

INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT TO WIDENING  
PARTICIPATION: MISSION, RHETORIC AND FRAMING

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is based upon a case study of six higher education institutions (HEIs) and their 'framing' of commitment to widening participation. Using elements of Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis, the thesis analyses the discursive strategies that the HEIs used to position their widening participation work in marketing literature and open day settings, as well as via policy documents and statements made by staff.

Bernstein's (1990) notions of classification and framing are applied as a framework for understanding how widening participation work is presented as part of a 'whole institution' approach to marketing.

The thesis argues that the discursive strategies of the pre-92 HEIs suggested a highly contingent approach to widening participation. Strong framing around standards and selectivity was coupled with weak framing of widening participation. The post-92 HEIs evidenced stronger framing of widening participation but this was positioned alongside a recruitment-oriented discourse of persuasion. Government policy appeared to have had a limited effect in terms of changing existing institutional cultures.

It is recommended that the government enforce tighter regulation around widening participation work in HEIs; ensuring that widening participation is embedded into institutional structures and that marketing literature and open day settings reflect this more accessible ethos.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BERA	British Educational Research Association
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DES	Department of Education and Science
DIUS	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills
ECU	Equality Challenge Unit
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
NAO	National Audit Office
NCIHE	National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education
NS-SEC	National Statistics socio-economic classification
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
WP	Widening Participation

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 The focus of the research

‘Our universities have succeeded in widening access to poorer students over the last decade, but this progress has been uneven across the system, with our most selective institutions seeing only modest increases. Fairer access for educationally disadvantaged but able UK pupils has to remain a key part of how our world class universities see their missions’.

*Higher Ambitions – The future of universities in a knowledge economy*  
(Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009, p.8)

In November 2009, Peter Mandelson, Britain’s First Secretary of State (and Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills) made a speech that once again propelled the issue of widening participation in higher education (HE) to the top of the Labour government’s agenda (Curtis, 2009). In his launch of *Higher Ambitions* (BIS, 2009), Mandelson urged the HE sector to broaden the social make-up of its student body, to work more closely with business and industry and to offer more flexible modes of study (suggesting also that in future, HE funding might be more closely linked to meeting widening participation targets). His speech drew on a key feature of New Labour’s widening participation policy; an insistence that a diversified, mass HE system can contribute to both social inclusion and economic growth.

The intense media coverage of Mandelson’s speech was also a reminder that Britain’s HE sector could no longer afford to be perceived as elitist or as out-of-touch with wider,

current, social and economic goals. Ten years earlier, Gordon Brown (then Chancellor of the Exchequer), had publicly criticised Oxford University's decision to reject a state school pupil with straight A grade predictions (Jary and Thomas, 2000). The 'Laura Spence affair', as it became known, received coverage from all quarters of the news media, bringing the elite selection practices of certain universities into public scrutiny. The story (albeit oversimplified in many news reports) of a bright, state school pupil from the North East of England who was rejected by an ancient university, played to stereotypes about Oxbridge and was used to argue that elitism was still rife in the university sector. By openly criticising the University's decision, Gordon Brown positioned the New Labour government as committed to opening up higher education to a more diverse group of students; not simply occupying the moral high ground of 'social justice' but also committed to a dynamic, forward-looking model of higher education, at odds with antiquated, elitist gatekeepers.

The Laura Spence case therefore highlighted the need for universities to publicly present themselves as inclusive institutions. This thesis argues, however, that statements of commitment to widening participation that are widespread in marketing literature and policy documents, potentially conceals a more complicated navigation of the concept of widening participation by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This is why widening participation policy and practice should continue to attract research interest. Carefully managed *statements* of commitment to widening participation do not necessarily tell us anything about institutions' *actual* commitment to widening

participation (cf. Williams, 1997). Indeed, if HEIs want to avoid a bad press, it is very much in their interests to outwardly present as committed to widening participation.

One way of scrutinising the relationship between rhetoric and reality, is to turn the critical gaze onto institutional mediation of the national widening participation agenda. Drawing on data that was collected in 2007, this thesis therefore focuses on institutions' discursive mediation of the Labour government's widening participation agenda. It examines the heterogeneous understandings and representations of widening participation that existed even within single institutions, as well as differences between universities.

To this end, my research analyses *statements* of commitment to widening participation within the broader context of what HEIs were actually *doing* in their broader efforts to recruit students. Rather than describing institutions' specific outreach and admissions processes, this research focuses (via staff interviews, open day presentations, marketing literature and strategy documents) on the ways in which each institution presented its commitment to widening participation via a range of different mediums and contexts. The aim is to assess how widening participation was positioned by the case study HEIs, what this suggested about the ideologies of the case study institutions and the implications of this for widening participation practice.

Widening participation has attracted research attention for a number of years but much of this work has focussed on the student experience (Bowl, 2003; Reay *et al.*, 2005;

Crozier *et al.*, 2008) and on contradictions in widening participation policy at national level (Jones and Thomas, 2005; Greenbank, 2006; Archer, 2007). This research project considers the space in between – the role of HEIs in interpreting national widening participation policies and in positioning their commitment to widening participation in relation to existing cultures and missions. It aims to highlight some of the factors that impact upon discursive representations of widening participation work. A comparative case study approach is utilised to achieve this, with a multi-method research design including documentary analysis and observation of open days, as well as more conventional methods, such as interviews with key members of staff. Documents such as prospectuses are publicly available and for many applicants are the first point of contact with potential university destinations but, despite their prominence in the outreach process, they are little researched. It is hoped that the chosen methods will result in some salient insights into the relationship between widening participation rhetoric and reality in the work of the case study HEIs.

## **1.2 Starting points**

The merits of widening participation have been hotly debated during the 13 years that New Labour held office. Critics of the Labour government's widening participation agenda suggested that the target to encourage participation from 50% of 18-30 year olds led to 'dumbing down' (Hayes, 2003; Furedi, 2004). Supporters of the widening participation agenda argued that this attitude reveals a desire to maintain elite, and

therefore unfair, structures (Williams, 1997; Bowl, 2003; Archer, 2007). Opinion remains divided on the viability of the New Labour government's widening participation policies.

Despite these tensions, the concept of widening participation has achieved a high public profile over the last thirteen years and is closely identified with the policies of the New Labour government. It is for this reason that my study focuses on institutional mediation of the New Labour government's aim to encourage more students from under-represented groups to participate in higher education.

Government widening participation policy is mediated through institutions, and therefore the student experience is influenced by the ways in which HEIs translate the government's widening participation policies into practice. Duke (2004) has therefore suggested that researchers need to consider organisational behaviour as a means of bringing about institutional change. Such a position moves away from the 'pathologising' of students described by Archer (2007) and the simple assumption that it is the fault of the students if they cannot fit into pre-existing institutional structures. It turns the critical gaze back onto the institution and the 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1998) who are responsible for delivering widening participation policies. It is for this reason that the focus of my research is the 'meso level' (Duke, 2004, p.200): in this case the organisation or institution that forms the interface between government policy and student experience.

### **1.3 The aims of the research**

The research upon which this thesis is based is principally concerned with analysing the ways in which six case study HEIs presented their widening participation work, with a particular focus on the discursive strategies that were used to achieve this. This includes a particular focus on how widening participation was presented as part of the 'whole institution' marketing (Shaw *et al.*, 2007) that was aimed at prospective, undergraduate students. The language and tone of prospectus documents and open days were considered alongside institutional policy documents and descriptions of work by widening participation managers. In other words, the study focuses on how universities of different types positioned their widening participation work and how they 'talked' to students. Bernstein argues that discourse 'has a material base' (1990, p.22) and that text is 'a form of the social relationship made visible, palpable, material' (1990, p.17). Fairclough (1995) similarly argues that discourse can be suggestive of socio-cultural processes. It is therefore suggested that a study of discursive practices has the potential to reveal something about both ideology and actual practice.

The research explores the level to which the discourses of the case universities suggested 'buy in' (or not) to the government's widening participation agenda, and how this was negotiated alongside local priorities. The ultimate aim is to draw conclusions about the extent to which the discursive practices of an institution suggested a commitment to widening participation. However, as Fairclough's (1995) critical

discourse analysis suggests, an institution's discourse is rarely homogenous. Critical analysis requires examination of the way in which heterogeneous strands, dis-junctures and inconsistencies are present within the public 'messages' that institutions present. This research makes a contribution to existing knowledge by turning the critical focus towards the work of HEIs in mediating the government's widening participation policies. This is important because the student experience is critically dependent upon such mediation by institutions. Any attempt to improve the experiences of students from under-represented groups must inevitably involve a detailed consideration of the work that universities are undertaking to support this student group.

This thesis focuses specifically on the widening participation work of six case study HEIs. However, widening participation policy 'migrates' from government (Greenbank, 2006) and analysis of institutional widening participation work cannot be divorced from this wider context. Much of the widening participation work carried out by institutions is strongly encouraged by government agencies such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England (see HEFCE, 2008a). This research project therefore considers the role of the New Labour government in the development of widening participation agendas within HEIs. Indeed, New Labour opened its era of administration by invoking the priority of 'education, education, education', and throughout three terms, maintained a targeted commitment to making participation in HE the norm, rather than the exception. My research therefore considers the relationship between the local and national widening participation agenda, and thus places the work of the case study HEIs into the wider policy context.

## **1.4 Analytical concepts and questions**

The starting point of the study was Jones and Thomas' (2005) suggestion that there are distinct models of widening participation at work in different institutions. They suggest three broad typologies that shape the ways in which HEIs deliver widening participation work. These are 'academic', 'utilitarian' and 'transformative' approaches. Jones and Thomas (2005) argue that proponents of the 'academic' model take quite a narrow view of widening participation activity. It is viewed as an outreach function and involves encouraging applications from the small number of appropriately qualified students that are present in groups currently under-represented in higher education. This model tends to blame lack of participation on individual factors, such as lack of aspiration, rather than structural factors. Consequently, institutions that work within the academic model will see little need to change the internal structures of the university. Students from under-represented groups are expected to 'fit in'.

Individuals and institutions that subscribe to the 'utilitarian' model view students as lacking in both aspirations and academic qualifications. Jones and Thomas (2005, p.618) refer to this as a 'double deficit model'. Within this model, serving the needs of the economy is viewed as a key function of higher education. Students and institutions alike are blamed for a lack of economic responsiveness. Consequently, utilitarians focus on the need to reform higher education in order to fulfil this role. The utilitarian approach, according to Jones and Thomas (2005), does recognize structural barriers to

student participation, but fails to challenge the current system. Instead, students are required to attend compensatory events, such as summer schools and additional study modules. Jones and Thomas (2005, p.618) point out that 'widening participation initiatives in utilitarian influenced higher education institutions are more or less "bolted on" to core work'. They go on to suggest that this model can most commonly be seen in the 'lower ranked' pre-92 universities and in post-92 HEIs.

Jones and Thomas (2005) contrast these current approaches with a more 'transformative' model, which places the needs of the student first, and calls for a much greater emphasis on institutional change as a means of meeting these needs. Rather than expecting the students to adapt in order to fit into a pre-existing higher education system, this transformative approach seeks to create institutions that take a positive view of diversity, and adapt their own structures in order to embrace the diversity of the student body. For example, a transformative approach might involve an avoidance of rationing places via A level achievement; it tends more towards open access. Such a model might also be characterised by an institutional willingness to change traditional structures of assessment in order to enable more students to show their potential.

Jones and Thomas (2005, p.619) trace the roots of this approach to the 'progressive thinking around adult education and the more radical precepts of the access movement'.

Thomas (2005) accepts that her vision for a transformative education system requires radical structural change. As Sheeran *et al.* (2007) point out, it is possible for staff to operate in transformative ways within institutions but for the impact to be limited due to

wider, structural limitations at both institutional and national level (funding regimes and league tables within an existing, market-based system, for example). In this sense, it should be acknowledged that whilst a radical transformative model remains the goal for some educators, the current system makes the realisation of this approach unlikely in practice. As Maringe *et al.* (2006, p. 17) suggest, transformative participation is something which 'policy should aspire to'. For this reason, references in the thesis to the transformative approach are located within this more weakly transformative model; thus suggesting, like Thomas (2005) and Sheeran *et al.* (2007), that deeper, structural reform is likely to be required in order to work towards a more radically transformative approach.

The three models of widening participation that have been identified by Jones and Thomas therefore seem to offer a *broad* way of assessing an institution's approach to widening participation. However, it can be suggested that these models are of more limited value when analysing the different (and sometimes conflicting or heterogeneous) discourses that institutions draw upon when communicating and delivering widening participation work. Therefore, whilst the Jones and Thomas (2005) models are useful as a starting point, the aim of this study is to find a way of moving beyond these models in an attempt to offer a more nuanced analysis of how HEIs mediate widening participation policy in the context of their own institutional priorities. This is why the widening participation work of the case study HEIs will be considered alongside other institutional aims and objectives: the aim is to identify how widening participation is 'positioned' by the institution. The purpose of such an analysis is to reveal the guiding ideology of the

HEI, thus setting widening participation work into a broader context. The term 'ideology' has a variety of connotations. Drawing on McLean (1996), it refers in this thesis to the belief system or set of ideas that staff in HEIs draw on when communicating what their institution stands for and what it is trying to achieve. This analysis will be an essential means of assessing the level of commitment that different HEIs show to the concept of widening access. A study that simply looked at the outreach work of the widening participation team would inevitably present the institution as strongly committed to widening participation. The wider context (including the study of official institutional literature, the website, open days and interviews with staff) potentially offers a more nuanced portrayal of the value that the institution attaches to widening participation work.

Bernstein's (1990) notions of classification and framing will provide the overarching theoretical framework for the research. In a broad sense, Bernstein (1990) is concerned with social class and cultural reproduction: in particular the ways in which class relations serve to reinforce and perpetuate certain 'codes' that position subjects in particular ways. Codes are defined as 'culturally determined positioning devices' (1990, p.13). Bernstein suggests that 'ideology is constituted through and in such positioning' (1990, p.13). This thesis examines the ways in which universities position both themselves and their prospective students with a view to analysing what this suggests about institutional ideology.

Two particular elements of Bernstein's theory have been selected as tools by which to analyse the *discourses* drawn upon by HEIs. Discourse refers to 'the study of language, its structure, functions, and patterns in use' (Marshall, 1998). The first element is the idea of 'classification'. Bernstein (1990, p.29) suggests that:

'where there is a principle of strong classification, this creates [a] set of specialized recognition rules...This set of specialized recognition rules translates into the syntax for the generation of legitimate meaning'.

One of the aims of this study is to consider how HEIs perpetuate a sense of 'speciality', and the implications of this for the positioning of widening participation as well as the positioning of the institution in comparison to other HEIs. For instance, an HEI might position itself (through its recruitment and admissions procedures, curriculum, organisation of staffing and disciplines, for example) as a Russell Group<sup>1</sup> university; 'special' and distinct from an HEI in the same city that might be categorised as a 'new', post-1992 university. This classificatory principle impacts on the communicative context by setting parameters around what counts as a legitimate message. Message can broadly be defined as 'practice' or what can be realised (Bernstein, 1990, p.24). Studying the message is therefore likely to reveal something about the culture and ideology of the institution, and the place of widening participation within this. Bernstein's (1990) concept of framing will be the means by which the specific messages coming from HEIs will be studied in detail. More specifically, it is the framing of commitment to widening participation that is of particular interest. In this context,

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<sup>1</sup> The Russell Group is a self-styled group of the UK's top 20 'research-intensive' universities. The universities within the group describe themselves as 'committed to the highest levels of academic excellence' (Russell Group, 2010a).

'framing' refers to the ways in which institutions control their 'communicative practices' in order to define their position (or classification) within the HE market place. Where framing is strong, 'the transmitter' (in this case the HEI) 'controls the selection, organization, pacing [and] criteria of communication'. Where framing is weak, 'the acquirer' (in this case imagined to be the prospective student) 'has more control over the selection, organization, pacing [and] criteria of communication.' In a basic sense, where framing of widening participation is strong, there is a consistency to the widening participation message in policy documents, official literature, and as articulated by staff in a variety of settings. Where framing is weak, commitment to widening participation is positioned in different ways within an institution: there is much greater scope for individual voices and multiple messages, some of which may be in tension with one another (cf. Bernstein, 2000).

In order to make an assessment about the framing of widening participation, it is necessary to closely analyse the *discourses* that are drawn upon by staff in the different institutions, both to position their institution within the higher education 'market place' and to construct their widening participation work within this. Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA), defined as an analysis of how discourses work 'within sociocultural practice' (1995, p.7), provides one methodological tool by which discursive strategies can be analysed. The concepts of classification, framing and elements of Fairclough's (1993; 1995) CDA have therefore been used in order to understand how the case study HEIs constructed institutional discourses around widening participation, how these were presented and how they positioned both students and institution. As

such, these frameworks offer a way of analysing the complexity of social/institutional practice. The concepts of classification, framing and CDA are explained and developed in more detail in Chapter 3 (section 3.4).

To summarise, the questions guiding the research project were:

- 1) What aims does each HEI claim it is trying to achieve via its widening participation policies?
- 2) How are these policies institutionally framed? What discourses are constructed to give meaning to the widening participation work?
- 3) What ideology/ies inform the institution's approach to widening participation?
- 4) Are individual institutions presenting a coherent approach to widening participation, as regards formulation of aims and practical strategies?
- 5) What does this suggest about levels of institutional commitment to widening participation?
- 6) Do Bernstein's notions of classification and framing offer a new way of understanding the discourses of widening participation in HEIs?

### **1.5 A brief outline of how the research was approached**

A case study approach was adopted in carrying out this research. Case study is thought to be particularly suitable when the aim is to study phenomena in context (Robson, 1993), and when the purpose is to look at the particular rather than the general (Stake,

1995). As a method, it therefore seemed to lend itself to a study that set out to gather rich and detailed data about a relatively small number of institutions.

The six case study HEIs were selected on a regional basis, with two different types of HEI being identified from three specific regions. These included pre and post-92 institutions (representing the extremes of the university league tables), as well as one university college. The case studies employed multiple methods of data collection. There were two types of documentary analysis: institutional policy documents (such as the admissions policy, corporate policy, teaching and learning strategy and access agreements) were analysed for each institution. The undergraduate prospectus and website were studied in the same way. Next, an in-depth, semi-structured interview was sought with the Widening Participation Manager (or equivalent) for each case study institution. Finally, an undergraduate open day was observed in order to gain a sense of the institutional messages that were given to prospective students. In addition, two Further Education (FE) colleges were identified for each of the three regions, and eleven staff involved in the progression of students to the case study institutions were interviewed. This was designed to offer an alternative perspective on the commitment of the case study HEIs to widening participation. The multi-method approach was selected to ensure that the widening participation policies and practices of the HEIs were considered from a variety of angles. It also provided a degree of triangulation in order to aid the validity of the findings. The methodology chapters (3 and 4) will provide a much more detailed analysis of the methods that were adopted.

To ensure anonymity for the participants, pseudonyms were assigned to the participant institutions. The names include either 'old' or 'new' in the title in order to help the reader distinguish between the older 'pre-92' and the newer 'post-92' universities. Thus, throughout the thesis, the case study HEIs are referred to as Oldchurch, Oldbeam, Oldlaw, Newdale, Neworth and Newbede Universities. A number of non-case study universities are referred to using the same prefixes. These 'non case study universities' have been included because references were made to them in the course of the interviews, and information gained about these institutions was deemed to be of relevance to the research. The FE colleges in the study have been assigned the pseudonyms of Hayle, North Kilworth, Lulworth, Lyme, Stoneleigh and Churston Colleges.

## **1.6 Defining key terms**

There are certain terms that appear regularly in this thesis but which have contested meanings. This section explains my usage of such terms so that the reader is in no doubt about the meanings that I have attached to them. First, 'widening participation' is not a term that has been clearly defined by the government or its agencies (although there has been guidance on which groups of students should be the target of widening participation work). In the absence of a clear definition of widening participation at the national level, institutions have been able to apply their own understandings of the term in designing their widening participation policies and practices. On a basic level, it is suggested that widening participation refers to efforts on the part of the government or

higher education institutions to encourage more applications to university from groups who are currently 'under-represented' (a term which is itself contested). Drawing on Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2007) guidance, this might include students from lower socio-economic groups, students who are the first in their family to go to university, students with disabilities, students from certain minority ethnic groups, and white working-class boys. This list is not exhaustive and different institutions target different groups, depending upon the pattern of participation in their own institutions and upon their interpretations of national strategies. Nevertheless, with reference to the Jones and Thomas (2005) models, it could be suggested that narrowly targeting widening participation in this way, might work against the development of a more transformative approach.

At a more complex level, interpretations of widening participation are influenced by ideology. Some institutions and practitioners see it as about offering opportunities to the small number of appropriately qualified students who happen to be from under-represented groups (the academic model in Jones and Thomas' (2005) typologies). Others see it as about 'inclusion of anybody and everybody' (taken from an interview with a member of staff in an FE college); an interpretation that might be more closely aligned to the transformative model of widening participation that is outlined by Jones and Thomas (2005). My own interpretation of widening participation corresponds most closely to the transformative model; with the hope (rather than expectation) that higher education will, over time, move towards a more radically transformative approach.

