups are officially sanctioned as 'widening participation categories' -- for instance, mature students, Black and minority ethnic students, students from low-performing schools, or low-participation neighbourhoods, or low-income households. It is clear within this that the definition of a 'WP student' is not fixed and might change across time, but also that it might be possible to have forms of disadvantage that are not officially recognised or that exist in multiple and intersecting forms. Targets are then set to increase the proportion of students in an institution who belong to these groups. Indeed, the advent of the OFFA agreement focussed the attention of universities on these targets, since their ability to charge £9,000 fees was threatened if they failed to improve. While this renewed focus on widening participation was welcome, in practice it encouraged universities to aim for 'low-hanging fruit', such as middle-class students who fulfil the 'state-educated' criteria. While an increase in participation amongst this group is very welcome, the strategies adopted by universities often ignored other groups that traditionally have been excluded from higher education. The effect is an extension of university participation very slightly outside the traditional boundaries of the young adults of the middle class -- those far outside those boundaries remained as poorly represented as ever.

How then might a university change in order to become more inclusive? One key strategy that we adopted when designing the Foundation Year was to create fictional 'pen portraits' of people who might wish to enter higher education but for whom the standard admissions route is not available. We then asked how our university would have to change in order to admit these students and provide them with a fulfilling and nurturing intellectual environment in which to engage fully with undergraduate study. It very quickly became clear that the strategy of taking WP as process was not equal to the task. For many of our fictional case studies, a lack of prior qualifications would exclude them from consideration however the institution amended its admissions criteria for undergraduate programmes. Moreover, for many of those who had been out of formal education for a long period, even if they had the intellectual capacity to deal with the material in an undergraduate programme, they would be immediately at a disadvantage (or, at least, might perceive themselves to be) because of their lack of academic skills, such as essay writing, note-taking, participation in academic discussion, and so on. What's more, the cultural and social differences between them and a typical undergraduate student at our institution might leave such a student isolated with a consequent impact on their academic success. What was needed, we concluded, was an approach that equipped these applicants with the skills required to engage in undergraduate education as well as the confidence to do so in an institution at which

they might initially feel out of place; indeed, if possible, to harness that ‘outsider’ perspective as a positive attribute they could bring to their studies.

After a brief biography of each of our fictional potential applicants to the programme, we answered the following questions: How will this person hear about the programme? What issues would arise in admitting this person to the programme? What might prevent this person completing the programme? Together, these questions informed the publicity campaign we designed to raise awareness of the programme amongst the groups from which we wanted to recruit; they helped us determine the structure of the admissions process as well as the academic and pastoral support that students would need; and they played an important role in our design of the academic content of the programme. This process also helped us to clarify the limits to what we could achieve. For example, one pen portrait of a 23-year-old man who had been functionally illiterate prior to enrolling for a course at a local FE college prompted us to think about prior levels of literacy. An important lesson from this was that, while it is essential that universities change their teaching to make their degree programmes as accessible as possible, there may still be areas such as basic literacy skills that still fall outside a university’s remit. This is, however, an aspect of preliminary or preparatory provision that we have continued to explore; in 2015/16, for example, we will work further with refugee rights organisations in Bristol to set up tailored tasters for students whose first language is not English.

A related argument that was made to us several times while the Foundation Year was being proposed was that a course of this kind would be better developed by a further education college or other equivalent provider. However, there had been an enormous reduction in arts and humanities provision at colleges in the Bristol area. In fact, the Foundation Year was not competing with any equivalent provision in the city at the time. Another argument was that the Foundation Year was likely to ‘use up’ the supply of potential students very quickly. This has not been borne out in fact - with application numbers rising from 45 in 2013 to 60 in 2014 and 80 in 2015. But it also misses the extent to which forms of exclusion and marginality in education shift in response to the changing economic and social climate and as particular individuals’ lives evolve. The Foundation Year is peculiarly adaptable to such changes because it makes no assumptions about background and experience. It has also been vital that the course has always involved running a series of short tasters that are co-designed with community organisations. As we are able to track the patterns and absences in our recruitment, we have thus been able to tilt these tasters towards new groups and communities; in 2015/16, for example, we will run taster courses in partnership with Bristol Probation Services and with the City Council’s Care Leavers’ team.