The analysis that I have applied to the data is therefore viewed through this lens. I fully acknowledge that a different researcher might have drawn different conclusions from the findings of this study. However, by being overt about my own interpretation of widening participation, I hope that the reader will feel able to make his/her own judgement about the validity of the findings and subsequent conclusions that I have drawn.

Throughout the thesis, I use the term 'higher education institutions' or 'HEIs' to describe the case study institutions. One of the six case study institutions is a university college, so 'HEI' has been selected as a more accurate term than 'university'. The staff who were interviewed in the HEIs are all referred to as 'widening participation managers'. This label has been chosen to reflect the fact that these staff were all responsible for coordinating widening participation work in their institutions, and therefore held comparable roles. In reality, the staff all had slightly different job titles. However, to use these would have compromised the anonymity of the respondents. It was therefore judged that a generic title would be more suitable, as well as being easier for the reader. The reasons behind this judgement are outlined in appendix 1.

## **1.7 The argument of the thesis**

The main argument of the thesis is that widening participation has been weakly framed during 13 years of a New Labour government; that is, the notion of widening participation allows multiple 'legitimate' interpretations. As a result, widening participation policies at national level are sinewed with tensions and contradictions that

make effective implementation at local level difficult to achieve. There have been very few edicts from government that insist on widening participation work being carried out in a certain way, and by suggesting that widening participation work need not interfere with other corporate objectives, the government effectively gave HEIs a 'get out clause'. Broadly speaking, institutions that have historically seen widening participation as part of their mission, drew on more inclusive discourses in their 'whole institution' marketing and when describing elements of their work. Institutions that regarded themselves as 'elite' emphasised their status as selecting institutions in ways that over-rode any messages about commitment to inclusion. There was a sense in which the government's widening participation policies had done little to change this situation.

In Bernstein's (1990) terms, it could be suggested that the government made a weakly framed attempt to break down the insulation that differentiates old from new universities, and Russell Group universities from all other universities (in other words, their 'classification' by type of university). The concept of widening participation acts as a challenge to the specialised discourses of selectivity and elitism that Russell Group universities draw upon to insulate themselves and therefore maintain legitimacy as the providers of 'world-class education'. It could be suggested that this results in staff in the older universities acting both as 'insulation maintainers' in order to 'defend their boundaries' (Bernstein, 1990, p.24), whilst simultaneously trying to give out a message of inclusivity. This creates mixed messages and a sense in which commitment to widening participation is conditional upon its ability to sit alongside a pre-existing culture of exclusivity.

In the case study HEIs that were members of the Russell Group, widening participation was weakly framed when compared to the more strongly framed messages around 'selectivity' and 'prestige'. In this sense, it could be argued that the government's aims to widen participation were being 'subverted' by the specialised discourses and pre-existing cultures of exclusivity that existed in these older HEIs. Classificatory principles were over-riding strong framing of commitment to widening participation. Much widening participation research has alluded to academic cultures in old universities that regard widening participation as a threat to academic quality (Williams, 1997; Jones and Thomas, 2005; Reay *et al.*, 2005). In the newer universities, it is argued that widening participation appeared to be part of the culture and ethos of the institution: the framing of widening participation was therefore much stronger. However, progress towards a more transformative or student-led approach seemed to be constrained to some extent by the need to fill places. Survival in a competitive market therefore exerted an influence on commitment to widening participation, with a blurring of the boundaries between benefit to the student and benefit to the institution.

The distinction that is made in the UK's HE sector between 'selecting' universities and 'recruiting' universities provides some indication of the insulation that is maintained between new 'widening participation' universities and exclusive Russell Group institutions. The so-called 'selecting' universities tend to be over-subscribed: they do not need to worry about filling places and their marketing efforts reinforce their perceived position as 'selecting' institutions. Most of the pre-92 universities fall into this group. A

number of post-92 universities, however, do struggle to fill places on at least some of their courses. These HEIs are therefore sometimes referred to as 'recruiting' universities. This dichotomy appeared to exert an influence on the ways in which widening participation was positioned in the case study HEIs.

In general terms, it is suggested that this 'insulation' perpetuates the two-tier system, whereby students from under-represented groups are encouraged more consistently by institutions with a stronger widening participation mission (cf. Archer, 2007). It might be argued that in a market-based system, these institutions are motivated by market survival as much as a desire to promote social justice. Nevertheless, students from under-represented groups are more likely to choose these institutions because they 'feel less conspicuous there' (Bowl, 2003, p.130). This means that higher education as a sector (albeit constrained by societal structures) has failed to address socio-economic inequalities, and the 'best' institutions remain the preserve of middle-class, traditional students (Archer, 2007). Institutions have been able to retain the insulations that differentiate themselves from each other – in some cases voicing a commitment to widening participation - but expressing this inconsistently and in certain cases demonstrating a more powerful and strongly framed discourse of exclusivity.

It is argued in this thesis that Bernstein's notions of classification and framing offer an illuminating means of understanding the ways in which institutions interpret, communicate and potentially practice, widening participation. It is through using this theoretical framework that the subtleties of institutional discourses are revealed. The

findings from this research project suggest that the Jones and Thomas models (2005) are useful in highlighting the *broad* approaches that HEIs draw on in their approaches to widening participation. However, evidence from the case study institutions suggests that it is rarely possible to suggest that any HEI has a single, unified way of interpreting and discursively practicing widening participation. As a result, there may be pockets of transformative practice within a wider culture of academic traditionalism. Similarly, an institution may display elements of all three models at different levels within the organisation, and in different areas of practice.

## **1.8 The structure of the thesis**

Chapter Two of this thesis outlines both the history of widening participation in HE and the process by which widening participation became a mainstream issue. It is a context-setting chapter that is designed to help the reader to understand (in later chapters) the ways in which the case study HEIs frame and implement their own widening participation policies. It begins with a chronology of the access movement (if, indeed, there is anything as coherent as a 'movement') from 1963 until 2007. The second part of the chapter focuses more specifically on the New Labour government's widening participation policies as they were set out during their first two terms of office. The chapter offers a critique of the discourses and ideology of New Labour in relation to social justice and, more specifically, widening participation.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological framework that has guided the research project. It introduces the reader to some of the broader decisions that were taken in designing and carrying out the research project. It describes, for example, the suitability of a qualitative (or interpretive) rather than quantitative approach and explains why case study was chosen as an appropriate method. It also introduces the theoretical frameworks that guided the analysis of the data.

Chapter Four provides a more detailed explanation of the research methods. It describes the ways in which the data were gathered and provides an analysis of the merits and limitations of the chosen approaches. The aim of both Chapters Three and Four is to demonstrate the extent to which the chosen methods are 'fit for purpose'.

Chapter Five continues to work at the 'macro' level in presenting an analysis of some of the key government documents covering higher education and widening participation policy between 1997 and 2003. Drawing on Bernstein (1990) and Fairclough (1993), the chapter analyses the assumptive frameworks of these documents as a means of evaluating the government's discursive strategies around widening participation. The chapter argues that particular discursive strategies have been used to gloss over some of the wider structural problems that can lead to the perpetuation of inequality. It draws attention to the ways in which the New Labour government's framing of widening participation can serve to blame individuals for their own exclusion. The chapter provides a policy-context for the detailed analysis of institutional approaches to widening participation that will take place in later chapters.

Chapter Six is designed to demonstrate how, in a general sense, the widening participation policies that have emerged since the late 1990s might impact upon students. One of the starting points of this study was a concern with the student experience, so it is important to highlight to the reader how government policies 'play out' in real life settings. This chapter draws on the work of other researchers to outline some of the barriers to participation and it focuses on the ways in which government ideologies are shaping the student experience. The chapter argues that these policies seem to have created a two-tier system, and whilst serving to widen participation in higher education in general terms, these policies appear to have done little to create parity of experience. Drawing on existing research, it is suggested that students from under-represented groups mainly access lower status institutions and qualifications that can affect their prospects after graduation (Modood, 1993; Jones and Thomas, 2005; Equality Challenge Unit and Higher Education Academy, 2008). Structural inequalities therefore remain intact. This chapter aims to provide the reader with an understanding of the national widening participation agenda so that the work of the case study HEIs can be judged within this wider context.

Chapter Seven returns to a consideration of the New Labour government's widening participation objectives before moving to a brief description of the kind of widening participation work that is carried out by HEIs. This chapter aims to provide some contextual information that will help the reader to understand the data that is presented

in the finding chapters. It includes, for example, a description of the different types of HEI, as well as key widening participation statistics for each of the case study HEIs.

Chapter Eight draws on interviews with widening participation managers to explore *how* the case study HEIs negotiated national widening participation policies at a local level, and *why* there were differing attitudes to the government agenda. The word ‘negotiate’ has been chosen to reflect the fact that there were choices to be made about the level of ‘buy-in’ to the government agenda, and that balancing national and (sometimes conflicting) local priorities did not seem to be easy for some institutions. By exploring the idea of ‘negotiation’, the chapter aims to reveal something about the guiding ideologies of the case study HEIs and the level of commitment to widening participation work. The chapter argues that there were a number of factors that impacted on how HEIs negotiated the widening participation frame. The negotiations appeared to be complex and multi-layered and in some cases left the impression that the government’s widening participation agenda was being slotted into pre-existing institutional cultures rather than radically altering the ways in which institutions engaged with under-represented groups.

Chapter Nine outlines the practice of widening participation in the case study HEIs as reported by widening participation managers, institutional websites and policy documents. It defines the difference between in-reach and out-reach work, and analyses how the case study HEIs managed this balance. It argues that there were very different ‘readings’ of widening participation by the different institutions, with some

applying a liberal interpretation, with others employing a much more narrow definition. This information provides a background for the more detailed analysis (in Chapter 10) of the discourses drawn upon by the HEIs to position their widening participation work in a pre-entry and admissions context.

Chapter Ten therefore considers how the case study HEIs 'operationalised' widening participation at the pre-entry and admissions stages. The chapter analyses examples of 'whole institution' marketing (via prospectuses, websites and open day discourses) in order to assess how commitment to widening participation was presented in these contexts. It found that market positioning and institutional awareness of 'place' appeared to exert a strong influence on pre-entry and admissions aspects of widening participation work. There was some evidence of an institution-centred rather than student-centred approach to widening participation, which manifested itself via the nature of the messages that were presented to students.

Chapter Eleven offers a shift in focus and a triangulation of data. It uses data drawn from interviews with staff in the case study FE colleges to explore perceptions of the widening participation work of the case study HEIs. This chapter offers a sense of how the case HEIs' actual commitment to widening participation is perceived by one part of its constituency; namely local FE colleges that aim to progress 'non-traditional' students into HE. It considers some of the reported differences in ethos and practice between the two sectors and highlights some of the difficulties that students reportedly faced when seeking to transfer from further to higher education. The chapter draws attention to the

scepticism shown by some staff in FE towards the motivations of HEIs in seeking to widen participation. It argues that difficulties with the flow of information and the partnerships between FE and HE are potentially preventing students from making informed decisions about progression into HE.

With reference to the original research questions, the Conclusion (Chapter Twelve) draws together the main arguments and conclusions of the research. It questions whether the Jones and Thomas (2005) models are still applicable and argues that Bernstein's (1990) notions of classification and framing offer a more nuanced way of analysing widening participation work at an institutional level. The chapter presents potential avenues for future research, and offers some possible ways in which:

- a) government policy could be changed in order to encourage a greater commitment to widening participation from the full range of HEIs; and
- b) institutional policies and practices could be altered in order to send a clearer message of inclusivity to students from under-represented groups.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **WIDENING PARTICIPATION: FROM THE MARGINS TO THE MAINSTREAM**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter considers the history of the access movement and the process by which widening participation in HE became a mainstream issue under the New Labour government. The first part of the chapter explains some of the significant moments in the progression of widening participation into the mainstream, from the Robbins Report of 1963, through to the New Labour government's election in 1997. The second part of the chapter focuses more specifically on the Labour government's widening participation policies, particularly between 1997 and 2003. It analyses the discourses of widening participation utilised by New Labour and offers a critique of the ideology underpinning these discourses. The particular focus on New Labour arises from the party's explicit focus, in their 1997 election manifesto, on education (Labour Party, 1997), and their 2001 pledge for 50% of 18-30 year olds to have some experience of higher education by 2010 (Labour Party, 2001). The purpose of the chapter is to provide a context for understanding the ways in which the HEIs examined in this thesis were communicating and implementing their own widening participation policies in 2007.

## 2.2 The access movement from 1960

The idea of widening access to HE is not new; it can be traced back to the 1960s and a concern by the then Labour government to address elitism in HE. In the early 1960s, only 6% of people under the age of 21 entered higher education (DfES, 2003a), and these students were usually from relatively privileged backgrounds. The Robbins Report of 1963 put forward a set of recommendations to try to broaden access to HE. This was based on the principle that ‘courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so’ (Committee for Education, 1963, p.8). This ‘famous Robbins principle’ built on the Anderson Report of 1960, which had recommended that all full-time undergraduates should receive mandatory awards to cover fees, as well as means tested maintenance grants. This reflected the prevailing view that participation in HE should not be dependent upon the ability to pay (Davies *et al.*, 1997).

However, despite increasing the numbers of students entering HE, the resulting changes made little difference to the social make-up of the students taking part (Ross, 2003). This can largely be attributed to the fact that entry to university was still through ‘qualification by ability and attainment’ as measured by the A-Level ‘gold standard’ (Ainley, 1994, p.11). As Ainley (1994, pp.11-12) points out:

‘Robbins simply moved selection up the age range just as it was being phased out of state schools by the piecemeal introduction of comprehensives from 1965 on’.

Despite scepticism from some quarters, further moves were made to widen access and participation in HE throughout the 1960s and beyond. The polytechnic institutions that were introduced by a White Paper of 1966 (called 'A Plan for Polytechnics and Other Colleges' (Department of Education and Science, 1966)), developed from social democratic ideals. Many of those involved in setting up the new system believed that the polytechnics would offer 'higher education for all' (Ainley, 1994, p.9). These were to be community institutions providing HE at a local level. Smith and Saunders (cited in Davies *et al.*, 1997, p.5) suggest that:

'The introduction of maintenance grants and the expansion of the non-university sector reflected the spirit of the 1960s and early 1970s and as such has been called the era of social democratic expansion'.

As Ainley (1994, p.10) suggests, however, the polytechnics served a dual purpose. In addition to providing 'higher education for all', the polytechnics could also be seen as part of the Labour government's plans for a 'regenerated economy' through 'national manpower planning'. Polytechnics were designed to offer practical rather than purely theoretical knowledge and their focus was on the vocational rather than the academic. The mission of polytechnics was therefore slightly different to that of universities: 'the polytechnics were expected to offer access to a different form of higher education, and to offer it to different kinds of students' (Ross, 2003, p.49). Crosland, as the Labour Secretary of State for Education when polytechnics were introduced, was careful to avoid any suggestion that polytechnic institutions were 'inferior' (cited in Ross, 2003, p.49). However, there was in certain quarters (amongst some university vice-

chancellors, for example) a sense that there was a quality distinction between the two types of HE provision (Ross, 2003). Conservative government ministers then perpetuated this by referring to the 'binary line' that divided polytechnics from universities. This militated against the social democratic ideals that had, at various times, partly fuelled the expansion of the HE sector.

The second wave of what might be called the mainstreaming of widening participation occurred during the 1980s, when there was a huge expansion of places available in both universities and polytechnics. The age participation index rose from 12.4% in 1980 to 19.3% in 1990 (Robertson and Hillman, 1997). Williams (1997) suggests that this expansion was initially fuelled by a growing acceptance of vocational qualifications and Access courses as recognized routes into HE. Access courses were mainly offered in further education colleges and were designed primarily for mature students without 'standard' entry qualifications (Leathwood and Hutchings, 2003). Vocational routes into HE occurred mainly via BTEC National qualifications and, from the academic year 1992/93, General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) (Raggatt and Williams, 1999). These qualifications were offered by both schools and colleges. From the mid-1980s, however, some members of the Conservative government had begun to attack alternative routes into HE. They 'singled out Access courses in particular for scrutiny and criticism' via the Lindop Report of 1985 (Davies *et al.*, 1997, p.7) while simultaneously promoting the A Level as the 'gold standard'. Williams (1997) argues that such actions served to undermine efforts to widen access. Indeed, the burgeoning HE sector, whilst seeing an increase in numbers of working class students, was still

dominated by middle class students (Ross, 2003). Therefore, despite some success in terms of *increasing* access to HE, it could be argued that the introduction of the polytechnics led to the existence of a two-tier system that allowed the middle class 'standard entrants' to maintain their dominance in the elite institutions (Ainley, 2004). Nevertheless, as Davies *et al.* (1997) point out, *within* HEIs the increase in student numbers had changed the focus towards greater accessibility. This suggests that widening participation was beginning to achieve a more mainstream status, with a gradual and, in some quarters, grudging acceptance of multiple pathways into HE.

### **2.3 Widening participation into the 1990s**

In 1992, the binary divide was ostensibly dissolved by the Conservative government's Further and Higher Education Act (1992), which merged universities and polytechnics through a new system of funding that was linked to student numbers. The polytechnics were renamed universities and, throughout this period, there was a steady growth in the numbers of students enrolling on HE courses. By 1995, the age participation index stood at 35% (Robertson and Hillman, 1997). Ainley (1994) suggests that the expansion of HE continued to be promoted as a response to the economic needs of the country. It was argued by influential voices in government, industry and education that a more skilled and educated work force would give Britain increased competitiveness in the global economy (Ainley, 1994; Raggatt and Williams, 1999; Ross, 2003). This economic discourse had been used to frame justifications for widening participation since the late 1970s. In Prime Minister James Callaghan's 1976 Ruskin speech,

'education and training [were] presented as the cure-all for unemployment and the key to economic recovery and modernisation' (Ainley, 1994, p.18). However, some commentators (Ainley, 1994; Wolf, 2002) are sceptical about the existence of a direct link between mass HE and training and economic prosperity. Ainley (1994, p.15) suggests that 'the assertion that economic development necessarily follows from educational investment is a statement of pure faith'. Nevertheless, the economic rationale has persisted as a justification for expanding HE (Department of Education and Science, 1985; National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997; Department for Education and Employment, 1998; DfES, 2003a). With the recent publication of *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy* (BIS, 2009), this rationale is still very much in evidence.

Davies *et al.* (1997, p.14) suggest that whilst the 1980s could be characterised as the decade of expansion in HE, the 1990s might more accurately be described as 'the decade of consolidation'. The Dearing Committee that was set up in 1996, with cross party support, was tasked with making recommendations 'on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of HE , including support for students, might look over the next 20 years' (cited in Davies *et al.*, 1997, p.14). This seems to suggest a recognition that the dramatic changes in HE over the past thirty years had led to a situation in which the purpose of HE had become unclear. However, there was arguably a regulatory purpose to the Committee of Inquiry into HE: Williams (1997, p.31) suggests that the mass system (of participation in HE) had caused a 'moral panic around

standards...which Dearing was asked to assuage in his review of qualifications for 16-19 year olds’.

The Dearing Inquiry was significant because it appeared to mark a recognition by Britain’s main political parties that the ‘mass’ system of HE required some changes in terms of both funding and clarification of mission. Widening participation was one of the areas to be considered by the Dearing Committee. The Dearing Committee reported its findings to the newly elected Labour government in 1997. The government did not accept all of the recommendations (for example, the suggestion that grants be reintroduced) but they did commit, in their 2001 manifesto, to the objective of increasing participation in HE to 50 per cent of those aged 18-30 (Labour Party, 2001).

#### **2.4 Widening participation after 1997**

In efforts to achieve the iconic 50% target, the Labour government introduced a number of measures that were designed to widen participation in HE. These measures included the provision of new routes into HE, funding marked out specifically for outreach work, and financial incentives offered to HEIs that could demonstrate commitment to widening access. For example, HEIs were given a sum of money that was linked to their ability to recruit students from lower socio-economic groups (the ‘postcode premium’). HEIs were also provided with funding that would allow them to run summer schools, taster courses, and a range of outreach events. Foundation degrees were introduced to provide either a two year, ‘free-standing qualification’ or to act as a ‘transfer qualification’ (Bathmaker

*et al.*, 2008, p.133). The foundation degrees were intended to be work-focussed. Since 2005, HEIs have been required to produce access agreements (DfES, 2004), in which each institution must set out the widening participation activities and support mechanisms that they plan to put in place, in order to aid the recruitment and retention of students from under-represented groups. The government directed large sums of money towards widening participation activities in HEIs (estimated at £392 million over six years (National Audit Office, 2008)), and most institutions now have at least one, if not a team of, widening participation officers. The government, via HEFCE (2008a), made it clear that it expected to see the embedding of widening participation into the ethos and mission of all HEIs. This point was reinforced in *Higher Ambitions* (BIS, 2009).