Here is one fictional case study:

Nell was doing well at school (‘mostly Bs, but sometimes I got an A’) when she fell pregnant at 15. She completed 5 GCSEs, getting one A (in English Language), 1 B, 1 C and 2 Ds. She and her boyfriend now have a flat and are bringing up their son together. Nell has done some part-time work over the last few years but mostly lived on benefits. Now that her son is close to starting school, Nell is keen to do something for herself.

Along with others, this case study determined the timing of the programme and the financial package that we would try to put together for the students on it. The need to make the

programme available to those with care commitments spoke in favour of child-friendly hours (10am-3pm) and the need to allow students to earn through part-time work determined that we would offer the teaching on two consecutive days in every week. By calculating the loss of earnings that would result from moving from full-time work to the part-time work required to join the programme, we arrived at the value of bursary that would be needed to maintain household income for a student on low income who wished to join the programme.

The pen portraits were also invaluable in preparing for the interviews. Our aim at interview was to select students with the intellectual capacity to thrive on an undergraduate programme but who lacked the formal qualifications required by the standard admissions route. However, a significant threat to this aim was the unconscious biases of the interviewers. Unconscious or implicit biases are well-documented psychological mechanisms that lead us to evaluate a person's performance at a task in line with the way in which people from the group to which we believe they belong are stereotyped as performing that task (Staats et al, 2015). Thus, young Black men are stereotyped as poor at academic work, but strong at athletic pursuits; young Asian women are stereotyped in the opposite way. It has been shown that these implicit biases affect people even if they explicitly avow egalitarian values. The pen portraits we created were, of course, subject to similar risks. However, they had the major advantage of allowing us to spend time considering counter-stereotypical examples, which has been cited as an effective way of countering unconscious bias (Blair et al, 2001). These were fictional characters, but they were often drawn from people we knew, and we had drawn them explicitly as examples of people from groups excluded from higher education whom we nonetheless believed would succeed. When we encountered candidates in interview who resembled these portraits in these ways -- and this happened remarkably often -- our unconscious mechanisms of evaluation at least had a counter-stereotypical exemplar with which to associate them and that would counter any unconscious negative stereotype that might also be activated. This is not to say, of course, that such a technique can hope to eliminate *all* unconscious biases.

The use of the 'pen portraits' put the potential students at the centre of the proposed course. But they also allowed us to start treating different aspects of the WP process holistically; to think about publicity, recruitment, admissions, course design, student support, assessment and progression in relation to a diverse cohort. In moving away from WP as process, we were able to avoid the risk that one aspect of process (such as outreach) might be improved without knock-on effects on, say, admissions. But we were also able to reclaim WP as pedagogy. Refusing to treat the existing university structures and ways of teaching as 'sacred cows' -- many of them inherited from a time of even greater inequality in access to higher education and some designed for a time when universities served a very different purpose -- the WP as pedagogy approach asks not how to admit students from WP backgrounds into a system to which they are then required to conform. Rather, it suggests a systemic mode of pedagogy along the lines proposed by Freire (1996): "The solution is not to "integrate" [the oppressed] into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become "beings for themselves." The pen portraits forced us to focus on specific individuals who face specific obstacles to engaging with higher education, with consequences also for how they might realise other possibilities in their lives.

WP as pedagogy abandons the idea that it is some other part of the educational system that is responsible for low participation in the elite institutions -- the schools, the applicants, or the families and social backgrounds of the applicants. It is also a reminder that some of the most

exciting aspects of pedagogy are to do with the encountering of difference and the unknown; this may be as true in our encounters with students as with the material we are studying. WP as pedagogy begins by accepting that it might be the elite universities that need to change in order to ensure that the education that they can provide -- as well as the enormous capital of a degree that they can bestow -- is accessible to everyone. After all, so long as qualifications from different higher education institutions are judged differently by employers, degrees from Russell Group universities are financial assets -- the less accessible they are, the less fair and equal the resulting society.