Despite a raft of initiatives aimed at encouraging HEIs to widen participation, many commentators remained critical of the Labour government's approach. It was suggested, for example, that the introduction of variable fees would have an adverse effect on the participation of students from lower socio-economic groups (Callender and Jackson, 2005; Jones and Thomas, 2005). Stuart (2005, p.27) criticised the entrenchment of a sharply defined hierarchy of institutions in which 'a hard-won place in the new "mainly teaching" university may be devalued by competitive abuse, one dimensional league tables and talk of plunging standards'. There were also concerns about the quality of the HE experience for students from under-represented groups who were expected to fit into existing cultures and systems (Bowl, 2003; Thomas, 2005a; Archer, 2007; Crozier *et al.*, 2008). Loxley and Thomas (2001, p.299) suggested that

these policy tensions were caused by ‘incremental dissonance...the layering of new policies that have as their notional objective ‘inclusion’, on top of policies that have demonstrably contrary effects’.

A key aim of this thesis is to consider how six case study HEIs translated national widening participation policy at a local, institutional level. Greenbank (2006) has drawn attention to the perceived tensions between the national widening participation agenda and the local objectives of HEIs, suggesting that government efforts to mainstream widening participation have not necessarily led to the concept of access achieving prominence in every HEI. Through an analysis of the ways in which institutions discursively framed their commitment to widening participation, this research project analyses the relationship between these national and local widening participation agendas. A key argument of the thesis is that New Labour’s ‘mainstreaming’ of widening participation largely operates on a rhetorical level. HEIs have been allowed relative freedom in translating and implementing widening participation policies in ways that fitted with their own local agendas and missions. In some cases, despite strong statements in support of the widening participation agenda, the ‘operationalisation’ of widening participation might indicate only weak commitment.

## **2.5 Defining ‘New Labour’**

An analysis of New Labour’s broad ideological framework provides an important context for understanding its widening participation policies. This is because widening

participation policy could be said to reflect some of the ideological tensions that are evident in the wider New Labour ethos. The following sections (2.5 – 2.9) review policy and strategic literature in order to provide a critical analysis of the ways in which, over the past decade, developments in widening participation have been informed by tensions between the social justice and marketisation dimensions of New Labour's mission. An analysis of the discourses of social justice will include a more detailed consideration of the rhetoric and discourses around widening participation. As mentioned in Chapter 1, section 1.4, discourse refers to 'the study of language, its structure, functions, and patterns in use' (Marshall, 1998) and it can therefore be revealing of ideology and socio-cultural processes (Fairclough, 1995).

'New Labour' is the self-labelling term used to describe the Labour Government that was elected in 1997. The New Labour title, which is strongly associated with Tony Blair's leadership, was designed to indicate a break with a Labour Party that many associated with tax and spend as well as poor management of the economy during the 1970s (Giddens, 2002). Giddens (2002, pp.33-34) suggests that the name and the ideology of 'New Labour' were drawn from the ideas of the 'New Democrat' think tank in the United States:

'They included a self-conscious break with the party's past, symbolized by a name change; the determination to become "the party of the mainstream"; a retreat from tax and spend; an emphasis upon "opportunity, responsibility and community"; a stress upon responsibilities as well as rights in welfare reform...; tax credit schemes to help poorer individuals and families; targeted anti-poverty and urban regeneration schemes...; and a tough approach to crime and punishment.'

However, this ideological position was arguably undeveloped at the point that New Labour came to power. When Blair was elected, one of his main advisers admitted that he (the adviser) did not have a 'coherent set of political ideas' (Giddens, 2002, p.33). This might explain some of the confusion that has surrounded the origins and aims of the New Labour project. Smith (2004, p.244) suggests that there was little agreement, even amongst senior members of the party, about how New Labour could be defined. He goes on to suggest that New Labour is 'hydra-headed' and difficult to define because it is full of contradictions and 'possesses a head to suit the occasion'. Smith (2004, p.224) argues that it is impossible to say that New Labour is either left or right wing on the traditional spectrum:

'Labour is not Thatcherite, because it has a strong faith in an interventionist faith. Yet it also questions some of the traditional social democratic canons...It is also difficult to see New Labour providing a third way, because it does not really have a coherent ideology that provides the principles behind a whole tract of policies.'

Many commentators (Cohen, 2003; Fielding, 2003; Lawton, 2005) have suggested that New Labour borrows from the left and right, which might explain why there is so little agreement about its ideological position. The ideas that New Labour represented have been variously called social democracy (Giddens, 2002), neo-Thatcherism (Fielding, 2003), and bastardized Thatcherism (Lawton, 2005). These alleged links with the Thatcher governments have been much examined; Fielding (2003) has suggested that these links have their roots in a desire on the part of the New Labour leadership to catch

up with Thatcherism. Heffernan (cited in Fielding, 2003, p.6) saw this as the climax of a 'gradual and incremental' 'accommodation' with the Conservatives' neo-liberal agenda. Once in government, Cohen (2003, p.22) suggested that whenever the Conservatives came up with an idea that Blair liked, 'Blair would move to the right and steal it'. This might imply that New Labour was indeed just a new form of Conservatism. However, both Fielding (2003) and Coates (1996) have suggested that New Labour overplayed its break with the leftist party of the late 70s and early 80s. These writers agree that there is some evidence to suggest that the party had returned to a way of thinking that characterised the Labour party between 1945 and the early 1970s. Therefore, as Fielding (2003, p.3) argues, 'the "New" with which Blair prefixed "Labour" is highly contentious'.

One of the defining features of the early New Labour ideology (not least in its approach to widening participation) was perhaps the potential for contradiction that it displayed. However, Smith (2004, p.215), for example, did not necessarily see this as a sign of weakness. He suggested that like all parties, New Labour needed to appeal to 'median votes', and in order to do this, the party was required to draw on what seemed to be neo-liberal or Thatcherite policies. He points out that it is possible for opposing parties to share policies, while in fact seeing the world in different ways and having different ends in mind.

In summary, it seems clear that it is difficult to define 'New Labour' in its early form. In fact, the party was almost defined by this ambiguity. However, it is possible to say that

the Third Way (as it became known) seemed to comprise a 'pick and mix' approach that drew on different ideologies and ideas depending on what was needed at a particular time. The New Labour government believed in state intervention (albeit reduced from the post-war belief in nationalisation and the superiority of public sector provision) in a way that the neo-liberals did not, and were keen to offer rights to citizens who would take on responsibilities in return for those rights.

New Labour's rhetoric largely made a virtue of working within the parameters of the existing market system, and at times party leaders appeared to adopt Conservative policies that many on the left of the Labour Party found difficult to accept. New Labour's rhetoric has tended to promote equality of opportunity, rather than equality of outcome, and to adopt the principles of meritocracy, thus ignoring some of the structural inequalities that prevent social mobility (Lister, 2001). In terms of widening participation in HE, there are a number of contradictions that arise from this tension between neo-liberal and socialist policies. These will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. However, in order to set the operation of widening participation in context, the next section will consider the effect of some of New Labour's ideological tensions on the management practices of HEIs.

## **2.6 'New managerialism' in HEIs**

According to Deem (1998), universities historically operated as communities of scholars working together in a collegial manner. Universities were 'led' rather than 'managed',

with little recourse to the sort of management styles adopted by profit-making organisations. More recently, this situation has changed, with universities increasingly expected to adopt more overtly private-sector management styles in order to cope with the quasi-market conditions that they operate under (Deem, 1998). This is termed 'new managerialism' (Deem, 1998, p.49). For example, universities are now engaged in income-generating activities, as well as being required by government to provide 'value for money' and year on year efficiency gains. There is also a need to 'compete' for students against other HE providers (Deem, 1998, p.48). This situation may not have been overtly created by the New Labour government, but the market-based approach to HE provision has certainly been reinforced by New Labour's policies.

Managerialism is a relatively new concept in HEIs. It could be suggested that this has led to something of an identity crisis, certainly for particular HEIs, who have struggled to come to terms with a new institutional culture and way of working. In her study of UK universities, Newman (1995) has argued that the development of new managerialism can be linked to the rise of two distinct organisational forms. One is characterised by a competitive approach, whereby part, or all, of the organisation is exposed to external competition (cited in Deem, 1998, p.48). The second is a more traditional, public-sector organisational form with a focus on 'an administrative and professional value-orientation far removed from industry and commerce' (cited in Deem, 1998, p.48). Newman (1995) argues that the more traditional approach is sometimes seen in pre-92 universities, whilst the competitive form is sometimes seen in the approaches of the post-92 universities. This can be contrasted with a more 'transformative' approach, which is

characterised by flatter hierarchies, a more team-based culture, and a focus on longer-term goals (cited in Deem, 1998). In 1995, Newman suggested that there was little evidence of the transformative approach being adopted in UK HEIs.

These models, which might be termed traditional, competitive and transformative, bear a striking resemblance to the models of widening participation that are suggested by Jones and Thomas (2005). As a reminder, Jones and Thomas argue that the three models of widening participation are academic, utilitarian and transformative. Like Newman (1995), they suggested that the first two models were broadly split between pre and post-92 universities, whilst the transformative model, in 2005, was not yet in evidence. The fact that the widening participation models seem to emulate the organisational forms, may be indicative of the way in which widening participation work is constrained by certain organisational parameters. This makes clear the need to consider widening participation work within the wider organisational, as well as national, context. When questions are asked about the limits of widening participation work, the wider competitive and market-based system might go some way to explaining why New Labour's ambitions around social justice appeared to be somewhat constrained.

On the one hand, universities were being asked to reform their practices so that they operated more like businesses (BIS, 2009). On the other hand, the New Labour government (specifically), were simultaneously asking universities to pay close attention to the social make-up of the students they admitted (HEFCE, 2008a; BIS, 2009), and to address under-representation where it was found. The government set out widening

participation benchmarks that were designed to encourage universities to do this. However, staff in some universities seemed to perceive a problem with the idea that they could operate under market conditions (competing with other universities, for example) whilst also engaging in the sort of 'social engineering' that the government were promoting via the widening participation agenda (Greenbank, 2006). This indicates a perceived tension between the managerialist and the widening participation agendas. This tension can manifest itself in a number of ways. For example, many universities approach student recruitment in a very 'public relations'-focussed way. Advertisements for certain universities appear on the television and on the sides of buses. It is clear that significant resources are applied to the marketing function and 'branding' of an HEI. This inevitably leads to a culture in which students become potential 'consumers' of the university 'product' (Archer, 2007, p.644). However, Reay *et al.* (2005) have highlighted the potential problems with this sort of marketing where students from under-represented groups are concerned. These students are more likely to be taking something of a leap of faith in applying to university, and might have many more doubts and misgivings than more traditional students (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Bowl, 2003; Archer *et al.*, 2003). They need accurate information in order to make informed choices, as well as the assurance that they will be well supported once on course. Whilst all students benefit from accurate information, students from under-represented groups may be in particular need of substance rather than 'spin' at this decision-making stage. This is because of the greater risks associated with higher level study for this group of students (Archer, 2007). This thesis will outline many other such examples of the tension between a market-based HE system and one which also promotes social justice;

arguing that this limits commitment to widening participation in some institutions and in certain contexts within HEIs. The next section will contribute to an understanding of this by outlining some of the difficulties surrounding New Labour's ideological position in relation to social justice.

## **2.7 Social justice and New Labour ideology**

In the context of widening participation, the drive to widen access is centred upon providing students, from under-represented groups, with the opportunity to enter HE: 'All those who have the potential to benefit from higher education should have the opportunity to do so' (DfES, 2003a). Whitty *et al.* (1998) and Gewirtz *et al.* (1995), however, have shown in their research that education reforms that promote choice, difference and diversity can simply reproduce existing hierarchies of class and race. As Whitty (2001, p.289) points out: 'the uncritical use of the language of 'opportunity' in a deeply inegalitarian society can actually serve to legitimate rather than challenge existing relations of domination'.

Some commentators (Robertson and Hillman, 1997; Archer and Hutchings, 2000) have suggested that New Labour failed to recognise the sheer number and magnitude of barriers that exist for non-participants in HE. This was not just a problem of failure to recognise structural barriers, but also perhaps a rather casual attitude to the methods by which admission to university is achieved. In the DfES (2003b, p.2) publication, *Widening Participation in Higher Education*, there is a sentence telling the reader that

‘One in four working class young people who achieve eight good GCSE passes do *not end up* in higher education (italics added)’. This seems to suggest that it is actually easy to ‘end up’ in higher education, and this might imply that the failure to ‘end up’ there is down to individual deficit (Archer, 2007). This marks a further shift away from any recognition of structural inequalities. The onus is on the individual to take responsibility for his/her own exit from social exclusion (Archer, 2007). In this way, the government’s framing of the issue might indicate an ideological move towards the right, with terminology that is designed to be non-controversial and a shift towards personal agency as the means of combating social exclusion or inequality. By framing the problem as one that belongs to individuals, the government absolves itself from a commitment to addressing inequality per se, as opposed to promoting ‘access’. It is certainly the case that *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (2003b) seems to oversimplify the barriers that operate against non-participants from groups who are under-represented in HE.

These documents suggest that the Labour government’s perception of the barriers are at odds with what students and researchers have often identified as the barriers to participation. Archer and Hutchings (2000, p.569) have suggested that ‘current widening participation initiatives, aimed primarily at raising working-class “desire to participate” (Robertson and Hillman, 1997), fail to address questions regarding “ability to participate”’. Again, this serves as an example of the Labour government foregrounding issues of individual agency and underplaying structural inequalities. However, by denying, or avoiding any recognition of, structural inequalities, it could be

suggested that progress towards widening participation will be limited. As Gewirtz (2001, p.373) points out:

‘So long as hierarchies – of schools and jobs – exist, the middle classes will always find ways of getting the best out of the system, of ensuring that their cultural capital is more valuable than that of any working class competitors. So without dismantling the hierarchies that structure schooling and employment provision, it is difficult to see how a genuine widening of opportunities can occur’.

The danger, as identified by Archer and Hutchings (2000, p.568), is that non-traditional students find themselves at the lower end of the HE ‘market place’. Archer (2007, p.644) suggests that the ‘formalisation of institutional hierarchies’ impacts on the decision-making of students who are targeted by widening participation initiatives:

‘As research demonstrates, working-class young people and adults possess a commonsense knowledge of the hierarchy of institutions and they ‘know’ that this hierarchy offers them a “bum deal” in that only “crap” universities (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Reay *et al.*, 2001a; Archer, 2003) are open to them’.

Reay *et al.* (2005, p.160) similarly argue that choice is a ‘social process...which is structured and structuring’. They suggest that ‘choice is rooted in fine discriminations and classificatory judgements of places for us and places for others – “social structures in the head” as Bourdieu terms them’. These perceptions indicate that the existing hierarchy of HEIs is a barrier to achieving a genuinely diverse HE sector.

Despite what might be called the 'myth of meritocracy' (Cohen, 2004), New Labour appeared keen to promote the idea that the opportunities provided by the government could lead to improved life chances for those who chose to take them. However, a distinction seemed to be made between deserving and undeserving recipients. Bridges (2005, p.5), drawing on the ideas of Michael Young, offers a detailed critique of the meritocratic agenda that seemed to guide New Labour policy: 'Bizarrely, contemporary political leaders like Tony Blair and...David Miliband consistently use the term 'meritocracy' as if it were a utopian dream rather than as Michael Young intended (and portrayed it) as a social nightmare!'. As Doyle (2003, p.282) points out, the 'emphases are on social integration and cultural change for the excluded rather than traditional leftist remedies of redistribution, with the consequence that employment and skills are the routes to inclusion and empowerment'.

Of more concern is the way in which individuals or groups may be construed as deficient if they do not 'buy into' the educational opportunities on offer (Tight, 1998; Gewirtz, 2001). This deficit model has been commented on by a number of researchers in the context of a whole raft of New Labour policies (Tight, 1998; Gewirtz, 2001; Archer, 2007). Blaming individuals for their failure to take opportunities is a convenient way of side-stepping the issue of structural inequality. It is a simplistic view of the problem that absolves the government from any responsibility to bring about a radical change to the system. An example of the attitude to non-participants in education can be seen in the Labour government's response to the Dearing, Kennedy and Fryer reports. In analysing

the discourses in *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998), Tight (1998, p.483) suggests that New Labour:

‘...effectively blame non-participants for the “learning divide” and places on them the responsibility for doing something about it. Thus non-participants are charged to “fulfil their potential”, “modify their behaviour” and “personally invest in the future”.

Interestingly, the non-participants were being asked to invest in *the* future, rather than *their* future. This might indicate that it is the economic and societal rewards, rather than the individual benefits of participation, that were the driving force behind such a policy.

## **2.8 The co-location of social justice and the market**

Some researchers (Doyle, 2003; Taylor, 2005) have suggested that the most important objective behind widening participation policies was the desire to have a more highly-skilled workforce. Early in New Labour’s first term, Tony Blair was quoted as saying that ‘Education is the best economic policy we have’ (Blair, 1998, cited in Taylor, 2005, p.109). However, the idea of linking educational and economic objectives as a means of achieving social justice has been widely criticised (Doyle, 2003; Coffield, 2000). Coffield (2000, p.9) suggests, in terms that recall Ainley (1994), that the simplistic link between investment in education and economic performance has not been proved and ‘probably does not exist’, and yet it seemed to perennially form ‘a central plank of government policy on education and employment’.

Even if a causal link were found, there are a number of other problems that arise from a simple assumption that better education leads to improved economic performance. Hatcher (1998, p.490), in common with Gewirtz (2001, p.373, cited in section 2.7), suggests that the human capital rationale for education is unlikely to lead to greater equality:

‘The reality is that the human capital argument does not entail a radical equalizing upwards of the future workforce but a stratified and differentiated school population which roughly corresponds to the stratified hierarchy of the future labour market’.

The human capital model views people as valuable principally in terms of their contribution to the economy. As Coffield (1999) points out, this leads to the exclusion of certain groups. Adults with learning difficulties may find themselves excluded because their potential contribution to the economy is lower than that of other groups. This situation is hardly conducive to social justice and greater social cohesion.

Nevertheless, it is a policy that New Labour continued to pursue. Early in their second term of office, the economic imperative tended to be tempered by references to social justice and ‘personal fulfilment’ (DfES, 2003a, p.17). More recently, the creation in 2008 of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), which quickly became subsumed in 2009 into a new Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), further suggested the dominance of the economic model in HE. Taylor (2005, p.111) has argued that evidence of this shift towards an economic model could be seen in the government’s initial concern that widening participation initiatives be aimed primarily at

'young, largely full-time, traditional students'. Indeed, the objective of a 50% participation rate by 2010 only extended to 18-30 year olds (Labour Party, 2001). This, Taylor (2005, p.111) argues, was because the government was driven by a 'human capital' perspective that saw younger students as having more potential to contribute to the labour market; they had more 'capital' and therefore more to 'invest'. This might explain why very few government publications, before the publication of the Leitch Report in 2006, made anything but a cursory reference to part-time students or lifelong learning. Taylor (2005, p.112) has criticised the New Labour government for being too narrowly focused on improving the skills of the workforce. He has suggested that the government failed to acknowledge 'any collective or community notion of education – it assumes an entirely individualistic (and 'marketised') frame of reference.'

This might seem strange given the government's stated desire to use HE as a vehicle for making a 'civilized society' and promoting 'active citizenship' (DfEE, 1998, p.7).

There is evidence to suggest that mature and working class students place a much higher importance on the idea of community and citizenship than the typical middle class 18 or 19 year old. In Reay's (2001a, p.337) research, a number of mature students wanted to study at a university that had a 'community feel' about it, and they incorporated this into their decision-making process. Reay *et al.* (2002) also found that the mature students in their study wanted to learn for learning's sake, and had a desire to make a contribution to society, rather than simply to make money or get a better job. Reay *et al.* (2002, p.8) suggest that such a stance 'was almost entirely absent amongst the younger students'. By failing to encourage a diverse range of students, it could be

suggested that the Labour government's discourse of 'citizenship' was largely tokenistic, or at least ignorant of its own class-stratified implications. 'Citizenship' may have been fore-grounded in *The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain* (DfEE, 1998), but by 2009 'citizenship' had been replaced by a discourse of 'skills' and 'employability' (BIS, 2009). It seemed that the conflation of social justice and markets had, over time, developed into an unequal relationship, with the market taking precedence in government discourse.

## **2.9 New Labour's discursive style in relation to social justice and widening participation**

Despite leanings towards what might be termed an 'economistic' discourse, notions of social justice were not entirely absent from New Labour's widening participation rhetoric. Some have argued that New Labour's economic discourse deliberately included liberatory discourses in order to 'enhance the power and influence of their argument' (Doyle, 2003, p.286). Fairclough (2000) has suggested that this was part of New Labour's persuasive style: certain words were used in conjunction with one another in ways that drew attention to incompatibilities but at the same time denied them. Fairclough (2000, p.49) also drew attention to the ways in which New Labour used 'not only but also' formulations in order to imply that both elements had equal weight, 'whereas in practice this may be far from true'. One example can be seen in the following extract from *The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain* (DfEE, 1998, p.7):

'Investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy of the twenty-first century...As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilized society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship'.

In this extract, the words 'as well as' imply that the economic benefits of education are equalled by the wider benefits of learning. However, as Tight (1999, p.5) points out, the reference to 'spirituality' only appears once within the document. The economic imperative, in contrast, is mentioned several times. This again implies that, in the eyes of the government at least, the economic benefits of education far outweighed those of social justice, citizenship and the development of spirituality. Fairclough (2000) appears to be correct when he draws attention to the deceptiveness of the 'not only but also' formulations.