Successes

The Foundation Year set out to attract learners who would not otherwise be in education. In its first year, 27 students started the course. 79% were mature students, 72% local students, and 90% did not have A-Levels. As these figures suggest, this was a diverse cohort. 17% of students came from ethnic minority groups, and 24% from low-participation neighbourhoods. 78% of students had a household income under £25k, qualifying them for a bursary. (An informal survey of 17 students found that 15 had incomes <£25k, 10 had incomes of <£15k, and 9 of whom had incomes of <£13k, i.e. <60% of median household income.) What is particularly striking in both the first and second cohorts was the participation of people who rarely engage with Russell Group institutions: recovering addicts, people with significant mental and physical health issues, students with substantial caring responsibilities, people with few or no formal qualifications, and people who had been out of education for decades. For a significant number of students, the Foundation Year was a second chance (or even a belated first chance) in education which was not available elsewhere.

The unconventional nature of the student body makes the completion rates even more pleasing: in 2013/14, 24 students (89%) completed the year and all qualified for progression to a degree. Of these, all but one completed with an overall average of 60% or above. One measure of the progress made by the student body over the course of the programme is the contrast between the average mark for the first assignment (56%) and the mean percentage for the year as a whole (65.3%). Individual students demonstrated even more dramatic progress over the course of the year, e.g. from a first assignment mark of 46% to a final assignment of 67%, or the student who began with an essay marked at 48% and completed with an overall average of 67%.

This quantitative improvement was often accompanied by increasing confidence amongst students during the period of the programme. This was not always exclusively tied to rapidly improving marks: participation in seminars and in the broader life of the University also played a key role. In some cases, students' confidence had been eroded by time out of the workplace and/or prolonged periods of employment in jobs which did not fully use their skills. Rosie, who had left school before GSCEs explained: 'Academically, my confidence is definitely ten times better than it was before. But also, just generally with talking to people, being able to put my opinion across....' As Rosie went on to say, the process of engaging with the programme, and thinking about what might come afterwards, was energising and exciting. 'It's just helped my confidence in general, because I just feel like I'm really going somewhere with my life and I'm really doing something with it.'

Of the 27 students who began the Foundation Year in 2013/14, 21 are now in full-time undergraduate education. 18 students began degrees in the Faculty of Arts in September 2014, ranging over Liberal Arts, Philosophy, Anthropology, History, English, Film and Archaeology. One student started a degree in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law; two started undergraduate degrees elsewhere. This has clearly had transformative consequences for the individuals involved. One said: 'The course has, quite simply, changed my life. I no longer feel like I am going to be stuck in a dead-end job for the foreseeable future; instead I am going to get an education, a degree, and pursue interests I have held my entire life.' It is also to be hoped that the presence of such students on undergraduate degrees will make the general culture of the Faculty a more welcoming one for students who have not come via the standard route. We heard several anecdotes during the year of the group acting as a magnet for other non-traditional students; for example, a group of Foundation Year students standing on the street were approached by two other mature students who were drawn to the unusual sight of a diverse and mixed-age group on the university precinct.

The Foundation Year has positively affected the culture of the University in a variety of other ways too. For the Programme Directors, setting up this programme from scratch was a highly stimulating and thought-provoking experience, qualitatively different from the experience of launching a new MA or undergraduate programme. In part this was due to the novel nature of the programme, and the creativity that was required both to design the course and to deal with issues as they arose. For all of us, the Foundation Year involved a much closer degree of collaborative working than we were used to, in terms of running the programme, designing the teaching, and addressing problems. Two of the programme directors had come to their involvement with the Foundation Year through a conventional academic career in research and teaching. The third had originally been appointed to oversee extra-mural programmes in English that were left over from the closure of the Continuing Education (formerly EMD) Department at Bristol in 1998; for him, the great surprise was 'being given the opportunity to do this' after years of such work being marginal within the institution and within the current funding regimes in higher education.