According to Fairclough (2000), another strategy that was employed by New Labour was to link and list themes, concepts or ideas that would not normally sit comfortably in the same sentence. Levitas has called this 'false antithesis' (cited in Fairclough, 2000, p.84). The link between such concepts may be far from clear, but by positioning them together, the reader is encouraged to see a link that may not exist. Fairclough (2000, p.28) has suggested that:

'New Labour discourse is full of such lists...The factors or elements in such lists are seen as connected only in the sense that they appear together. There is no attempt at explanation that tries to specify deeper relations amongst them (eg. of cause and effect) which might constitute a system'.

One example can be seen in the aims of the reforms that are contained in the foreword to *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a). Arguments in favour of the expansion of HE as a means of justly including a broader section of society, sit alongside the need to 'compete on the world stage'. It is not at all clear that these aims are in harmony within the current HE system. As Archer (2007) points out, the ability to compete on a world stage is limited to a handful of 'research intensive' institutions that have a poorer record than most in terms of widening participation.

Another potential contradiction has been highlighted by Jones and Thomas (2005, p.621). Jones and Thomas (2005) suggest that *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a) links widening participation with a more harmonious society: they have argued whilst it is possible to see how widening access could lead to a more diverse HE sector, it is not so easy to see how this might translate into 'a more harmonious society'. Indeed, Jones and Thomas (2005, p.621) have further suggested that there might be a negative correlation in which 'disparities of wealth and power' lead to antagonism.

Levitas (2004) considered the language of New Labour in detail, and draws attention to the shifting ways in which certain key words have been used. She identified 'social exclusion' as one such term, and explains that its meaning changed over time, between documents, and within individual speeches. Levitas (2004, p.45) saw a sinister motive behind the use of these 'loose' terms, arguing that:

‘Analytically, this lack of clarity might be seen as problematic, but as with the third way, the breadth and flexibility serves a political function. The multiplicity of meanings is part of the point, as it facilitates the acceptance by neo-liberals of redistributive policies under the guise of social cohesion, or, more often, the acceptance by social democrats of potentially punitive and always constraining policies like parenting orders and anti-social behaviour orders...’

By saying very little, the policies in this area can appeal to both left and right in a non-controversial way. The framing of the issue appears to be weak. However, what is not clear is the extent to which such framing was used as a deliberate political ploy; or indeed, whether the motive for such weak framing was necessarily as sinister as Levitas (2004) suggests.

‘Opportunity’, a word that New Labour frequently used in educational policy documents, might be described as another ‘loose’ term. It might be assumed that this would frequently appear in the phrase ‘equality of opportunity’. However, Fairclough (2000) has suggested that the word ‘equality’ was rarely used by New Labour. The terms ‘social justice’, ‘social inclusion’ and ‘fairness’ were far more in evidence. Lister (1998, pp.431-32) has explained this as a paradigm shift that allowed the government to avoid ‘a direct assault on socio-economic inequality and polarisation’. Providing equality of opportunity is not the same as providing equality of outcome, and the language of ‘opportunity’, ‘social inclusion’ and ‘fairness’ arguably allowed the government to sidestep the issue of structural inequality. The paradigm shift that Lister (1998) referred to ensured that the framing of social justice remained weak, and the classifications between the meanings of social justice, equality of opportunity, and equality of outcome, were deliberately blurred.

Part of this reframing involved a removal of the language of class from New Labour discourse (Gewirtz, 2001). By avoiding such references and by using terms such as 'socially excluded' in policy documents, the nature of the problem can be vaguely defined. Fairclough (2000, p.26) has identified this as a process of 'nominalisation', whereby there is no specification of who or what is changing, so that the processes of change themselves are underplayed. It is the effect that is the main focus, rather than questions of agency and causality. Fairclough (2000, p.28) has drawn attention to the 'ghosts in the machine' that gloss over the role of global capitalism. Indeed, New Labour, as Fairclough (2000) has suggested, saw global capitalism as a 'fact of life'. By drawing attention away from agency and causality, it could be suggested that New Labour was able to avoid some of the difficult questions that might have interfered with the rhetoric of persuasion. The framing of the market and social justice as compatible, helped to achieve this.

What is perhaps of greater concern was the lack of commitment to helping students to succeed once in HE. It is an opportunity that was offered, and not an outcome. A number of commentators (Power and Whitty, 1999; Leathwood and Hayton, 2002) have drawn attention to the way in which New Labour discourse seemed to 'accept inequality as a "fact of life" to be acknowledged rather than a problem to be overcome' (Power and Whitty, 1999, p.540). This appeared to be part of New Labour's meritocratic vision, which recognised but accepted inequalities, and rested 'on notions of fairness for (differently abled/talented) individuals' (Leathwood and Hayton, 2002, p.148). The

problem with such an approach is that, 'although potentially enabling some individuals from "disadvantaged" backgrounds to succeed, [it] necessarily means that many will not' (Leathwood and Hayton, 2002, p.148).

## **2.10 Conclusion**

It is difficult to see how such an ambiguous approach to relationships between education and social inequality could widen participation in a profound way. Rather than representing a harmonious approach, the co-location of social justice and markets appears more reminiscent of the 'incremental dissonance' referred to by Loxley and Thomas (2001, p.299). This might indicate that the concept of widening participation and New Labour's commitment to it, was rhetorical rather than real or, at least, that government conceptions of widening participation were poorly defined and unevenly put into operation. Loose framing, lack of definition, and a breaking down of insulations between contradictory ideas allowed difficult issues to be 'fudged' in order to take the controversy out of the debate. In the long run, however, this might serve to make the Labour government's widening participation policies toothless and ineffective.

This chapter began with an historical summary of successive British governments' approaches to widening participation in HE. It suggests that, over the past forty years, the concept of widening participation has moved from the margins into the mainstream of education policy. This provided the context for a more detailed critique of the role of the New Labour government in promoting wider access to HE. The critique has drawn

attention to the problematic conflation of social justice and markets within increasingly 'slippery' discourses of widening participation. In drawing attention to the ideological basis of New Labour's approach to widening participation, it is hoped that this chapter will help the reader to contextualise and understand both the analysis of key government documents that are contained in Chapter Five and the institutional approaches to widening participation that are discussed in Chapters Seven to Ten.

The next chapter outlines the methodological framework that has guided this research project. It explains the development of a mixed-method case study approach in the examination of discursive approaches to widening participation.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework of the research that forms the basis of this thesis. It provides a context for the more detailed decisions that were taken about research design (which will be outlined in Chapter 4), and therefore focuses on issues such as the theoretical framework and the selection of a qualitative (or interpretive) approach. The chapter begins with a reminder of the aims of the research, before moving to a discussion of the suitability of qualitative (or interpretive) methods of research. The selection of the case study approach is then explained, prior to a discussion about the chosen theoretical frameworks. The final section contains an explanation of the epistemological status of the resulting data.

My research is centrally concerned with an analysis of the *framing* (Bernstein, 1990) of widening participation by members of the HE community. The research considers the discourses of widening participation that were being projected to external audiences via policy documents, marketing literature and open day settings in the six case study HEIs. The research seeks to analyse the ways in which the case study institutions presented their commitment to widening participation, particularly in relation to other institutional priorities. In assessing discursive practices, and drawing on Bernstein's idea that discourse 'has a material base' (1990, p.22), the research will also seek to trace the

ideological roots of the different approaches to widening participation. Chapter Two's analysis of *government* framing of widening participation helps provide a context in which to understand the widening participation decisions that were taken by HEIs. The findings of the research are used to try to draw some conclusions about the extent to which individual institutions were presenting strongly-framed approaches to widening participation.

The landscape of policy and practice in the area of widening participation has been varied and complex under the Labour government. As a result, it cannot be assumed that there is a single and correct interpretation of widening participation, or that a consistent or homogeneous approach to widening participation is necessarily desirable in itself. Nevertheless, it should be possible to assess the strength of different institutions' widening participation messages and thereby to draw some conclusions about institutional commitment to widening participation, in relation to other institutional priorities. The research is also concerned with contradictions in both national and local policy that might undermine the realisation of socially-just forms of widening participation. The three models of widening participation activity (academic, utilitarian and transformative) that have been identified by Jones and Thomas (2005) are used as a starting point in analysing the standpoints of each HEI.

### 3.2 Selecting a qualitative approach

Qualitative or interpretive research tends to favour the analysis of language and images rather than numbers (Silverman, 2001). Consequently, it is an approach that is often drawn upon where there is a desire to understand social worlds as they are lived and experienced by actors (Silverman, 2001). It is an approach that deals with human perception, action and interaction, and that recognises the 'immense complexity of human nature' (Cohen *et al.*, 2003, p.9). Interpretive approaches stand in contrast to positivism, which aims to apply the methodological procedures of the natural sciences to the social sciences (Cohen *et al.*, 2003), and which consequently regards human behaviour as 'passive, essentially determined and controlled' (Cohen *et al.*, 2003, p.19).

Qualitative or interpretive research allows the researcher to study the ways in which people interpret and represent particular situations and it provides an opportunity to probe social meanings, in ways that are not afforded via a more quantitative or scientific approach. Certain research tools and strategies that are associated with interpretive research (such as interviews, focus groups and observation), are better able to reveal complexity in social situations; the selection of such tools is particularly important where the research questions are exploratory and concerned with 'how' and 'why' (Yin, 2003).

This research project is concerned with the relationship between ideology, discursive representation and some of the practical activities entailed in widening participation. Given the multiple layers of investigation involved, a quantitative or quasi-scientific

approach (with an emphasis on hypothesis testing and measurement of 'facts') is not suitable. The workings of an underlying ideology, and its relationship to widening participation policy and practice, may be subtle and therefore requires an approach that is able to detect such subtleties and ambiguities. Gubrium and Holstein (1997, cited in Silverman, 2001, p.39) suggest that 'qualitative researchers inhabit "the lived border between reality and representation"', indicating that qualitative research offers opportunities to probe social issues that may sometimes seem intangible.

Within quantitative research, a positivist approach draws on notions of objectivity, and therefore regards the subjective accounts that may be gleaned from interview data as unreliable. However, where personal accounts of motivation and events are necessary in the pursuit of answers to the research questions, there is often no way of avoiding the issue of subjectivity. Interviews with key respondents are bound to be subjective but they may be the only way of gaining a perspective on the complex reasoning behind certain decisions. Qualitative researchers recognise the reliability threat, but feel that there are ways of countering this via forms of triangulation. It could be suggested, however, that subjectivity pervades every aspect of social science research, and whilst it is important to recognize this, it does not necessarily render qualitative or interpretive research valueless.

Bryman (2004, p.28) suggests that perhaps the most important criterion of research is its claim to validity. He defines validity as being 'concerned with the integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a piece of research'. There are several different

types of validity, some of which are concerned with more positivist principles, such as measurement, causality and generalisation. However, there is also the concept of 'ecological validity', which is concerned with the extent to which research findings are applicable to peoples' everyday lives. This construct, which was developed by Cicourel (1982, p.15), asks whether the chosen research instruments 'capture the daily life conditions, opinions, values, attitudes and knowledge base of those we study as expressed in their natural habitat?' A key feature of ecological validity is that it involves the collection of data in naturally-occurring settings. Bryman (2004) suggests that it particularly applies to ethnographic research, in which participant observation might feature. Qualitative or interpretive research is therefore capable of achieving high ecological validity, particularly where the aim is to carry out research in a naturalistic setting.

In order to consider how national widening participation policies have been translated at a local (institutional) level, it is necessary to consider how widening participation is framed in a range of different, naturally-occurring, settings. These settings include participant observation via attendance at open days, semi-structured interviews with staff, and analysis of institutional marketing literature such as the prospectus and website. The statistics and surveys favoured by a more positivist approach might be illuminating in terms of revealing *what* is happening, but they are unlikely to be able to reveal *how* policies are discursively framed and operationally translated, or *why* their institutional mediation takes particular forms. Therefore, whilst analysis of statistics will

form a part of my research project, most of the chosen methods draw on a qualitative or interpretive approach and aim for ecological, rather than measurement validity.

The research questions emerged from a general 'exploratory' interest in the area of widening participation, and were initially broad in scope rather than emerging from a clearly-defined hypothesis. Although one of the aims of the research was to assess the extent to which the Jones and Thomas (2005) models might provide a useful framework for understanding institutional ideology and practice, the intention was not to 'test' their models as if they constituted a predictive theory. Rather, the identification of broad and differentiated ideological positioning among HEIs provides a focus rather than a hypothesis. The research questions have evolved over time and the research is therefore more inductive than deductive in approach. It is hoped that this research project might ultimately contribute to the generation or development of new concepts that, while not being drawn from statistically generalisable cases, offers the potential for analytic generalisation. It is hoped that such analytic generalisation might contribute to the body of current social research on widening participation.

The qualitative or interpretive paradigm has informed most of the decisions that have been made in relation to the collection of the data for this study. This short section has sought to explain the suitability of such an approach. The following sections provide information about the more detailed methodological frameworks that have guided the research.

### **3.3 Selection of the comparative case study approach**

A comparative case study approach was selected in seeking to explore some of the different approaches to widening participation that exist within HEIs. In its most basic form, a case study tends to be associated with the intensive study of a particular location, 'such as a community or organisation' (Bryman, 2004, p.49). A comparative case study design involves using identical methods to study contrasting cases. Bryman (2004, p.53) suggests that a comparative design 'implies that we can understand a social phenomena better when they are compared in relation to two or more meaningfully contrasting cases or situations.' A further advantage of the comparative design is the fact that by comparing two or more cases, the researcher is in a stronger position to build or develop theory (Bryman, 2004).

In terms of definition, Robson (1993, p.52) argues that case studies provide 'a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomena within its real life context'. Yin (2003, pp.13-14) develops this point by defining the case study inquiry as one that copes with a 'technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points' and which therefore relies on 'multiple sources of evidence'. The comparative case study approach is particularly suitable in the context of my own research, because it involves the study of a particular phenomena within six HEIs. The HEIs represent what Bryman (2004, p.51) refers to as 'exemplifying' cases; they have been chosen because they provide a suitable context for the answering of my research questions, rather than for their

unusual characteristics. The questions for investigation within the case HEIs have clearly-defined boundaries (involving the study of the framing of widening participation in particular contexts) and these are examined using multiple sources of evidence. The communication of widening participation messages is investigated via the real life context of open day settings, prospectus and policy documents, as well as interviews with staff. In outlining the benefits of the case study approach, Warmington (2000, p.81) suggests that:

‘The potential for moving beyond actors’ individual accounts, in order to examine the discourse within which the voicing of their accounts is framed and, beyond that, to study the historical production of that discourse, makes case study a powerful critical tool.’

Bryman (1988, p.18) argues that ‘A case should not be thought of in statistical terms, ie, as a sample of one. The argument for the prospective generalisation of case study findings lies in their generalisation to theoretical and analytical concerns’. This suggests that it is potentially possible to achieve theoretical and/or analytical generalisations with a single case study and that the credibility of case studies is not undermined by their singularity. By developing a case study approach as a comprehensive research strategy (as suggested by Yin, 2003), my study will aim to draw analytic rather than statistical generalisations.

Stake (1995, p.8) suggests that ‘the real business of case study is particularisation, not generalisation’. He encourages a detailed look at what a case is and what it does, and

places emphasis on the importance of ‘understanding the case itself’. The advantage of the case study as a research tool, is that it allows for an investigation of a number of things that may be happening at once. Case study facilitates the study of ‘multiple realities’ and ‘the different and even contradictory views of what is happening’ (Stake, 1995, p.12). This approach is particularly suitable in the context of this research and its particular set of research questions. The multiple realities may be evident in the difference between the stated aims of widening participation policy and actual pre-entry practices, in competing ideologies, and in potential contradictions between what the policy documents say and the perspectives of key members of staff. The ability to analyse multiple layers of meaning and activity, as well as different voices and interests, is made possible via a case study approach. The investigation of multiple layers will also allow for a degree of triangulation which is likely to increase the ecological validity of the findings.

### **3.4. The theoretical frameworks used to approach the data**

Yin (2003, p.14) suggests that the case study as a research strategy ‘comprises an all-encompassing method – covering the logic of design, data collection techniques, and specific approaches to data analysis’. This should include, according to Yin (2003, p.14), ‘the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis’. A theoretical framework is essential in allowing the reader to understand the particular focus of the research questions, as well as how certain conclusions have been arrived at and why certain information has been selected as note-worthy or important.

The theoretical framework also helps to define the limits of the case study. This study is centrally concerned with institutional 'framing' of widening participation work and with the discourses that are drawn upon both in the interpretation of national policy and the communication of commitment to widening participation at a local, institutional level. The overarching analytical framework used to understand variations in the ways in which the case study HEIs developed their local definitions of widening participation, derives from Harry Daniels' adaptation of Bernstein's (2000) notions of classification and framing (Edwards *et al.*, 2009). Alongside this, elements of Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (1995) allowed for a detailed consideration of the ways in which HEIs discursively constructed their widening participation work.

#### **3.4.1 *Classification and Framing***

Daniels adapted Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing when analysing the ways in which children's services professionals in UK local authorities developed principles and practices for creating new forms of inter-professional work. This required practitioners in education, health and social care to shift beyond their traditional professional boundaries and to produce new forms of collaboration in response to government calls for effective 'joined up' working (Edwards *et al.*, 2009). In his study, Daniels examined how and why case study local authorities produced differing 'local' interpretations of joined up, multi-professional practice in making provision for 'at risk' young people. His research questions have a degree of analogy with the aims of my own research. Both studies focus upon variation in 'local' interpretations (or regulation)

of national policy. The aspect of Bernstein upon which Daniels draws is Bernstein's (2000) late period concern with 'understanding the mediational power of institutions' (Edwards *et al.*, 2009, p.60). Daniels defined regulative discourse as particularly relevant to the development of new organisational practices because it: '...communicates an institution's public moral practice, values beliefs and attitudes, principles of conduct, character and manner.' (Edwards *et al.*, p.60).

The focus of the current study on HEIs' communication of their commitment to widening participation, is concerned with the HEIs' 'moral practice', values and principles of conduct in defining and prioritising widening participation practices within their institutions. For Daniels, relations of power and control within institutions give rise to different principles of communication:

'These principles mediate social relations and shape both thinking and feeling. They therefore shape the 'what' and 'how' of practice as well as the 'why' and 'whereto' concerns of professional learning.' (Edwards *et al.*, 2009, p.58)

In short, by drawing upon Bernstein's principles of classification and framing (the terms in which Bernstein writes about control/ regulation), the current research aims to produce a nuanced understanding of how the discourses and practices of communities (such as academics and widening participation practitioners) are 'structured by their institutional context' (Edwards *et al.*, 2009, p.58).

Framing, following Daniels' (Edwards *et al.*, 2009) application of a Bernstein-informed framework, therefore refers to the regulation of communication. It is concerned with the 'realisation rules' that impact upon the ways in which people talk. Within my research, institutional framing is studied via policy documents, marketing literature and discourses drawn upon by staff in interviews and open day settings. There is a focus on descriptions of widening participation work as well as descriptions of the 'values' or 'speciality' of the institution. An assessment of institutional framing involves a close analysis of the discursive practices that are drawn upon to create a particular 'message'. Bernstein (2000, p.204) suggests that power relations regulate voice, and where strong framing is present, the smaller is 'the space accorded for potential variation in the message'. Where the framing is weak, there is much greater scope for individual voices and multiple messages, some of which may be in tension with one another. This can lead to a sense of inconsistency in the message.

Within HEIs, strong framing is therefore characterised by discursive practices in a range of settings projecting the same message about institutional commitment to widening participation. It is perfectly possible for there to be strong framing of a *lack* of commitment in this area. It is the *consistency* of the message that makes the framing strong, rather than the *nature* of the message. Weak framing, in the context of this research study, is characterised by the existence of a range of different messages about commitment to widening participation. The prospectus document might express institutional commitment in one way, and a member of staff in an open day setting might then undermine that message by projecting a less positive commitment. Drawing on

Bernstein's description of framing (2000), it should be pointed out that evidence of weak framing of widening participation work does not necessarily mean that widening participation work in an institution is not of good quality. Rather, it suggests that there is an inconsistency in the messages that are projected about widening participation. This in turn might indicate that there are pockets of good practice within an institution, but that responses to widening participation are varied and might also include lack of commitment in certain areas of the organisation. In these cases, an embedded approach to widening participation would appear to be absent.

An assessment of the discursive practices used to frame widening participation work, provides the means to analyse the classification of particular institutions. Bernstein (2000, p.7) suggests that 'In the case of strong classification, each category has its unique identity, its unique voice, its own specialised rules of internal relations. In the case of weak classification, we have less specialised discourses, less specialised identities, less specialised voices'. Classification can be seen in the way in which HEIs seek to differentiate themselves from one another. For example, Russell Group institutions might differentiate themselves from post-92 universities by stressing 'academic standards' and the 'outstanding research' that they carry out. There is a direct and visible focus on particular 'research-led' notions of quality and standards which may not be fore-grounded to the same extent in post-92 HEIs. Many of the post-92 institutions, however, might stress their commitment to widening participation and accessible learning and appear to categorise their ethos and mission differently. There are clearly differentiated categories within the higher education sector, and it could be

suggested that many institutions, through membership of the various 'mission groups', work to position themselves within a particular category. Bernstein refers to this as 'insulation' (1990, 2000). Within each category there is a specialised identity which marks one university as different from another. As Bernstein (1990, p.23) explains:

'The speciality of each category is created, maintained and reproduced only if the relations between the categories of which a given category is a member are preserved...It is the strength of the insulation that creates a space in which a category can become specific...Thus the degree of insulation is a crucial regulator of the relations between categories and the specificity of their "voices".'

In order to achieve insulation, institutions will try to control the discourses by which they are characterised and positioned:

'From this perspective classificatory (boundary relations) establish "voice". "Voice" is regarded somewhat like a cultural larynx which sets the limits on what can legitimately be put together (communicated). Framing (control) relations regulate the acquisition of this voice and create the "message" (what is made manifest, what can be realized)' (Bernstein, 1990, p.260).

In this way, the concepts of classification and framing are linked. In broad terms, it could be suggested that this study considers the framing of commitment to widening participation by HEIs; and that by comparing this to other messages that are projected about the speciality of the institution, it becomes possible to see how institutions are engaged in classifying themselves as different from one another (pre-92 as opposed to post-92; Russell Group as opposed to Million Plus, for example). However, it is difficult to separate the concepts and to analyse them in isolation because framing decisions

and classificatory principles are likely to act upon one another. In practice, it is not just widening participation messages that are being framed, but the wider speciality of an institution; and this framing is bound up with concerns about the classification of the institution. The concepts are therefore heavily interdependent.

To summarise, the discursive strategies of the case study HEIs are studied as a way of revealing something about the ideology or guiding principles behind their chosen locations. Widening participation messages are analysed both in terms of national framing (the government agenda) and local framing (the messages set out by the case study HEIs). Analysis of the particular framing decisions by HEIs includes a consideration of *why* these discursive practices were used, and the possible implications of these decisions.

### **3.4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis**

In this thesis, Fairclough's (1993, 1995, 2000) critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides a means of analysing language as social practice in a higher education context.

Fairclough (1993) draws on a three-dimensional framework when analysing discursive events. He suggests (1993, p. 136) that each event will have three facets: 'it is a spoken or written language text, it is an instance of discourse practice involving the production and interpretation of text, and it is a piece of social practice'. Fairclough (1993, p.136) argues that the connection between text and social practice is 'mediated by discourse practice'. Discourse, according to Fairclough (2000, p.179), 'classifies

people, things, places, events' and it mediates the ways in which people live. It is the mediating and classifying role of widening participation discourses in HEIs that are the focal points of this research. The applicability of Fairclough's (1993) three-dimensional framework to the current research lies in Fairclough's focus on the discursive event as taking place within existing relations of power; the framework facilitates the analysis of institutional discourses as positioning devices. Indeed, Archer and Francis (2006, p.26), drawing on a post-structuralist approach to discourse analysis, suggest that the approach can 'facilitate an awareness of the ways in which people are multi-positioned – for example, how we are positioned within and by discourses'. This is useful when analysing the ways in which the case study HEIs were positioning their prospective applicant audiences. For example, were the case study HEIs addressing the prospective student directly in their prospectus documents, or were they writing in the third person? Were institutions positioning students as outside of the HE community or as already a part of it?

Fairclough (1993) applied the three-dimensional analytical framework to prospectus documents from different decades in his own HEI, arguing that the framework provides a means of analysing the increasing marketisation of discursive practices in HEIs. He showed how this framework could be used to reveal something about power relations and ideology as reflected in particular discursive practices. Indeed, Fairclough (1995, p.4) has argued that texts are 'multi-semiotic' and suggests that they can be studied in order to gain some insight into ideology and socio-cultural processes. Fairclough's (1993) model has therefore been drawn upon as one means of understanding how the

case study HEIs were constructing both their own identity and that of current and prospective students. However, Fairclough (1993, p.138) himself suggests that he does not always apply his three-dimensional framework systematically. In order to retain this thesis' broad focus on power, positioning and ideology in the case study HEIs, analysis of documentary and interview data is focused on Fairclough's (1993) discourse practice rather than detailed linguistic analysis of features such as grammar, tenses and modality that are characteristic of some approaches to discourse analysis. There is a thematic analysis of how, via discursive practice, the case study HEIs were positioning their institutions within the higher education 'market place' and how they were framing their widening participation work within this.

### **3.5 The status of the data**

Even where a strong theoretical framework is used to guide the research, there are still many questions about the epistemological status of the data gathered. There are well rehearsed competing views, for instance, about interview data. Ethnomethodologists reject the idea that data pre-exists. They see the interview as a two way sense-making process, rather than as 'time out' from the social world (Baker, 2002, p.783). Similarly, constructionists see the interaction of the interview as a topic in its own right. Positivists seek an objective truth from interviews, whilst emotionalists are interested in gathering 'authentic accounts' (Silverman, 2001). Gudmundsdottir (1996) draws attention to the ways in which the interview process can distort the reality that the respondent is trying to express. She suggests that there is no 'one to one' correspondence between the reality

that respondents are trying to express and their actual words: 'interpreters' of data apply their own interpretations to the information, so that the information is being continually distorted. This is true of observational work and documentary analysis, as well as of interviews. There is no way of knowing whether the interpretation is accurate. This leads to what Gudmundsdottir calls 'an endless hall of faulty mirrors' (1996, p.304). Indeed, Kvale (1996, p.205) suggests that 'A recognition of the pervasiveness of interpretation throughout an entire interview enquiry may counteract a common overemphasis on methods of analysis as the one way to find the meaning of interviews.'

This suggests that there are many ways in which the data can be read and it is, therefore, important that researchers are explicit about the status that they attach to the data. The reading of the interview data within this research project is informed by Miller and Glassner (2004), who suggest that data gleaned from interviews will only ever be partial because the story is told with a particular audience in mind. Miller and Glassner (2004) argue that the story may have taken a different form if someone else were the listener and they highlight the idea that the interviewer can impact on the narrative, either by appearing too deeply committed, or as too distant, from the interests being expressed. An awareness of this is therefore critical when carrying out and analyzing interviews. However, despite their provisos, Miller and Glassner (2004) maintain that interviews are nonetheless capable of offering insights into the worlds experienced by interviewees. This awareness should also be applied to observational work, where the messages and interactions that are observed are directed at particular audiences. This

leads to a situation in which perception of audience heavily influences the nature of the message.

A number of researchers (Atkinson, 1990; Briggs, 2001; Prior, 2003) have drawn attention to the fact that interviews are 'socially structured accounts' (Prior, 2003, p.91), and that this further impacts upon the status of the data. It is therefore important, as a researcher, to recognize that there is no 'truth' to be found. The best that can be hoped for is that the interviewee responds to questions in a way that accurately reflects his or her thoughts, feelings and perceptions of a situation at a given time. Walker (1986, p.179) suggests that to the case study researcher:

'...what *seems* to be true is more important than what *is* true. For the case study worker as opposed to the psychometrician, the internal judgements made by those he studies, or who are close to the situation, are often more significant than the judgements of outsiders.'

Therefore, when analysing the interview data that has been gathered in the course of this project, a narrative rather than realist approach is applied (Silverman, 2000). In keeping with Miller and Glassner (2004), this involves seeing the answers that respondents give as cultural stories, possessing ecological validity, rather than as a window on the 'truth'.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview of the methodological framework that has guided the research project in order to demonstrate how such a framework is 'fit for purpose' in answering the key research questions. The focus of the research is the way in which widening participation policies were discursively framed within six individual HEIs. Fairclough's (1993, 1995) CDA and Bernstein's (1990) classification and framing provide the means by which discursive practice, and therefore the assumptive frameworks in the case study HEIs, are interrogated. Chapter Four will describe the more detailed decisions that were made about data collection and analysis.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter reflects upon the development of my research design. It explains the ways in which my chosen methods are 'fit for purpose' in addressing the research questions outlined in Chapter One. The first part of this chapter describes the selection and institutional features of the six university case study sites. The second part outlines the data collection methods in detail, before moving to a discussion of both the strengths and limitations of the chosen approaches. The third section describes the ethical considerations that informed the decision-making process, bearing in mind that the choices made by social researchers are never simply 'technical' decisions. The final part of the chapter briefly explains the ways in which the research findings from the six sites were analysed.

#### **4.2 Selecting the case study institutions**

Six potential case study higher education institutions were approached in the first instance. These were made up of one post-92 and one pre-92 institution in each of three specific regions. The selection of the regions was opportunistic, being based on geographical convenience, and could equally have been selected from any other city or

region that had both a post-92 and a pre-92 institution. However, the selection of these two different types of institution was significant in the context of this study. It might be expected that a Russell Group university with a highly selective approach to admissions would see its widening participation mission as different from a post-92 university that views part of its role as offering 'more open access' (Crozier *et al.*, 2008, p.169). It might therefore be assumed that discursive representations of widening participation activity would differ between the different types of HEI.

Of the six case study HEIs that were originally asked to participate in the project, only one refused access. This refusal came from a post-92 institution in an area where HE provision was limited. A second post-92 institution in the region was then approached, but access was denied once more. This exhausted the post-92 provision in this particular region, so at that point, a university college was approached instead. This institution willingly agreed to participate, and on reflection, it was felt that the inclusion of a university college would actually provide an important contrast to the more traditional university provision. The final six 'cases' were therefore made up of three pre-92 universities, two post-92 universities, and a university college.

Six case study FE colleges were selected on the basis of their proximity to the case study HEIs. Interviews were sought with staff in two FE colleges in each of the three regions. Staff in these colleges were interviewed about the progression of their students into the case study universities and their perceptions of the widening participation work

that the case study HEIs were carrying out. Access was not easy to obtain, but two case study colleges were eventually identified for each region.

### **4.3 Describing the case study HEIs**

This section describes the case study HEIs in detail in order to help the reader understand their locations within the UK higher education sector. This information is significant because it will help the reader to build up a picture of the extent to which discourses of widening participation are particular to certain types of institution. The FE colleges will not be described in detail because their role in the research was to provide a perspective on the work of the HEIs; the colleges themselves were not the focus of the research. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

The first case study HEI is **Oldchurch University**. Oldchurch is part of the Russell Group of UK higher education institutions, and as such it describes itself as having a strong research base, with a focus on academic quality and world-class standards. Oldchurch is a selecting university, mainly offering three year, full-time degrees to school leavers with A Level qualifications. It is an institution with a history of elite provision which is consistently placed towards the top of university league tables (Times Online, 2008).

The second case study institution is **Oldbeam University**. Oldbeam is a large, city-based university which is, again, part of the Russell Group. Like Oldchurch, it describes

itself as having a strong research base, and is keen to attract students with a good academic record. Oldbeam is a selecting university, mainly offering three year, full-time degrees to school leavers with A Level qualifications, although it also considers applicants with alternative qualifications. Oldbeam is consistently placed within the top thirty HEIs in the UK university league tables (Times Online, 2008).

The third case study institution is **Oldlaw University**. Oldlaw is part of the 1994 Group of UK universities, and as such promotes itself as an institution with a good balance of research and teaching expertise (1994 Group, 2010). It is a selecting university and most of its students are school or college leavers with A Levels. However, alternative qualifications are considered by admissions tutors and the University professes a strong commitment to lifelong learning. Oldlaw University appears as a top thirty HEI in the UK university league tables (Times Online, 2008).

The fourth case study institution is **Newdale University**. Newdale is a large, city-based, post-92 institution that is part of the University Alliance Mission Group. This group describes itself as 'research-engaged and business-focussed' (University Alliance, 2007). It offers both academic and vocational courses to students who have a range of qualifications. Places at Newdale University are not as over-subscribed as institutions in the Russell and 1994 Group. There are greater numbers of non-traditional students than in Oldchurch, Oldbeam and Oldlaw Universities, and the University has a history of commitment to widening participation. In UK university league tables, Newdale University is placed in the bottom quarter (Times Online, 2008).

The fifth case study HEI is **Neworth University**. Neworth is a city-based institution that is part of the Million Plus Group. This group describes itself as a university think-tank with member institutions that 'have their own diversity and specialisms' (Million Plus, 2010). Most of the courses at Neworth University have a vocational focus; students with A Levels are in the minority rather than the majority. Neworth University has a strong commitment to widening participation, and a large proportion of its students are from groups who are under-represented in higher education. Many of the students are local. In UK university league tables, Neworth University is placed towards the bottom (Times Online, 2008).

The sixth case study institution is **Newbede University**. Newbede is part of the GuildHE group, which represents smaller UK HEIs and some Further Education Colleges (GuildHE Group, 2010). Newbede is a university college with a long history of educational provision. It is based in a cathedral city, in a region of the country with limited progression to higher education. It draws many of its students from the local community. The courses are mainly, but not entirely vocational, and research is not a strong feature of the institution. University colleges do not feature in the university league tables (Times Online, 2008).

#### **4.4 Gathering information about the case study institutions and their approaches to widening participation**

Once the cases had been selected and access gained, the aim was to use multiple methods to gather as much information as possible about the ways in which widening participation was interpreted, communicated and delivered in the different institutional settings. The tradition of case study research suggests that it is important to gain and describe in detail a sense of what is happening within an institution in the here and now (Stake, 1995). In order to achieve this, an interview was sought with the Widening Participation Manager (or equivalent post-holder) at each of the case study institutions. The Widening Participation Manager in a HEI is responsible for co-ordinating outreach activities and overseeing the development of widening participation policy and practice within the institution. Evaluation of a range of policy, marketing and information documents enabled analysis of the discourses of widening participation at work in different institutional settings, and contributed to a critical understanding of how widening participation was positioned within each institution's overall mission. The absence of references to widening participation in certain documents was of equal interest to instances where widening participation was the main focus. 'Participant observation' visits to institutional open days were also undertaken, so that information could be gained about the messages that were given to prospective students.

Hakim (2000, p.61) suggests that the use of multiple sources of evidence allows case studies 'to present more rounded and complete accounts of social issues and

processes'. In keeping with the desire to obtain a 'rounded picture', and to probe 'multiple realities', information gained from within HEIs was triangulated by interviewing members of staff in further education (FE) colleges who had experience of helping students to gain access to higher education courses. The FE colleges that were approached were located within the same city or region as two of the case study HEIs and therefore had experience of helping students to gain places at the case study HEIs. This decision was guided by the knowledge that, compared to sixth form colleges and schools, FE colleges tend to enrol higher numbers of 'widening participation' students, which includes applicants from lower socio-economic groups (DfES, 2006; Stanton, 2008). It has been suggested (Pugsley, 1998; Reay, 1998; National Audit Office, 2008) that students from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to live at home and attend their local university. It was felt that staff within further education colleges were likely to have first-hand knowledge of the progression of students from under-represented groups into higher education and, as such, might provide some insights into the perceived efficacy of widening participation initiatives in HEIs.

#### **4.5 Data collection**

Documentary analysis, interviews and observation via attendance at open days were the main methods by which the research questions were addressed. Silverman (2000, pp.824-25) suggests that fitness for purpose is an important consideration when selecting research tools. Researchers should therefore ask themselves not only

whether the chosen methods will help in addressing the chosen research topic but also whether the 'analytic position' is 'appropriate' to the 'practical concerns'.

Documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews and observation were adopted as complementary research strategies in relation to this particular area of study. The aim was to consider the ways in which the case study HEIs interpreted the national widening participation agenda, and then communicated and framed their widening participation work at a local level. In order to do this, it was necessary to:

- a) analyse a range of different written (and visual) material for each case study HEI (for example, prospectus documents, websites, policy documents)
- b) interview widening participation managers in the case study HEIs in order to gain an insight into institutional approaches to widening participation;
- c) interview staff in local FE colleges (access to HE co-ordinators, for example) to gain a perspective on the efficacy of widening participation work in HEIs; and
- d) attend open day events for each case study HEI (as a participant observer) in order to analyse the messages that were given to prospective students.

These methods were designed to reveal not only the discursive strategies being employed by HEIs to account for their widening participation practice (via policies, official literature and explanations from widening participation managers), but also the ways in which these strategies were being translated into practical activity (via open day

events, and according to the perspectives of staff in FE colleges who had been involved in student transitions between further and higher education).

There were many other research methods that could, in principle, have been selected in pursuit of answers to the research questions but these methods were ultimately deemed less suitable. For instance, information about an institution's culture and ideology cannot be readily gleaned from statistics or from short answers to a questionnaire. Practical constraints led to the rejection of certain other methods. It was not feasible to expect that key members of staff could be gathered together for a focus group discussion within a particular case study institution. This would represent a considerable cost to the institution, particularly where participants were at a senior level within the organisation. In essence, the 'framing' and discursive practices of an institution were key to understanding the ideology around widening participation work. This information was most readily available via detailed analysis of documents (such as prospectus documents, widening participation policies, corporate strategies etc.), first-hand observation and in-depth interviews with key members of staff.

#### **4.6 Data sources**

The following sections provide further detail about why documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews and observation were felt to be 'fit for purpose' in ways that other methods were not.

#### **4.6.1 Documentary Analysis**

Atkinson and Coffey (2004, pp.56-57) argue that documentary records hold a 'pervasive significance...in contemporary social settings' because of their centrality to 'the fabric of everyday social life'. They suggest that documents should form part of contemporary ethnographic fieldwork in order to reflect this centrality. There are a number of advantages to using documentary analysis as a research method. First, many documents tend to be readily available. Second, analysing the content of documents represents an 'unobtrusive measure' (Robson, 2002, p.349); the content is not subject to change as a result of its use.

Documentary analysis is particularly relevant to this research study, because, as Atkinson and Coffey (2004, p.57) suggest, some of the documents that organisations produce are concerned with 'self-presentation'. Official institutional literature is often the result of considerable thought and debate prior to publication and in this way it presents a calculated 'position' on the part of an institution. Bernstein (1990, p.13) suggests that 'ideology is constituted through and in such positioning'. In the case of HEIs, prospectus and website documents represent a key interface between the institution and prospective students. Within the research, these documents were therefore particularly significant as a means of revealing something about how an institution wished to be seen by external audiences and how the institution viewed its prospective students.

When trying to uncover the ideology informing an institution's widening participation policies, a range of different policy, strategy and marketing documents were analysed in order to build up a detailed picture of the ways in which the institution presented and framed its position in relation to widening participation. These documents included those that specifically related to widening participation:

1. access agreements,
2. widening participation policies (where they existed),
3. admissions policies

The analysis also included more general policy, strategy and marketing documents:

4. institutional websites (for all references to widening participation, not just the web pages that were specifically about widening participation).
5. institutional mission statements
6. institutional strategic plans (for references, if any, to widening participation)
7. undergraduate prospectuses.

Comparison across different documents was carried out in order to analyse evidence of contradiction or competing ideologies that might imply weak framing of widening participation. As outlined in Chapter 1 (section 1.4), with weak framing, widening participation was likely to be positioned in different ways within an institution: there

would be much greater scope for individual voices and multiple messages, some of which might be in tension with one another (cf. Bernstein, 2000).

In addition, inter-textual comparisons provided an indicator of the level of coherence in an institution's approach to widening participation. In relation to the Jones and Thomas (2005) models of widening participation (academic, utilitarian and transformative), it should be acknowledged that the documents did not, in isolation, provide *comprehensive* evidence of adherence to a certain model of widening participation. However, in combination with information about how an institution 'operationalised' certain elements of its widening participation work (gleaned through observations and interviews with key members of staff), it was possible to draw some conclusions about the ways in which widening participation work was framed, and thus the place of widening participation in relation to the institution's wider objectives.

The documents were analysed by drawing on elements of Fairclough's critical discourse analysis. For Fairclough (1995), discourse is a material force; he advocates paying attention to the processes of text production, distribution and consumption, and suggests that analysis of texts should not be isolated from the institutional discourses and practices of which the text is a part. This approach moves away from an analysis of content or language in isolation. Like Bernstein (1990), Fairclough (1995, p.209) suggests that it is through texts that 'social control and social domination are exercised (and indeed negotiated and resisted)'. As a theoretical lens, such a framework therefore lent itself to a research project that was concerned to investigate the ways in which

powerful institutions interpreted, communicated and delivered policies that were designed to support students who had traditionally been under-represented in higher education.

Prior (2003) agrees with Fairclough that documents need to be considered within their social settings; in relation to fields of action and as agents in their own right. She draws attention to their inter-textuality and encourages researchers to consider how documents function, and how they are manufactured and consumed (2003). Like Fairclough, Prior doubts the value in analysing documents without reference to their social contexts. In the context of the current research, analysing the wider social settings of the documents produced by HEIs was essential to understanding the place of widening participation within the organisational culture. It was only by considering these broader contextual factors that conclusions could be drawn about the ways in which widening participation was constructed by the institution and how documents were 'used' within institutional practice.

Drawing on the ideas of Fairclough (1995) and Prior (2003), and therefore foregrounding the idea of the document as 'multifunctional' and embedded in social processes (Fairclough, 1995, p.6), the analysis of an institution's policy documents and marketing literature took place before seeking to carry out any interviews. This analysis involved looking not just at substantive content (*what* the documents said), but also at *how* the information was conveyed. For example, did prospectus documents explicitly mention support for students from under-represented groups? If so, where was this

information located in the prospectus? One of the main focal points were the *assumptions* that were made about applicants and students within the documents. This refers to the extent to which marketing literature made an obvious 'pitch' to a particular model of student. Prospectus documents that highlighted sporting opportunities and the 'vibrant' social scene might 'speak' more to applicants without family responsibilities, for example.