In addition to the core teaching team, 25 colleagues from across the Faculty, from professors to early career researchers, led sessions on the core units. A further 19 PhD students and postdoctoral researchers were involved in the Individual Project unit, and undergraduate students have acted as peer mentors. Colleagues from the Library, the Theatre Collection, Students' Union, and the Faculty Widening Participation team have also played a key role in the success of the programme. Feedback from contributing lecturers was extremely positive. One wrote:

It was the most invigorating teaching I've done in a long time and I put this down to the opportunity to teach more broadly within my field but also due to the cross section of students who were on the course this year. It was amazing to walk into a room with such a diverse range of people. Their receptivity to learning was tangible and I think that we all responded to this and found ways of communicating our ideas to them that we had not explored before. I felt reinvigorated in terms of my job as a lecturer and have taken the experience back into my undergraduate courses.

What was it about teaching Foundation Year students that colleagues found invigorating? Firstly, the value-added of this teaching was much clearer than is sometimes the case for students with an unblemished record of educational success. Secondly, as people with mixed experiences of education, the students often brought a critical perspective to our discussions, and were quicker to challenge academic authority when it did not match with their experiences. Discussions felt less predictable, leading us to question and adapt our usual teaching styles. Thirdly, as Foundation Year students had not come through traditional routes, they were less bound by received academic norms. This led to a willingness to juxtapose topics that other students might have considered too risky, e.g. an imaginative essay on Caravaggio and Bob Dylan. Students' newness to the academic environment also meant they raised perceptive questions: in a discussion on the interaction of research questions and sources in historical methodology, one student broke in to ask 'but where do the questions come from?' Fourthly, 'mainstream' students' awareness of academic norms such as objectivity, control of emotion, and avoidance of the first person can sometimes lead to a self-consciousness and reserve. The fact that this was a second chance for many Foundation Year students resulted in a striking sense of energy in the classroom. Students were eager to get involved in discussions, and quick to reflect on their experiences. Finally, academics were aware of the novel nature of the course, and the unusually diverse composition of the student body. There was a high level of investment in making the sessions work, in identifying barriers to engagement and seeking to overcome them with all means possible. This contrasted with a (perhaps unreasonable) sense when teaching highly-qualified undergraduates that it was up to them to engage with the material on offer.

This warm response from colleagues has been extremely gratifying: we are now oversubscribed with volunteer lecturers for the core courses. There was also a noticeable shift in management perceptions of the Foundation Year: while early on it was sometimes seen as a drain on resources, university leaders were gradually able to see its connection to the university's educational and civic missions; in some respects, this remains an ongoing task. The success of the programme was key, as were the powerful nature of the students' stories. Over the past year, the success of the Foundation Year has been acknowledged through a Vice Chancellor's Teaching Award, a University Engagement Award, and presentations at the annual Engage Conference and Enterprise Dinner. It seems that the success of projects such as the Foundation Year and the part-time degree in English Literature and Community Engagement has contributed to a gradual change in university approach to widening participation, and made other projects along these lines worthy of support in the eyes of management.

Finally, the Foundation Year was able to build on existing links with Bristol community groups and create new working relationships through a series of taster courses. Our community partners include IDEAL Community Action, which works with recovering addicts, Single Parent Action Network, Refugee Women of Bristol, Bristol Refugee Rights, Full Circle Youth Project, and Into University. All of these tasters were run off-site and took place in some of the most deprived wards in Bristol. While many of the taster courses resulted in students applying for and taking up a place on the Foundation Year, feedback suggests that they were an enjoyable and rewarding experience, even for those who did not apply. 'It challenged what my ideas of history are and how you can approach it, and asked a lot of unexpected questions. It made me think.' Participants on the SPAN course praised the 'different innovative techniques that aren't usually used in teaching...I loved the fact that everybody on the course is different'. Another participant said: 'you feel as if you've made new friends...More people should get involved in this sort of

thing...it opens up your mind'. Thus, the tasters have raised the University's profile as a positive force in the city, and reached audiences that would otherwise have been unlikely to engage with the University.