Prior (2003, p.48) suggests that it is important to consider '*who* manufactured a document, *why*, and in *what context?*' By viewing a document as an actor in the social process, rather than a static object, the researcher is able to see how the existence of the document 'can influence the actions of human beings' (Prior, 2003, p.21). Viewing documents as potential social actors was very important in tracing an ideological perspective running through an institution's approach to widening participation. By seeing documents as powerful communicators of an institutional approach, it became possible to make some links between institutional policy and communicative practice.

#### **4.6.2 Interviews**

Thorough analysis of institutional documents facilitated entry into the interview situation with a good awareness of the institution's policies and practices as they were represented in a range of written formats. In the context of this research, the interviews were necessary as a means of gauging whether the discourses of staff delivering the institution's widening participation work were framed in a similar way to statements

made in the literature. Interviews presented the opportunity to probe the space between documented policy statements and elements of actual practice (as reported by widening participation staff). It is always possible for respondents to say that they have delivered a policy in a certain way, without this actually representing operational reality. However, by asking for specific operational examples, and by carefully recording the language that was used by members of staff to describe the institution's widening participation work, it was possible to draw some conclusions about an institution's discursive production of its commitment to widening participation. Drawing on Fairclough's (1995) idea of discourses revealing something about socio-cultural practice, this approach also highlighted what appeared to be contradictions, either in terms of ideological position, or the way in which certain policies appeared to be delivered in practice.

Interviews were particularly helpful in providing an opportunity to probe the meaning of statements that were made in institutional documents. If Miller and Glassner's (2004) confidence about the validity of interview data is accepted, then interviews allow the researcher to 'drill down' and make an assessment about the extent to which statements contained in the documents are more than just rhetoric. Using this approach, it was possible to make an assessment about the level of 'fit' between the statements of commitment to widening participation that were made in the literature, and the values and practices of the institution as discursively represented by members of staff. As Bernstein (1990, p.22) suggests, 'Discourse...has a material base, albeit is less obvious and its relation to its materiality may be more opaque'. It was also possible to use interviews as a means of evaluating whether there was weak or strong framing around

the widening participation messages of the institution, and how this differed (if at all) in different contexts . This information was valuable when seeking to assess the coherence and/or contradictions that seemed to underpin institutional approaches to widening participation.

Within the higher education case studies, one interview was carried out in each of the six institutions with the member of staff who managed widening participation on a day-to-day basis. As already mentioned in section 4.2, further triangulation was achieved by interviewing members of staff from six local FE colleges who had experience of working with the case study HEIs. These interviews were carried out after the HE interviews.

The aim was to contrast this 'outsider' perspective with the official discourses from within the HEIs. The interviews with staff in the case FE colleges provided a platform (drawing on their experiences of partnership arrangements and student progression) for staff to provide an alternative discourse by explaining their perceptions of the widening participation practices of the case study HEIs.

Semi-structured interviews were selected on the basis of their flexibility. Each institution had a different approach to widening participation, and a rigid set of questions may not have allowed for these differences in approach to be made explicit. A schedule of 'set' questions was taken to each interview, but analysis of documentary evidence sometimes meant that there were additional questions that were unique to an institution. The interview schedule was not rigidly followed, although there were some 'core' questions that were asked on each occasion. This flexibility meant that interesting areas

could be probed in more depth and follow-up questions could be asked where appropriate. This was a major advantage of the semi-structured approach to conducting interviews.

Positivist researchers might argue that the reliability of the data is compromised by the decision not to ask exactly the same questions in each case institution. However, the case study approach is about collecting rich and detailed data that aims to provide a sense of what is happening in a particular 'real-life context' (Yin, 2003, p.13). This is dependent on the ability of the researcher to be attuned (and adaptable) to 'leads' which might provide insights into the research questions.

#### ***4.6.3 Observation via attendance at open days***

The purpose of attending open days for each of the case study institutions was to provide a means of triangulating the data that had been collected via interviews and documentary analysis. This work provided an alternative angle on the research questions; it sought to observe the self-presentation of the case study HEIs in a 'live' setting, with a particular focus on what was actually said to prospective students. This approach was important because in open day settings, the institution is addressing an audience that includes 'traditional' as well as 'non-traditional' students. Therefore, one of the aims of the open day observation work was to assess the extent to which the widening participation message was fore-grounded in such settings. It was a means of observing some of the public interface practices of the case study institutions. The

positioning of the student/institution relationship could be seen 'in action' on the day, and it was possible to record the precise discourses that framed the institution and its widening participation work.

Although this work cannot be described as 'ethnographic' by strict definition, the approach had some of the advantages of an ethnographic study: in this sense, it might be described as critical ethnography. For example, one of the key strengths of ethnography is the fact that it allows the gathering of data in naturally-occurring settings. As Hammersley (1998, p.8) suggests, 'this can only be achieved by first hand contact with it, not by inferences from what people do in artificial settings (such as experiments) or from what they say in interviews about what they do in *other* settings'. Another advantage of this type of research is that it allows the researcher to blend in, and to minimize his/her impact on the behaviour of the people being studied (Hammersley, 1998). What is observed in these settings, is therefore less tainted by 'interviewer effects' (Hammersley, 1998, p.8).

The open days were attended in the role of 'participant as observer'. Cohen *et al.* (2003, p.310) describe the participant observer as a researcher who becomes 'part of the social life of participants and documents and records what is happening for research purposes'. The aim in this case was not to observe the students attending the open day, but to join this group as a means of observing the messages that were given to prospective students by university staff.

An overly structured approach to data gathering on open days was rejected as too restrictive. Such methods, which might include event sampling and interval recording, would not have offered the same opportunity to record critical incidents, or to record interesting or unusual facets of the experience. However, it was necessary to adopt a loose set of criteria as part of the observation process and that would make comparison possible across the research sites. Therefore, a set of questions were devised in order to guide the observation and to restrict the data to manageable levels. These questions were as follows:

- What literature is received in advance of the open day?
- How strongly is the HEI encouraging attendance at the open day?
- How is the day structured?
- What presentations are on offer?
- What sort of tone is struck by the staff and is this consistent?
- Is information aimed solely at potential applicants?
- What assumptions are made about the student audience?
- Are *particular* messages highlighted by staff?
- What does this suggest about the ideology of the institution?
- Is a widening participation message strongly or weakly framed?

Where the formal presentations were concerned, the data was recorded 'transcript style', and where possible, words were recorded verbatim. At times, due to the speed of

delivery, certain messages or sentiments were recorded via key words and the detail filled in later from memory. Using a tape-recorder would undoubtedly have improved accuracy, but seeking permission to use a tape-recorder would have alerted the member of staff to the presence of a researcher in the audience. This would potentially have changed the style, tone and/or content of the presentation. It was therefore decided that written notes would be taken in order to preserve the ability of the researcher to 'blend in' (cf. Hammersley, 1998). Notes from the day were typed up on the same day, and any other observations added at this point. This was in keeping with Spradley (1979) and Kirk and Miller's (1986) suggestion that observers keep four sets of data, to include:

- 'Notes made 'in situ';
- Expanded notes that are made as soon as possible after the initial observations;
- Journal notes to record issues, ideas, difficulties etc. that arise during the field work;
- A developing, tentative, running record of ongoing analysis and interpretation' (cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2003, p.313).

The aim of the guiding questions, and the methods of recording and analysis, was to introduce an element of systematisation in order to increase the reliability of the data.

## **4.7 Limitations of the chosen methods**

This section outlines some of the limitations of the chosen approaches. This analysis is offered as a means of demonstrating that the chosen methods were used carefully and with a full awareness of their limitations.

### ***4.7.1. Observation via attendance at open days***

Observation provides a means of gathering a lot of information in a short space of time, and where participation is covert, the 'raw data' could be said to be untainted by interviewer effects. However, whilst attendance at open day events offered some interesting snapshots of particular discourses and ways of framing the ethos of the institution, the 'marketing' function of the open day potentially made it difficult to separate rhetoric from reality. Nevertheless, Prior (2003) suggests that there is a world view to be studied in every arrangement. It could therefore be argued that it was useful to observe at first hand the discourses drawn upon by the institutions in highlighting their 'specialities', and the positioning of students that was revealed via the assumptions that were made about the types of student in the audience.

### ***4.7.2 Interviews***

One of the many advantages of using the interview as a research tool is the opportunity that it offers to gather a lot of data in a short space of time. However, as already

mentioned in section 4.6.2, Prior (2003, p.91) makes the point that respondents in interviews are often influenced by the interviewer, and will make statements that they consider 'to fit the investigator's bill'. Silverman (2000) suggests that concerns about reliability can partly be addressed by systematic transcription of the data. Another argument is that by gathering rich, detailed data, low reliability can be balanced by high validity. For researchers carrying out a qualitative research study, the aim of the research may not be to find the definitive answer to a research question. It is more likely to be about exploring an issue in depth with a view to achieving a better understanding of the phenomenon that is being investigated. This is certainly true of case study research (Yin, 2003). As mentioned in Chapter 3 (section 3.5), Miller and Glassner (2004) suggest that it is helpful to think of interview accounts as cultural stories, rather than windows on the 'truth'. In this way, potential criticisms about reliability can be addressed by highlighting to the reader the status that will be attached to the data.

#### **4.7.3 Documentary analysis**

As with all research methods, there are also some limitations to be mindful of when using documentary analysis. Documents will often provide evidence of an *intention* to carry out an activity in a certain way. Therefore a close analysis of stated intentions might only provide partial information about practice. Having said this, it is important to remember that documents *are* practice in the sense that they convey messages between social actors (cf. Fairclough, 1995; Atkinson and Coffey, 2004). Documents

perform a social function and therefore represent a rich (and often under-used) source of data.

Another potential limitation of documentary analysis is that the meaning of a text is fluid and will change depending on the context in which it is read. Prior (2003), Atkinson (1990) and Hodder (2000) all point out that there is no 'true' meaning of a text outside of specific historical contexts. Hodder (2000) goes on to suggest that once words become text, the gap between the author and the reader widens because the possibility of multiple interpretations increases. It is therefore important for the researcher to adopt a clear analytical framework, and to highlight his or her perspective on the research topic in a way that will allow the reader to make a judgement about the validity of the interpretations that are being presented.

It could be argued that no research is without a degree of bias (Lynch, 1999). Choices are made throughout the research process – in the selection of the question, the objectives of the research, the selection of research tools, and in the analysis of the data. In this context, it seems important for the researcher to make clear his or her perspective on the research topic (as in Chapter 1, section 1.6) when writing up the findings. The reader can then make a judgement about the credibility or validity of the findings in light of this information.

## 4.8 Ethical implications

The British Educational Research Association's (BERA, 2004) Revised Ethical Guidelines make a number of suggestions to assist educational researchers in their work. Central to these guidelines is a belief that participants should be treated with respect, as well as protected from any harm that might arise from participation in the research. This section will detail the steps that were taken to ensure that this research project complied with the ethical guidelines.

Voluntary informed consent is considered to be a norm by which researchers will undertake research, and deception is to be avoided unless the research design specifically requires it (BERA, 2004). There was no reason to disguise the purpose of this research project, and therefore a letter was sent to key members of staff within the case study institutions to ask whether they would be willing to be interviewed (see appendix 4). The letter explained the purpose of the research, and the process by which I hoped to achieve answers to the research questions. The letter also explained how the research would be used. It made clear that participation was voluntary, and that efforts would be made to ensure that institutions and individual members of staff were not identifiable.

The Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2004, p.8) suggest that 'Researchers must recognize concerns relating to the "bureaucratic burden" of much research, and must seek to minimize the impact of their research upon the normal working and workloads of

participants'. In recognition of this, potential participants were not pressured to participate if they cited workload as a reason for non-participation. I also made efforts to ensure that the interviews I did carry out lasted no longer than one hour. I only continued beyond the hour if the participant explicitly stated that he/she was happy to do this.

The Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2004) state that participants should be free to withdraw from the research at any time, and for any or no reason. I informed the participants of this before beginning the first interview. I also informed the participants of their right to refuse to answer if they felt unhappy about responding to a particular question.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed. In keeping with BERA's Ethical Guidelines (2004), participants were offered the chance to check the transcript and to request changes to factual errors and any points that they felt had been misrepresented. When writing up the research, the case study HEIs were given pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity. Interviewees were reassured that these pseudonyms would be used throughout the thesis, and in any subsequent publications, conference presentations or discussions which made reference to the data.

#### **4.9 Ethical dilemmas**

One of the ethical dilemmas in research relates to the sometimes covert nature of observation work. Covert research, which takes place without the subjects knowing that

they are being observed, seems to reject the idea of informed consent. However, it is sometimes judged appropriate where it is the only way to access particular data. The British Psychological Society's 'Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human Participants' suggest that it is also deemed acceptable in cases where 'the observed could expect to be observed by strangers' (Tilstone, 1998, p.123). In the context of this study, covert participation as an observer at university open days was judged to fall into the latter category. Open days are events that are open to the public, and therefore the information that is given cannot be said to be of a sensitive or private nature. Nevertheless, attending in a covert capacity was not a wholly comfortable experience because it involved an element of pretence in taking on the role of a prospective student.

Five of the six HEI open days were attended as a participant observer. I booked a place on the open days in the same way as a prospective student, thus ensuring that I received all the documentation and marketing materials that a student would be sent. However, at two of the sessions in two different institutions, I decided to reveal my status as a researcher. In one case, this was because I attended a session that was led by a member of staff whom I had recently interviewed. In the other case, the member of staff leading a small session was encouraging participation from the audience. I decided to reveal the fact that I was not a prospective student rather than answer her questions about A Level subject choice and expectations around degree-level study. At another institution, I had to make my position clear before the day. This was because places for the open day event were limited and I did not want to take the place of a prospective

student. I therefore contacted the organiser, prior to the event, and asked whether I could attend as an observer. It could be suggested that these instances might affect the comparability of any findings, since in some cases staff knew that there was a research student in the audience. However, it was felt that to do otherwise would have been ethically wrong, because it would have involved lying or taking the place of a student at an over-subscribed event.

Some of the ethical dilemmas inherent in the role of participant observer could be anticipated in advance, and decisions made prior to attending the open day events. In other cases, quick decisions needed to be taken 'in situ'. In one institution, I arrived to attend a talk that had no other attendees. Rather than expect the member of staff to spend an hour of his time talking solely to me, I judged that it was better not to go into the room. An important data gathering opportunity may have been lost, but ethically, this seemed a better outcome than misleading the member of staff and taking his time under false pretences. In the open day settings, it was necessary to constantly weigh up the potential benefit of having the data against 'doing the right thing'.

#### **4.10 Analysing the findings**

The analysis of the data was guided by the theoretical framework provided by Bernstein's (1990) notions of classification and framing. Decisions needed to be taken about exactly how and what to select from the large amounts of data that were collected. Reference to the theoretical framework (alongside the original research questions)

provided a focus. This avoided the temptation to simply select data that appeared unusual or particularly interesting.

Drawing on elements of Fairclough's (1993, 1995) CDA, a close reading of the documentary data, as well as open day and interview discourses, focused on the self-presentation and positioning (both of the institution and students) of the case study HEIs. This was carried out with a view to revealing something about ideological approaches to widening participation in the different HEIs. Therefore, using Bernstein's (1990) classification and framing, discursive practice was analysed, first for a sense of where widening participation was positioned within a wider institutional mission (how is widening participation 'framed' and contextualised by the institution?), and second, in terms of the classificatory principle (how does the institution differentiate itself from other HEIs? What is its 'speciality'?). An analysis of discursive practices in specific widening participation documents, (drawing on Fairclough's (1993) three-dimensional model), provided the opportunity to reveal contradictions within and between both documents and wider institutional discourses.

The interview data, once transcribed, were coded using NVIVO, a data analysis software programme. This involved reading through each transcript to identify answers to my research questions before creating a series of codes and code families. Initially, this involved picking out points made by different interviewees in relation to their particular institutional approaches to widening participation. This meant that, drawing on Fairclough's (1995) CDA, attention was paid to instances where interviewees revealed,

(through language, tone and particular assumptive frameworks) examples of a specific approach to widening participation that seemed to be guided by a particular institutional ideology. After identifying these key themes, Bernstein's (1990) notions of classification and framing provided the focus for creating specific codes. For example, three of the case study universities drew heavily on business-oriented language in answering the research questions. Within this theme, there appeared to be different motivations for adherence to the 'business' model. These instances were therefore coded in different ways to reflect the different 'frames' that were being drawn upon. Once each transcript was coded, the codes and code families were printed, so that commonalities and differences in institutional approaches could clearly be seen.

A similar process was undertaken with the notes collected via attendance at open days. The existing interview themes and codes were used as a starting point; setting some parameters around the scope of the data collection. However, some codes were added where new themes or frames emerged from the new data set. Observations from open days were also plotted onto a table so that answers to the open day research questions could be compared for each institution.

There is a risk that coding leads to an overly rigid or systematic approach to the data. In order to avoid this, Strauss's (1987, p.35) dictum was drawn upon. He suggests that when analysing field data, the motto 'What's the main story here?' should be used as a guide. The data was also analysed via a process of informal discussion and reflection with practitioners (including academic staff working in HEIs as well as administrative

staff working within widening participation and student support departments). This was a vital part of the analysis phase, because other people can highlight angles that may not appear obvious to those who have been immersed in the data. Indeed, some new angles on the data were revealed as a result of a 'post-data collection' meeting with one of the widening participation managers who had been interviewed as part of the research. When reflecting back my observations from open days and analysis of prospectus documents, the member of staff offered some perspectives from the point of view of a practitioner. This led to greater critical reflection around some of the data and was therefore an important step in the analysis phase of the research.

#### **4.11 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the methods that were chosen in pursuit of answers to the research questions. The aim has been to justify some of the research decisions that were taken and to allow the reader to make a judgement about the extent to which the chosen methods were 'fit for purpose'.

The next chapter marks the beginning of the literature review chapters. It presents a detailed analysis of the key government documents in the area of widening participation and higher education between 1997 and 2003. The discourses within the documents are analysed with a view to presenting some common themes across the policy documents. The aim is to provide the reader with a critical outline of the New Labour

government's agenda in terms of widening participation. This will provide a background and context for later chapters that focus on the institutional response to this agenda.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF NATIONAL POLICY DOCUMENTS

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a critical analysis of key higher education policy documents that were published between 1997 and 2003. The chapter focuses on the period between the Dearing Report of 1997 (NCIHE, 1997) and *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a) and *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b). These documents reflect the development of New Labour's widening participation policies after the party's election in 1997. Some, *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b) for example, focus explicitly on widening participation. Others, such as the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997), are broader in scope but make reference to the issue of widening access to higher education. The chapter traces the development of New Labour's policies around widening participation, as a means of helping the reader to understand the ideological basis of the Labour government's thinking on issues of access and inclusion in higher education. As a context-setting chapter, it does not provide an exhaustive analysis of every higher education policy document produced under New Labour. Instead, the chapter focuses in detail on some of the key documents that were produced during New Labour's first two terms of office. The analysis provides the reader with a sense of the common themes recurring across the

documents, as well as an awareness of the ideology and discourses in which they are embedded. The chapter provides a background for the framing decisions that were being made by the case study institutions at an institutional level in the academic year 2006/07.

The first section of this chapter analyses the Dearing (NCIHE, 1997), Kennedy (1997) and Fryer (1997) Reports. The second section considers the government's response in *The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain* (DfEE, 1998) and *Learning to Succeed – a new framework for post-16 learning* (DfEE, 1999). The third section covers *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a) and *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b). The purpose of each report is outlined before moving to an analysis of the text.

## **5.2 The Dearing, Kennedy and Fryer Reports**

This section considers the recommendations of the three committees that were set up by the government between 1994 and 1997 to consider the future of higher, further, and continuing education. The similarities and differences between the three reports are analysed, drawing on critiques by other researchers. The themes and language of the documents are considered in detail, as a means of tracing the development of ideas in the field of widening participation and lifelong learning.

### **5.2.1 Background and terms of reference**

The Dearing Committee was set up with cross party support in 1996. As already mentioned in Chapter 2, section 2.3, the Committee was asked to 'make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the UK over the next 20 years.' (NCIHE, 1997, p.3). The Committee was convened under a Conservative government, but submitted its findings (in 1997) to the newly elected Labour government. This was an inquiry that was given a wide remit; the final report was entitled *Higher Education in the Learning Society*.

The Kennedy Committee (Kennedy, 1997) had a more specific remit and was asked to consider widening participation in further education. It was set up in 1994, and reported, like the Dearing Committee, to a newly elected Labour Government in June 1997. The Kennedy Committee (Kennedy, 1997, p.111) was asked to identify:

- a) 'those who do not now participate in further education;
- b) those for whom the quality of participation indicated by completion and achievement rates is less than the norm for the sector;
- c) how participation may be increased and the quality of participation improved.
- d) the contribution that participating in post-compulsory education might make to social inclusion'.

The National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning – chaired by Fryer – was commissioned by the government in June 1997. Its task was to produce a report to advise on lifelong learning issues in the preparation of a White Paper. In broad terms, while Dearing considered higher education, and Kennedy considered further education, the Fryer Committee (1997) was given the remit of continuing education.

The three reports cover many overlapping issues and there are a number of similarities between them which will be explored in detail in the following sections.

### ***5.2.2 Common ground in the Dearing, Kennedy and Fryer Reports***

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, the Dearing, Kennedy and Fryer Reports all draw upon neo-liberal discourses and ideological perspectives. There is an acceptance of the social dominance of the market and, whilst there is recognition of the need to draw diverse and under-represented groups into post-compulsory education, there is no questioning of the existing, market-based system. The three committees adhere to a discourse that accepts that widening participation in post-compulsory education (or lifelong learning) is integral to the UK's global economic position. This is evidenced in the discourse of competition that runs through all three reports. Dearing (NCIHE, 1997, p.8) refers to the need for higher education in the UK to undertake research 'that matches the best in the world' and suggests that the country will 'need to invest more in education and training

to meet the international challenge' (NCIHE, 1997, p.12). Kennedy (1997, p.19) claims that learning is necessary in order to face 'the immense challenges of the global economy' and referred to the need for the UK to maintain its 'competitive position'. Fryer (1997, p.3) suggests that a new learning culture is 'essential to help the country and all of its people meet the challenges they now face, as they move towards the twenty-first century'. 'Challenge' is a word used by all three committees and is one of many instances where the reports appear to draw upon very similar language and ideology.

All three reports promote the view that learning is a necessary precondition of economic growth and social cohesion. However, Tight (1998, pp.477-78) has criticised this perspective, suggesting that the documents all state the critical importance of lifelong learning for the economy, but without citing any evidence:

'this acceptance is grounded in fairly simplistic assertions about the need to increase economic competitiveness by producing more knowledgeable, skilful and hence more productive workers; and about the desirability of using learning to create more fulfilled, aware and socially cohesive citizens'.

Furthermore, despite many references to 'lifelong learning' (Fryer, 1997), the 'learning society' (NCIHE, 1997) and the 'learning culture' (Fryer, 1997), little attempt is made to define these terms. Field (2000, p.252) has suggested that 'lifelong learning is an amorphous policy goal' whilst Gustavsson (cited in Field, 2000, p.253) has claimed that the term is 'empty of content'. The Fryer Committee (1997) indicated in the report that 'cultural change' would be necessary in order to foster an acceptance of lifelong learning. It could be suggested that this 'cultural change' is similarly difficult to define.

Indeed, Field (2000, p.256) has labelled the project 'a rather fuzzy political objective'. Such criticisms imply weak framing of lifelong learning: the term is open to varied interpretation at both national and local level. The recommendations of the reports therefore appear to have been designed to work within the existing system, rather than to address some of the structural barriers that might hamper a culture of lifelong learning.

An example of this is the way in which the reports' vision of lifelong learning appears to be driven by an economic motive. Tight (1998) has suggested that a broad view of lifelong learning was being replaced with a narrow focus on vocational education and training. Dearing, Kennedy and Fryer all acknowledge, and often fore-ground, the social and cultural benefits of learning. Kennedy (1997, p.23) even suggests that there had previously been too much focus on 'economic goals at the expense of learning for life'. However, references to the social and cultural benefits of learning never appear without an accompanying reference to the economic benefits, and when listed, the economic benefits are nearly always listed first. Furthermore, when the policies are detailed, it is clear that the emphasis is on 'formal education and training, the needs of employers, and achieving meaningful qualifications' (Tight, 1998, p.483). The social and cultural benefits of learning are paid lip service but not necessarily recognised in the detailed policy recommendations. Within this, there is no room for any challenge to market conditions, or to the central role of the economy in education. Neither is there any acknowledgement of potential tensions between social justice and economic rationales. There is, however, strong framing around the specific idea of education as directly linked

to economic benefits. Although not referring to this particular point, Bernstein (1990, p.41) can be drawn upon to explain how such a discourse gains currency:

‘the distribution of power and the principle of control translate into classificatory and framing principles regulating the structure (organization), interactions and communicative contexts of agencies for the production and reproduction of discursive and physical resources. The subject acquires classification and framing principles, which create for the subject, and legitimize, the speciality of his or her voice and message’.

The effectiveness of this discursive strategy of control and legitimization (by successive governments) can be seen in the extent to which Dearing, Kennedy and Fryer adhere to the existing neo-liberal agenda in their reports and resulting recommendations.

According to Tight (1998), the potential problem with this framing is that those individuals who have had bad experiences of formal education and training will not re-engage if they are simply being offered more of the same. As a result, he suggests that the policies might fail to engage the very people that the government wished to encourage. Tight (1998, p.483) has also voiced concerns about the ‘compulsory’ nature of the lifelong learning agenda. For example, Kennedy (1997, p.15) uses directive language to suggest that:

‘All those who are not fulfilling their potential or who have underachieved in the past *must* be drawn into successful learning’ (italics added).

Fryer (1997, p.4) similarly indicates that individuals would need to ‘modify their approach and behaviour’. Dearing (NCIHE, 1997, p.12) claims that ‘individuals *will* increasingly *need* to develop new capabilities and to manage their own development and learning

throughout life' (*italics added*). This directive language is in evidence throughout all three reports. 'Must' and 'will' gives the impression of little choice, and that those who 'choose' not to engage in learning will find themselves excluded and marginalised. As already discussed in Chapter 2 (section 2.4), Williams (2008, p.158) suggests that such a discursive strategy serves to 'move the focus away from structural economic concerns'. By framing the 'problem' in this way, income inequalities at the macro or state level are glossed over and replaced by qualification inequalities that are the responsibility of individuals.

Indeed, despite at times referring to the partnership that would be needed between government, individuals, employers and learning providers, the language of the three reports suggests that the onus will be on individuals to re-engage in learning. Geddes (cited in Field, 2000, p.255) has argued that 'the discourse of partnership frequently cloaks a profound inequality between the so-called partners', so that the needs of government and business become prioritised over the needs of the other 'partners'. At the time, the language of the documents led to criticism from Coffield (1999) and Tight (1998) about the way in which individuals were being expected not only to pay for their learning, but also to remain committed to it 'for the sake of their employers' (cited in Ecclestone, 1999, p.333). In developing this point, Coffield (cited in Ecclestone, 1999, p.336) suggested that this was a means of privatising problems such as unemployment and continuous training, whilst leaving intact the employer's right to cast employees aside 'when the economic going gets tough'.

All three documents charge individuals with taking greater responsibility for their own inclusion, with the promise of economic, social and cultural benefits as a reward for participation in learning. This led Tight (1998, p.484) to surmise that 'the prospectus on offer is more or less as follows'.

'Lifelong learning for all is the new imperative. Its curriculum is primarily vocational in content and intent. It is our fault if we have not participated to date. We risk social and economic exclusion if we do not participate in the future. We must pay directly for our participation'.

This represents a highly critical view of the lifelong learning agenda and the Labour government's policies in this area. Ten years on, this criticism remains. As Williams (2008, p.158) has pointed out: 'low skills [had] come to replace low income (or poverty) as the key marker of social exclusion'. This might indicate a change in the way that exclusion was framed by the Labour government, but not necessarily a change in ideological approach. By drawing on government framing of exclusion in their own reports (charging individuals to take responsibility for their own inclusion, for example), it could be suggested that Dearing, Kennedy and Fryer shared both the Conservative and Labour government's broad acceptance of the neo-liberal agenda.

### **5.2.3 Recommendations arising from the reports**

Despite this, Dearing, Kennedy and Fryer all argued for changes in policy within the existing system. They suggested, for example, that more funding would be needed in order to achieve the vision set out in their reports. Kennedy (1997) was particularly keen

to stress that student support must be reformed if under-represented groups were to be drawn back into learning. She suggested a progressive system of funding that moved away from a unit price per student and towards a system that would provide tax credits and additional funding for those on benefits. She also argued for an increase in access funds and a needs-based childcare fund. Fryer drew on Kennedy's suggestions when making his own recommendations. He too called for a 'Learning Regeneration Fund' and use of lottery money to fund lifelong learning initiatives. He also called for a fairer system of funding for part-time students:

'the Government should move towards equalising public investment for the same "episode of learning" irrespective of sector, mode or level of learning. As an initial step, and once the new scheme for full-time students in higher education has been implemented, plans should be made for loans for learners to be available on a means-tested basis to part-time learners. Steps should also be taken to end the age discrimination which denies access to loans to people over 50 years of age.' (Fryer, 1997, p.10).

Dearing (NCIHE, 1997) echoed this by expressing concern about the cuts in funding for higher education students. He recommended larger access funds, better support for part-time students, and the return of grants. He also suggested that additional funding be directed towards HEIs with a good record of widening participation.

The three reports also argued for a credit accumulation and transfer framework that would make it easier for students to gain credit for their work and to transfer their learning between and within sectors. This was designed to facilitate access, and to reduce the complexity of qualifications and progression routes. Dearing, Kennedy and

Fryer called for a user-led system which was designed around the needs of the learner, rather than the needs of the learning institutions: 'The focus should be on the needs of the learners themselves, systematically making it easier for them to take up and continue lifelong learning, rather than on the requirements of institutions and organisations' (Fryer, 1997, p.6). The reports also called for a breaking down of the divide between academic and vocational qualifications so that both types of qualification would enjoy 'parity of esteem' (Fryer, 1997, p.82). In this sense, they were advocating moves towards the transformative approach described by Jones and Thomas (2005). However, it could be argued that the detailed recommendations did not lend themselves to achieving this. Dearing (NCIHE, 1997, p.14), in suggesting that most of the expansion of higher education should be at 'sub-degree' level, was arguably reinforcing the two-tier system whereby students from lower socio-economic groups would be the main beneficiaries of these vocational and lower-status degrees (see Jones and Thomas, 2005).

Kennedy (1997) perhaps appeared to go further than Dearing or Fryer in challenging existing education systems. She criticised the lack of targets for monitoring the lifetime education of unemployed and economically inactive people. The national targets applied only to those in the workforce. She felt that the definition of 'learner' was too limited and that the focus on learning opportunities was too narrow. Kennedy (1997, p.23), appearing to move beyond the meritocratic approach adopted by New Labour, talked about providing learners with the opportunity to 'succeed' in education, not just the opportunity to participate. This outcome-oriented approach suggests recognition of the

fact that merely providing opportunities would have limited success in widening participation for under-represented groups. It perhaps represented a rejection of the government's framing of social exclusion.

Despite this, Tight (1998, p.478) has suggested that, 'there is...much more shared between the three reports (particularly Kennedy and Fryer) at the strategic level than separates them'. Tight (1998, p.479) felt that with the Kennedy and Fryer reports, each 'may have been derived directly from the other'. Given this shared perspective, it is interesting to consider the Labour government's response to the recommendations made by Dearing, Kennedy and Fryer. The consultation paper, *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998), and the resulting white paper, *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999), will therefore form the focus of the following section.

### **5.3 *The Learning Age and Learning to Succeed***

*The Learning Age* is a Green Paper that was published by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) in 1998. It formed the incoming Labour administration's initial response to the Dearing, Kennedy and Fryer reports. The stated aim of the Green Paper was to:

'...set out for consultation how learning throughout life will build human capital by encouraging the acquisition of knowledge and skills and emphasising creativity and imagination' (DfEE, 1998, p.7).

*Learning to Succeed* was the White Paper that followed this consultation process in 1999. It proposed 'a new framework for post-16 learning' which included a focus on driving up 'the quality of what is on offer' as well as raising participation (DfEE, 1999, p.4). The learner was to be placed at the heart of the new system but there would be a partnership between 'individuals, businesses and communities as well as institutions' (DfEE, 1999, p.4).

Neo-liberal conceptions of 'human capital' have been woven through New Labour's lifelong learning policies since 1997. Williams (2008, p.155) suggests that 'education is...presented as a form of investment in one's personal stocks of human capital'. Implicit in this terminology is the suggestion that humans are sources of value and they undertake education for utilitarian reasons. Learning for learning's sake becomes submerged by this more powerful discourse, as can be evidenced by Charles Clarke (then Secretary of State for Education) reportedly saying in 2003 that 'education for education's sake is a bit dodgy' (cited by Ingrams, 2003). However, some commentators (Avis, 2007; Williams, 2008) would argue that strong framing of the idea of 'human capital' cannot simultaneously sit comfortably with strong framing of the social justice agenda. This is because potential learners have different amounts of 'human capital' to invest. This leads to a situation in which certain people can invest more and reap greater rewards – thus perpetuating existing inequalities.

In these early New Labour government documents, strong framing of the 'human capital' discourse tends to be accompanied by weak framing of the concept of lifelong learning.

As Edwards and Nicoll (2001) point out, lifelong learning is never clearly defined. Instead, the *rationale* for lifelong learning is rhetorically presented through constant repetition. There is 'no sense of the agency that engenders particular forms of change with the implied possibility of alternatives' (Edwards and Nicoll, 2001, p.109). In other words, the Labour government did not articulate alternative positions and it avoided positioning lifelong learning as something that could be manipulated by government. Thus, *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998) suggests that 'learning is essential to a strong economy and an inclusive society' (DfEE, 1998, p.11) and that 'we have no choice but to prepare for this new age' (DfEE, 1998, p.7). Edwards and Nicoll (2001, p.107) describe this rhetorical device as 'exigence', which can be defined as a problem that demands a response. The 'problem' (as identified by the government) seems to be a lack of economic competitiveness in the face of global competition. It is interesting to note that whilst the concept of 'lifelong learning' is weakly defined, the *consequences* of exclusion from learning are strongly set out in terms of the economic impact. In other words, the focus is on the solution to the perceived problem, rather than an analysis of the problem itself.

Edwards and Nicoll (2001, p.108) suggest that the ethos and logos of *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998) is built up 'through its use of the definite article and the imperative'. This helps to make the exigence persuasive (Edwards and Nicoll, 2001). In *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998, p.7), the reader is told that 'To continue to compete, we *must* equip ourselves to cope with the enormous economic and social change we face'. The document goes on to suggest that 'we *will* succeed' (italics added). According to

Edwards & Nicoll (2001, p.109), the use of 'we' and 'our' are used in both *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998) and *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999) as a means of positioning the vision as shared. This language seems designed to suggest that all agree with the vision, and that there are no dissenting voices or alternative points of view. Drawing on Bernstein's (1990, p.260) ideas of 'voice' (setting limits on what can be legitimately communicated), it could be argued that through the discourse of the document, New Labour were presenting their 'vision' as the only legitimate one; therefore suppressing alternative discourses. As Edwards and Nicoll (2001, p.110) point out, 'there is almost a sense of the revivalist meeting in the two policy papers'.

Tight (1998, p.256), however, has suggested that the inclusive rhetoric is misleading. Whilst the language could be said to be 'enabling and inclusive', the actual detail of the policies emphasise forms of learning that represent a retention of the status quo. As already mentioned in section 5.2.2, the focus is on formal and accredited learning that will be vocationally relevant but which must be paid for by the individual. Tight (1998) has suggested that there is therefore a sense of coercion in both *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998) and *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999) which operates within both the language and the detail of the documents.

Indeed, the motivation and the main thrust of these documents appears to be economic rather than social. Despite suggesting that learning 'helps makes ours a civilized society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship' (DfEE, 1998, p.7), there is much evidence to suggest that this was of minor importance

compared to the economic benefits that were alleged to arise from a more educated workforce. Evidence of this can be seen in the policy decision that student loans would not be available to the over 50 age group, unless they were re-entering education following redundancy and with a view to re-entering the workforce (DfEE, 1998). If, as the DfEE (1998, p.7) suggested, learning ‘helps make ours a civilized society’, then there is something suspicious about a decision that only offers lifelong learning to those who are young and able to work. It suggests that the government was only interested in the ‘civilizing’ effect of education where there was also some evidence of benefit to economic competitiveness.

Further evidence of the overt influence of the economic motive could be seen in the new relationship that was proposed between employers and education. In *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999, p.6), the government set out plans to give employers ‘a substantial stake in shaping post-16 education and training’. Under these new proposals, employers were to be given ‘unprecedented influence over the education system and promote a better match between demand and supply for skills’ (DfEE, 1999, p.10). The overt focus on employability in the Leitch Report (2006) further promoted the link between higher education and the interests of business. This would seem to imply little place for courses that students undertook ‘for learning’s sake’. Instead, global competitiveness had become the motivating factor in promoting lifelong learning, with learning institutions and ‘human capital’ being harnessed to these ends. Indeed, the DfEE (in *Learning to Succeed*, 1999) referred to ‘investment in human capital’ and people as an ‘important asset’ in organisations. This language implies that learners

were being seen as 'capital' and 'assets': they had become commodified in the drive towards greater economic competitiveness. There is little evidence of 'spirituality' or 'citizenship' in this vision of lifelong learning. Williams (2008) suggests that this commodification of skills and education is evident in a range of government documents.

Despite the economic motive in the new culture of lifelong learning, one of the government's aims was to 'place the learner at the heart of the new system' (DfEE, 1999, p.4). However, as Jones and Thomas (2005) point out, it is difficult to see how a system can simultaneously place the learner at the heart of the system and also privilege the needs of employers and the wider economy. This assumes that there is a match between the needs of the learner and the employers. Would the student remain at the heart of the system if he/she decided to pursue a course purely for learning's sake? If employers were to shape post-16 learning, could it be assumed that courses without a clear vocational benefit would cease to be provided? In this case, there might be a mismatch between the needs of the learner and the employer. It might be more accurate to suggest that the learner would be placed at the heart of the system, *but only insofar as*, the student was prepared to take one of a number of courses set up by employers to improve national competitiveness, or, more cynically, to improve the employers' own market position.

*The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998) and *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999) both refer to a partnership between state and individual 'stakeholders'. The partnership could be seen to be one-sided to the extent that it would be employers that were setting the

educational agenda, and the funding would follow young people who had the potential to be economically active. It might also be seen to be one-sided in the extent to which individuals were expected to pay for their participation in education and training, as Tight (1998) has argued. The idea of a partnership between the state and the individual was a key part of New Labour education policy but, like a number of its other social policies, it potentially masked an agenda that was primarily economically, rather than socially, motivated.

In summary, the economic motive was a recurring theme in the New Labour government's higher education policies. This can be traced from *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998) of 1998 right through to *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a) that was published in 2003. *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a) forms the focus of the following section.

#### **5.4 *The Future of Higher Education* and its implications**

*The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a) was published in 2003. It proposed some changes to higher education in the areas of widening access, student support, university funding, and links with business. The three stated aims of the proposed reforms were:

- the expansion of higher education to include 'the talented and best from all backgrounds';

- to make better progress in ‘harnessing knowledge to wealth creation’, which includes giving universities the resources to turn ideas into successful businesses so that they can compete on a ‘world stage’;
- To reform the system of student support so that students pay a greater proportion of the cost of their degrees, but with greater financial assistance to students from ‘the poorest backgrounds’. (DfES, 2003a, pp.2-3)

These themes are evident throughout *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a). However, the proposed reforms attracted criticism from a number of different quarters. Some commentators (Callender, 2003; Callender and Jackson, 2005) could not see how a system of increased contributions from students could help to broaden access to higher education, when there is evidence to suggest that students from working class backgrounds are averse to debt. Others (Jones and Thomas, 2005) criticised the way in which certain assumptions were made about the motivations of students from under-represented groups. It is these assumptions and ‘false antitheses’ (Levitas cited in Fairclough, 2000, p.84) that will be discussed in the following sections.

The opening statement of *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a, p.2) acknowledges that universities are ‘a great success story’, and suggests that ‘at the same time’ a university place ‘has been extended to hundreds of thousands more students each year’. It is interesting to note that the words ‘at the same time’ imply that universities have been ‘a great success story’ in spite of, rather than because of,

widening participation. Throughout the White Paper (DfES, 2003a), widening participation is referred to as central to and compatible with the higher education reforms that were being proposed. However, there is evidence that this positioning might be rhetorical rather than real. As Jones and Thomas (2005) have pointed out, wider access in the context of the White Paper means wider access to two year, work-focused foundation degrees. The paper acknowledges that such programmes attract lower returns in the labour market, and that they are regarded with 'suspicion' (DfES, 2003a, p.61). These courses are targeted at under-represented groups and will be incentivised by the government so that students are hooked in through financial assistance that is not available on three year honours degrees. Jones and Thomas (2005) have argued that it is difficult to see how this will lead to anything other than a two-tier system in which privileged groups retain their monopoly on honours degrees in elite universities, whilst students from lower socio-economic groups are coaxed into vocational courses that perpetuate existing inequalities. This two-tier system will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, section 6.4.

*The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a) makes a great many references to the suggestion that an increased number of graduates will benefit the economy. Higher education is seen as providing 'the labour force with appropriate and relevant skills' which are central to the country's global competitiveness (DfES, 2003a, p.10) However, the 50% target would not apply to people over thirty years old, implying a purely economic motive in wishing to increase appropriate and relevant skills. The vision for mature learners was that they would develop their skills from their existing place in the

workforce. They would be encouraged into higher education only for the purpose of continued professional development that could be directly applied in their existing or future jobs.