Risks

In this section, we explore the risks associated with the Foundation Year: for applicants, students, those teaching on the programme and for the institution itself. The institutional risks to the University of Bristol were largely financial. The University committed a bursary fund of £75,000 to provide maintenance grants to students whose household incomes were below £25,000. It approved a fee of £3,500 in the first year of the programme, less than half the standard fee of £9,000 for all other undergraduate programmes. It also accepted the potential loss of fee income if a lower proportion of Foundation Year students failed to complete the programme. (In the end, over 90% of students completed the programme.) Despite the relatively minor nature of the financial commitment involved, resistance at an institutional level was significant. This suggests that the current model of university funding, which provides financial incentives for WP activities, is not entirely effective. On the face of it, the flexibility of the mechanisms around the OFFA agreement appear to give institutions the scope to be creative in the WP projects that they foster. But in practice it leads universities to be risk-averse, focussing energy on low risk projects that are likely to produce a modest return, rather than embracing more high risk and innovative though untested projects that have the potential to be more broadly transformative.

At a Faculty level, concerns were raised by academic colleagues that admitting students on to undergraduate degree programmes by progression from the Foundation Year would diminish the overall quality of undergraduate cohorts. Such students, it was argued, might well possess raw intellectual ability, but would lack the common body of knowledge and suite of concepts conferred by a shared pre-university educational background. This would prevent lecturers from teaching at the high intellectual level at which they currently teach and would thus tarnish both the University's reputation for teaching and its market position relative to other Russell Group universities. Upon further probing, however, it transpired that this argument rested on an idealised picture of the current undergraduate population. Most lecturers admitted they could assume little common knowledge amongst a first-year undergraduate cohort, and that while an A-Level in English or History might result in familiarity with certain technical vocabulary, the advantage that this gave students was slight. As the aim of the Foundation Year was to prepare students for undergraduate study, it could in fact be argued that students entering a degree by this route had an advantage over their peers. Of particular note here are the built-in skills element, the fact that students were already working to undergraduate marking criteria, and the emphasis on critical assessment and appraisal.

We now come to the greatest risks created by the Foundation Year: the risks to the students. The innovative nature of the Foundation Year, and its ambition to make the University's student body more diverse, was one of the things that energised both staff and students. Yet the risks were carried disproportionately by the students. For academics, while teaching Foundation Year sessions could feel challenging and 'risky', it stretched our existing skills and expertise rather than taking us into entirely uncharted territory. For students, however, the experience of the Foundation Year was potentially transformative in that it might change their life course, their

values, their ways of thinking and their identities. We have, more than once, heard students from backgrounds that have not traditionally engaged in higher education express concern that they are finding themselves moving too far from their community and family (metaphorically or literally); some have left programmes for this reason. (See also Reay, 2002). The students in the first cohort had a strong sense of being ‘pioneers’, not just in their family or social group, but within the university. For Alison, a single mother in her 40s, this was an empowering feeling: ‘We have proved something to that University, that a course like this that includes people from such diverse backgrounds, can be included in an elite university. It’s now opening that up to all the other departments. So I will go through that University going “Well of course I was a pioneer on the Arts and Humanities Foundation Course” and know that that’s something to be really proud of.’ While the sense of being a ‘pioneer’ undoubtedly added to this student’s sense of achievement, a sense of difference to the undergraduate ‘norm’ could also cause anxiety, particularly as students began to anticipate their exit from the Foundation Year, and their dispersal throughout the Faculty. To address these anxieties, we ran a transition day at the end of the programme, with contributions from a current mature undergraduate student, and the University’s Mature Students’ Advisor. Once the students had begun their undergraduate degrees we ran a series of ‘transition sessions’ with a familiar tutor from the programme team, where they could share their experiences and regain some of the solidarity and shared experience of their first year.

The imbalance in the risks taken by staff and by students is most stark when we consider financial risks. Students on the Foundation Year were eligible for student loans for the duration of the Foundation Year and any undergraduate programme onto which they progressed.³ But many of the students entering the Foundation Year could only do so by moving from full-time to part-time work, sometimes impacting dependents. The design of the programme set about mitigating the financial risks in a number of ways: firstly, the reduced fee of £3,500. Secondly, the dedicated Foundation Year bursary gave 20 students with a household income below £25,000 a bursary of £3,750 each. Thirdly, all teaching took place on Mondays and Tuesdays between 10 and 3 to allow students to continue to supplement their income with part-time work, and to keep childcare costs low for those with small or school-age children. Fourthly, the fact that students who decided that undergraduate study was not for them could exit the Foundation Year with a Level 0 qualification made this a way of testing the water for those who were unsure about the financial commitment of a full-time, three year undergraduate degree. Having spent a year at the University, and fully explored their options with the support of their personal tutor, the Careers Service, and the Student Finance Office, students could make their own decision about the costs and benefits of further study.

Limitations

We do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Foundation Year in Arts and Humanities provides a one-size-fits-all solution to the problems of participation in higher education. Most obviously, it reaches only a limited number of students (a maximum of 30 students per year, in relation to an

³ Taking the Foundation Year also meant that students used up their entitlement to an additional year of funding from Student Finance England, which is significant for students with complex lives which might necessitate a suspension of studies at some point during their university career.

overall annual undergraduate population of 15,397). This programme is effective partly because it achieves radical, if marginal, changes to a relatively privileged student body. However, institutions outside the Russell Group which are often prestigious in other ways, arguably have a greater impact by offering such opportunities to less advantaged groups on an institutional scale. While initial plans for the programme projected an eventual doubling of numbers to 60 students per year, our current feeling is that expansion could undermine the group cohesion and the quality of personal interaction and student support which has made the programme a success. A partial solution to the problem of scale could be the replication of the Foundation Year model across the university's other Faculties, and indeed across the UK HE sector more generally. Its applicability across other disciplines raises interesting and challenging questions about prerequisites, but not, we feel insurmountable ones.

The Foundation Year model as established at the University of Bristol is also vulnerable to changes in the local and national funding regime. Indeed, it has not proved possible to preserve the additional bursary past the first two years of the course, and the fee level has also risen from £3500 in 2013/14 to £4500 in 2015/16. A drop in the income available for all Widening Participation schemes - or changes in the University's statutory obligations to be seen to address the issue of Widening Participation - could lead the University to further reassess its priorities. A change of government policy on student funding for level 0 programmes would make the Foundation Year unworkable. Further rises to undergraduate fees and/or less favourable repayment terms for student finance might also undermine the viability of the programme, making further study financially unpalatable for our target groups. However, schemes like the Foundation Year, and the feel-good factor created by their success, are important in keeping issues of social justice and equitable student funding near the top of universities' agenda. Only by demonstrating that the 'problem' of widening participation is not an intractable one can the argument for its continued importance be won.

The organisation of the programme also means that the Programme Directors must tailor the course around the research and teaching interests of the volunteer lecturers from across the Faculty. In this sense, while the *structure* of the course has been designed with this student body in mind, the course *content* is a reflection of teaching and research in a relatively traditional Arts Faculty. One consequence of this was that despite attempts to deliver a curriculum that was not entirely Eurocentric, sessions which drew on non-Anglo-American material tended to focus on Western interventions or legacies. It was harder to find lecturers who were able to deliver teaching on completely non-Western topics. In this sense, the Foundation Year may 'remake' the shape/framework of the curriculum, but it does not dramatically challenge its content. There is certainly a sense in which the Foundation Year needs to give a realistic representation of the Faculty's degree programmes, so that students can make an informed decision about progression. Even if it were possible to deliver a completely non-Eurocentric course, this could result in a form of false advertising. Nevertheless, there is something problematic about a diverse student body engaging with a curriculum which leaves the Western canon in most respects unchallenged.

Finally, and significantly, a critic of the Foundation Year might argue that it does not do enough to disrupt the traditional student-teacher relationship. Unlike in co-operative and peer-led models of education such as those used by the Social Science Centre and the Ragged University, the power of curriculum design and assessment remains with the teaching staff. While students are encouraged to draw on the authority of their experience, they do so within a curriculum that

is pre-ordained. Students are invited to engage with the running of the programme via the system of student representation, and involved in the drawing-up of protocols for classroom etiquette. Those who choose the Individual Project carry out a piece of research of their own design. The Foundation Year's place within the University also requires the Programme Directors to conform to institutional and sector norms, e.g. adherence to Faculty marking criteria, student progress procedures, and so on. Indeed, the entire set-up of the programme is designed to enable students to progress to an undergraduate degree - an implicit sense of the value of a conventional university education is built-into the project, although both staff and students may stress intellectual over financial value. While the Foundation Year aims to reshape aspects of university life, it does so within its boundaries.

Could it be said, therefore, that the Foundation Year does not do enough to challenge traditional pedagogical hierarchies? Existing structures are not without their strengths. Firstly, the aim of the Foundation Year is to prepare students for undergraduate study in a relatively short period of time (teaching runs for 22 weeks from late September to early May). A clear and well-established structure enables students to make rapid progress in e.g. essay writing over this period. Secondly, while it is true that 'anyone can teach, everyone can learn', being put in the role of teacher and co-producer of the curriculum may not be right for every student. While many students came to the Foundation Year with negative experiences of education behind them, this has not prevented them enjoying the pleasures of being a student. (Indeed, one of the joys of *teaching* on such a wide-ranging course was attending the weekly lectures from across the Faculty.) Thirdly, the hands-on student support that was central to the high completion/progression rate also relies to a certain extent on the authority of the tutor to be able to say 'don't panic, what you are feeling is normal at this stage of the course', 'you are already working at first year level' etc. In this context, academic authority and experience can be reassuring and even empowering for students. Finally, for many Foundation Year students, unsure of their 'right' to be at university, a flat hierarchy might feel too chaotic. The authority of experience is what they have relied on until their return to study. The purpose of the Foundation Year - and subsequent undergraduate study - is to give students access to different authorities that they can integrate into their existing knowledge while also feeling empowered to draw upon their experience.

What is more, the transformative potential of attending university should not be underplayed, nor the particular benefits that accrue with a degree from an 'elite' university. A degree from the University of Bristol offers opportunities and also significantly enhances a student's social capital. When you take the university out of the picture you also lose something, i.e. in the social cachet, job prospects etc. that undergraduate degrees can give someone. As Adrienne Rich put it: 'The orthodox university is still a vital place, however, if only because it is a place where people can find each other and begin to hear each other. (It is also a source of certain kinds of power.)' (Rich 1979: 127) And, as a space slightly outside 'ordinary' life, even a traditional university can be a place with radical potential for reassessment and reinvention (see also Smyth 2014).

Remaking the elite university

The experience of the first Foundation Year cohorts suggests that not only is academic success at an elite university possible for those without A-Levels, but that it is precisely the non-traditional backgrounds of these students that shape their distinctive and original contribution to university

life. In this light, elite universities are clearly culpable for failing to admit a more representative group of students. It is clear that WP is not an intractable problem: in fact it is something that can be addressed quite readily with materials and expertise that universities have in abundance. What is more, treating widening participation as pedagogy has the potential to create new forms of dialogue, knowledge and collaboration, and thus to impact positively on the university's fundamental purpose and aims. Indeed the advantages of universities as sites for educational experimentation should not be underestimated. While financial pressures can lead to a diminution in a university's civic role, new organisations outside the educational establishment are equally (if not more) susceptible to economic pressures or to reliance on the participation of those with available social capital.

The modern university is naturally risk-averse. Within this context, it can be difficult for individuals to find space to develop initiatives that do not boast obvious financial benefits for the institution such as increased income from research or student tuition fees. It can also be increasingly challenging for academic staff to understand how complex aspects of university process interact - as more and more of these processes are centralised - and thus to intervene effectively in decision-making. Yet playing it safe has not necessarily resulted in an improved experience of university life for students or staff.

Our aim in this article has been to identify some of the problems that have inhibited attempts by elite universities in the UK to widen participation and to reflect on the approach we developed. However, it is also our contention that this experience has implications for those who wish to transform such universities in the coming years. Part of this transformation might be in student recruitment. An initiative such as the Foundation Year could be taken as evidence that elite universities can afford to take a much more radical approach in their wider admissions policies, with effects on a considerably larger scale. However, there are also other aspects of university life where collaborative work across disciplines, a creative approach to administrative structures, and a reclaiming of the transformative power of pedagogy could have beneficial and wide-ranging implications. It is our hope that this article will enable academics, administrative staff and students at other institutions to believe that such change is possible.

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