Once again, the economic theme appears to be central to *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a, p.60), and where there is perceived to be both an economic and social benefit to participation, the economic benefit is mentioned first:

‘Our overriding priority is to ensure that as we expand Higher Education places, we ensure that the expansion is of an appropriate quality and type to meet the demands of employers and the needs of the economy and students.’

There is more than one reference to the needs of the economy and the student, with the implication that these needs are the same. However, no evidence is provided to indicate that such needs are the same. An assumption is made that students enrol on higher education courses simply to increase their future ‘value’ in the labour market. Throughout the White Paper (DfES 2003a, p.4), there are references to the individual benefits of higher education, but these are always financial: ‘on average, graduates get better jobs and earn more than those without Higher Education’. Where personal fulfilment is mentioned (and these instances are rare), it is tagged onto the end of a list of economic benefits.

The reluctance to extend the 50% target beyond thirty year-olds, the way in which the two year degrees were to be targeted at certain groups, and the use of the word

'harnessing' in relation to knowledge and wealth creation, all imply that in 2003 the aim to mobilise the 'skills and talents of our people' (DfES, 2003a, p.2) was driven by the needs of the economy. The White Paper stops short of referring to students as 'hands', but it leaves the impression that graduates of the future are the knowledge economy's equivalent of factory fodder.

The White Paper appears to be built upon the premise that there is a positive correlation between the number of students receiving a higher education and economic growth. This link is by no means proven, and as already mentioned in Chapter 2 (section 2.3), a number of commentators (Ainley, 1994; Wolf, 2002) question that there is a link at all. Nevertheless, the White Paper of 2003 confidently asserted that there was such a link: 'National economic imperatives support our target to increase participation in higher education towards 50 per cent.' (DfES, 2003a, p.57). However, the 'credit crunch' of 2009, when set alongside a participation rate that has hovered around a high of 40% for the last 10 years (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008a), lends weight to the argument that there is no direct link between the number of students receiving a higher education and economic growth.

There is some evidence to suggest that the government was aware of the controversial nature of these assertions. One statement in *The Future of Higher Education* (2003a, p.58) suggests:

‘A comprehensive review of the academic literature suggests that there is compelling evidence that education increases productivity, and moreover that higher education is the most important phase of education for economic growth in developed countries, with increases in Higher Education found to be positively and significantly related to per capita income growth’.

The words ‘comprehensive’, ‘compelling evidence’, ‘most important’, ‘positively and significantly’ all contribute to the impression that this statement is not open to question. However, a footnote says: ‘It should be noted... that there are both data limitations and methodological problems in isolating the contribution of any particular factor empirically’ (DfES, 2003a, p.58). This supports the points made by Wolf (2002), who suggests that it is not possible to prove that education increases productivity.

*The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a) makes a number of linkages between ideas and concepts that are not obviously compatible. The logic of certain assumptions and linkages is never made explicit, so that the reader is often left trying to work out why it should be the case that broadening access to higher education will necessarily lead to greater productivity. In the White Paper, the language of ‘wealth creation’ and ‘competition’ sits alongside ‘social harmony’ and ‘fairness’. This is without any apparent sense of the irony of suggesting that the market forces that lead to wealth creation are fair. Reconciling elements of the left and right that might previously have been seen as irreconcilable, could be seen as central to New Labour’s ‘third way’ (Fairclough, 2000). According to Fairclough (2000, p.44), however, this was achieved via fundamental revisions of social democratic discourses, so that words like ‘fairness’ and ‘equality’ were redefined in traditional and conservative terms. It is fairness within the confines of the

market, and equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome. In breaking down the insulations between these categories, the New Labour government provided an example of weak classification (Bernstein, 2000). The ideologies of the left and right were merged, as were the previously distinct categories of market forces and fairness.

The issue of 'equality of opportunity' appeared to be key to *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b), which the government published in 2003. Opportunity is mentioned many times within the document and in the context of widening participation, but this is framed within a meritocratic discourse, and it is made clear that widening participation is not about fundamentally changing the structure of higher education. This will be discussed in more detail in the following section, which provides a critical analysis of the discourses of widening participation that are drawn upon in *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b).

### **5.5 The focus on widening participation: *Widening Participation in Higher Education***

*Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b) was published in 2003, and describes the actions that the Labour government planned to undertake to help widen participation in higher education. These actions were outlined under four headings: attainment, aspiration, application and admissions. The document also set out plans for establishing an Office for Fair Access. The purpose of the document arose from the introduction of variable fees from September 2006: 'As universities gain the freedom

from September 2006 to vary the level of tuition fee, the Government is determined to ensure that access to higher education is broadened not narrowed.’ (DfES, 2003b, p.2).

The four headings are interesting, because they send a clear message that at that time, the government was principally interested in the pre-entry and admissions stage of the student life-cycle. However, as pointed out in the document, there was no wish to *dictate* university admissions policies: ‘The Government is clear that admissions policies are the responsibility of the universities – not of the Government’ (DfES, 2003b, p.15). Therefore, whilst *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b) contains a great many references to good practice, the government clearly had no plans to oversee the extent to which universities were actually operating fair admissions processes. In practice, this was likely to result in vastly different admissions processes across the sector. Oversubscribed ‘selecting’ universities were unlikely to change their admissions practices to reflect, for example, the findings of the Universities UK Report *Fair Enough* (2003). This report, cited in *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b, p.16), indicated that a range of factors should be taken into account when making decisions about student admissions: ‘In addition to prior attainment, it [the document *Fair Enough*] suggested considering the extent to which applicants were self-organised, worked well independently, were motivated to learn and interested in the subject area’. Many selecting universities are able to fill places with relative ease and therefore have no incentive to introduce an additional layer into the selection process. As a result, it is unlikely that they would introduce these measures without being induced to do so. In addition, these qualities are difficult to test in practice because most universities do not

interview applicants. It is therefore difficult to see how any institution could introduce these principles into its admissions systems without a major commitment of time and money. Furthermore, it could be suggested that as long as the government was merely offering ideas and good practice, universities were unlikely to feel any obligation to adopt new practices.

An unwillingness to radically alter the structures and systems that already existed in HE, could similarly be seen in the Labour government's focus on 'out-reach' as a means of widening participation. *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b, p.2) suggested that 'some universities need to do more to reach out to students and schools to encourage a broader range of applicants'. This is mentioned a number of times in the document, but at no point is it suggested that widening participation is about much more than simply 'out-reach'. To suggest that reaching out to schools and students is the answer to the under-representation of certain groups in HE, shows a misunderstanding of why some groups of students steer clear of particular types of university. As already mentioned in Chapter 1 (section 1.7), work undertaken by Bowl (2003) provides evidence that some students from under-represented groups deliberately chose to go to less prestigious institutions because they wanted to feel comfortable in the HE environment. Such decisions might be rooted in a perception that university is for young, middle-class students, and that students from under-represented groups will be 'out of place'. Some students might therefore prefer to attend institutions where they feel that there are other students like them. If this is the case, then out-reach work alone

– when carried out by institutions that are perceived to be elite – is likely to have only a limited effect in terms of diversifying the student body.

Although *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b) largely concentrates on pre-entry and admissions, there is some discussion of support for students who are already enrolled on courses. However, student support is only considered in the narrow sense of financial support. This provides further evidence of the Labour government's belief that widening participation could be achieved without changing the structures within universities. The framing of widening participation is once again focused on one element of 'the problem', and there is an unwillingness to address the deeper-seated structural inequalities that can act as a barrier to participation (cf. Archer *et al.*, 2003; Reay *et al.*, 2005). Consequently, there is no discussion in this document of potential changes to teaching and learning, the wider area of student support, or the culture and ethos of universities. This is despite suggestions by researchers (Burke, 2002; Osborne, 2003; Bowl, 2003; Jones & Thomas, 2005) that 'in-reach' is just as important as 'out-reach' where widening participation is concerned. It has been suggested that without radical changes to the structures and systems within universities, the retention of students from under-represented groups is likely to remain problematic (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Burke, 2006).

*Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b) seemed to propose quite limited solutions to widening participation. In some respects, it could be argued that the suggestions contained in the document might actively work against the principle of

greater diversity in higher education. For example, there was a proposal to roll out an 'advanced educational award' which would help universities to 'distinguish between very good candidates with top A level grades' (DfES, 2003b, p.15). However, the Sutton Trust (2008) suggested that students from under-represented groups were more likely to be attending schools and colleges that did not have a great many students achieving the top grades. The introduction of the advanced educational award would therefore seem to privilege students in those schools that are already at an advantage in terms of university admissions.

At the same time, the Labour government were promoting foundation degrees, which it claimed would provide 'new choices for students with a clear route to a high quality job' (DfES, 2003b, p.14). By 2009, the government had also introduced diploma qualifications for 14-19 year olds, which were designed to offer a vocational choice to students at an earlier stage in their school career. There was some concern, though, that these new qualifications would fail to challenge the binary divide that exists between academic and vocational education. Jones and Thomas (2005), for example, feared that the foundation degree would be seen as a lower status qualification.

Layered onto this was the lack of obligation for higher education institutions to retain students from under-represented groups. The Office for Fair Access would monitor admissions, but not retention or completion rates. *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b, p.5) suggested that places should be offered to students who had 'the ability to participate' or the 'ability to benefit', but institutions were only being

asked to support to graduation 'those who have the potential to succeed'. These terms are ambiguous and perhaps imply, once again, that the onus was on *admitting* students from under-represented groups, rather than supporting them to graduation. The framing here is inconsistent and therefore weak, thus offering opportunities for multiple interpretations by institutions. This might explain why there was a lack of focus on the monitoring of retention and completion. A further ambiguous term can be seen in the request that institutions 'promote the progress' of students from under-represented groups. It is not clear whether this calls for the promotion of progress towards successful completion of a degree, or simply the promotion of progress that would allow a student to *participate* in higher education, rather than to *succeed*.

*Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b) appears to be built on a number of assumptions. It assumes that higher education is a good thing, and it assumes that some minor tinkering in terms of out-reach and admissions will lead to widening participation. In common with a number of other New Labour documents, *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b) also makes some assumptions about the costs of non-participation. It claims that the cost of under-achievement is high and that it 'affects people's chances of steady employment and good health' (DfES, 2003b, p.8). These are emotive statements, but not statements that can necessarily be backed up by evidence. As already mentioned, some commentators (Ainley, 1994; Wolf, 2002) have argued that the link between increased education and increased economic growth is tenuous, and yet New Labour often presented the link between education and prosperity as irrefutable. It could therefore be suggested that

the foundations upon which New Labour seemed to be building its concept of widening participation were shaky. This might explain why approaches to widening participation in certain HEIs appeared to be piecemeal; failing to effect any real changes to the existing system (cf. Layer, 2005).

## 5.6 Conclusion

There are a number of themes that run through the Labour government's higher education documents and these can be traced from the response to Dearing's review (NCIHE, 1997) through to the two higher education papers that were published in 2003. The government stated its commitment to lifelong learning and widening participation but the detail of the policy documents referred to a number of *practices* that might be seen to work against the achievement of wider participation and a lifelong learning culture. The introduction of variable fees was one such policy. A reported decrease in enrolments was seen during the year that variable fees were introduced (DIUS, 2008a). Similarly, the limited availability of loans to the over-fifty age group was only likely to inhibit the take-up of learning opportunities amongst this group (cf. Fryer, 1997).

In terms of *discourse*, definitions of concepts such as lifelong learning are vague and loosely framed. This helps them to be represented as apolitical and therefore uncontroversial. There is also evidence of weak classification leading to a breaking down of insulations between previously incompatible categories. New Labour arguably disguised neo-liberal policies by drawing on discourses that stressed opportunity and

inclusivity. As Edwards and Nicoll (2001) have suggested, inspirational and aspirational language was used to achieve this effect. On certain levels, therefore, both framing and classification are weak. However, at other levels, framing is strong and boldly stated. Education is firmly linked to economic growth, and social justice is seen as achievable only through individuals taking responsibility for their own inclusion. However, as Avis (1998, 2007) has pointed out, this is highly problematic in terms of addressing the roots of social injustice and lack of participation, and leads to a sense of distance between the rhetoric of the documents, and the reality of the policies.

The critique contained in this chapter will provide a background to the detailed analysis of institutional policy that will form the basis of Chapters 7-10. The next chapter is a literature review chapter. It will consider the impact of the government's widening participation policies on the experiences of applicants and entrants to HE from under-represented groups. A number of research studies will be drawn upon in order to demonstrate that the ideas and policy formulations of the Labour government did not always translate into positive experiences for the students towards whom such policies were aimed.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE IMPLICATIONS OF CURRENT WIDENING PARTICIPATION POLICIES FOR APPLICANTS AND ENTRANTS TO HE

#### 6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to consider, in general terms, how the national widening participation policies that have emerged since the late 1990s (as discussed in Chapters 2 and 5) might impact upon applicants and entrants to HE from under-represented groups. It is, in the main, a literature review chapter and as such it aims to provide an insight into the critiques of government widening participation policy that have been offered by key researchers in the field. Nevertheless, there are brief references to the mediation of government policy by the case study HEIs, in order to give the reader a flavour of the findings presented in Chapters 7-11. The chapter concludes the section of the thesis which focuses on the *national* widening participation agenda; it provides a context for the subsequent chapters which examine the ways in which *institutions* were mediating and delivering the Labour government's priorities in this area.

The chapter is split into six sections. The first section outlines some key statistics in order to illustrate the patterns of participation in HE between 2002 and 2008. The second section analyses the Labour government's discursive representation of higher education as an investment for students. The third section considers whether the

government's policies could be perpetuating a two-tier system in higher education. The fourth section problematises the discourse of participation as a 'good thing', before moving to a consideration of the costs of HE in the era of tuition fees. Finally, there is a discussion of the role of the Office for Fair Access. These areas of analysis are included in the thesis as a means of outlining some of the critiques of the Labour government's widening participation policies, particularly in relation to their impact upon students. There is extensive literature on this subject which needs to be acknowledged in order to set the aims of this study within the wider context.

## **6.2 Patterns of application and participation amongst students from under-represented groups**

The statistics in this section are offered as a means of understanding the overall patterns of application and participation (in HE) amongst students from under-represented groups. They provide quantitative information that acts as a background to arguments that are referred to throughout this and later chapters.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collates data on an annual basis about the numbers of students entering higher education. This includes detailed data for the measurement of participation by students from occupational groups recognised by the National Statistics socio-economic classification (NS-SEC) 4-7. Students from these occupational backgrounds are deemed to be under-represented in higher education. Classifications 4-7 are defined (HESA, 2010) in the following way:

- ‘4) Small employers and own account workers
- 5) Low supervisory and technical occupations
- 6) Semi-routine occupations
- 7) Routine occupations’

Data (HESA, 2010) suggests that in the academic year 06/07, when my research was carried out, there were 319,355 young, UK entrants to first degree courses. 59,580 of these students were from NS-SEC occupational backgrounds 4-7. This represents 29.8% of the total. Mature students on full-time courses made up 68,510 or 21.5% of the intake to first degrees in the academic year 06/07. Figures are not provided for the participation of mature students from NS-SEC 4-7, although 6,915 or 10.6% were described as being from ‘low participation neighbourhoods’ in 06/07 (HESA, 2010). Low participation neighbourhoods are defined (HESA, 2010) as ‘areas for which the participation rate [in HE] is less than two thirds of the UK average rate’.

Table 1 (on page 143) shows how the participation rate for young, full-time, first degree entrants has changed over a period of six academic years.

**Table 1: Participation of young, full-time, first degree entrants from the academic year 02/03 to 07/08 (HESA, 2010).**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total number of young UK entrants</b>	<b>Percentage from state schools or colleges</b>	<b>Total number of students from NS-SEC 4-7</b>	<b>Percentage of students from NS-SEC 4-7 (as a percentage of total number of entrants)</b>	<b>Percentage of students from low participation neighbourhoods</b>
<b>02/03</b>	309,315	87.2%	50,930	28.4%	13.3%
<b>03/04</b>	313,840	86.8%	56,750	28.6%	13.9%
<b>04/05</b>	314,020	86.2%	56,485	28.2%	13.7%
<b>05/06</b>	333,280	87.4%	60,165	29.3%	14%
<b>06/07</b>	319,355	87.8%	59,580	29.8%	9.0%
<b>07/08</b>	332,505	88.0%	62,000	29.5%	9.7%

It can be seen from Table 1 that the participation of students from NS-SEC groups 4-7 remained fairly static as a proportion of the total number of entrants. There was also very little change in the proportion of entrants from state schools and colleges over the six year period. The participation of students from low participation neighbourhoods, however, saw a 5% decrease in 2006/07, the year that variable fees were introduced.

The Sutton Trust (2010, p.6) has drawn attention to figures that suggest that ‘while the number of young, full-time, first degree entrants to Russell Group universities increased by 18% from 2002/03 to 2007/08, the number coming from the four lowest socio-economic groups increased by 16%’. The Sutton Trust argues that this is a ‘disappointing finding.’ The Sutton Trust (2010, p.13) also points out that pupils from the top fifth of independent schools as measured by A Level attainment, ‘generally make twice as many applications to “Sutton Trust 13” universities as their peers from comprehensive schools with similar overall levels of attainment’. The Sutton Trust’s definition of ‘Sutton Trust 13’ universities includes ten Russell Group universities (cf. Russell Group, 2010a). The Russell Group itself does not appear to publish any data about the collective social-class composition of either applicants or entrants to Russell Group universities, although individual institutions do hold this data. When considering rates of applications from students in FE colleges, the Sutton Trust (2010, p.13) suggests that applications to “Sutton Trust 13” universities are less than half of those from other types of schools, even when account is taken of the average overall levels of A Level attainment’.

The statistics therefore suggest only minimal progress in terms of increasing the proportion of students from under-represented groups in higher education. Particular inequalities appear to remain in relation to the proportion of students from under-represented groups who apply to Russell Group universities. The remaining sections in this chapter, drawing on work by other researchers, will outline some of the tensions in

government policy that might contribute towards this apparent lack of progress in widening participation.

### **6.3 Higher education as an investment?**

Contemporary government-driven widening participation discourses have framed the individual benefits of higher education in two ways. The first emphasises the financial benefits that ‘generally’ follow from having gained a degree (DfEE, 1999; DfES, 2003a); the second set of benefits relate to personal ‘fulfilment’ (DfES, 2003b). The students in a study by Archer and Hutchings (2000) largely shared optimism about the financial and employment benefits that might result from participation in higher education, but they were less convinced of the personal fulfilment benefits. Some commentators (Elias *et al.*, 1999; Purcell *et al.*, 2002; Greenbank, 2009), however, have questioned the economic and employment returns of participation, and, in particular, whether the rewards are distributed equally amongst graduates. Despite this, documents such as *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a) and *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b) have consistently drawn attention to the financial benefits of participation, drawing on a discourse of ‘investment’. In *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (2003b, p.18) the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) confidently asserted that graduates would ‘on average’ earn 50% more than non-graduates over a lifetime. Similarly, *The Future of Higher Education*, (DfES, 2003a, p.83) draws attention to the ‘wider career opportunities and the financial benefits that *generally* follow’ from having gained a degree. This idea is perpetuated by HEIs at open day events and via

prospectuses. Within this discourse, though, little mention is made of the personal debt that will be accrued by students once on course. However, despite the framing of higher education as an investment, the DfES (2003a; 2003b) were careful to qualify its statements with the words 'on average' and 'generally'. This might suggest that the government department was well aware of the hierarchy of benefit that is linked to holding qualifications in certain disciplines from certain 'elite' institutions. Research (Purcell *et al.*, 2002; Brown and Hesketh, 2004) clearly indicates that this is the case.

Evidence (Elias *et al.*, 1999, cited in Leathwood and Hayton, 2002, p.146) also suggests that:

'although average graduate salaries are higher than those for non-graduates, the benefits which accrue to working-class graduates continue to be less than those of middle-class graduates with the same degree'.

A research report by the National Audit Office (2008, p.46) more specifically suggested that 'people from lower socio-economic backgrounds [earn] on average five percent less than people from upper socio-economic backgrounds one year after graduating'. One research study (cited by Ford, 2005) indicated that the amount graduates earned over a lifetime compared to non-graduates had 'fallen dramatically'. This study confirmed the view that graduates who studied at 'top' universities 'still earned more than those who studied at universities sitting towards the bottom of the league tables'. This was rarely, if ever, acknowledged by the Labour government, who continued to frame university participation as a means of levelling the playing field, rather than perpetuating existing inequalities.

Coffield (1999), however, has drawn attention to the fact that an increased market of graduates has the effect of lessening the value of a degree. This potentially leads to greater importance being attached to the institution attended and the class of degree obtained. A further effect of the increase in numbers of graduates is that employers can afford to become more selective about the graduates they employ. This, drawing on Hirsch (1976, p.50), is likely to result in 'lengthening the obstacle course of education and favouring those best able to sustain a longer or more costly race. These are the well off and well connected'. It may also have the effect of sharpening the distinctions between universities; increasing the desire of the middle-classes to ensure that their children gain places at the 'elite' institutions.

Ainley (2003, p.348) has suggested that qualifications have become increasingly 'commodified through certification'. As a result, even though students gain more qualifications at a higher level, there is a risk that what they learn is meaningless beyond its 'utilitarian application and exchange value'. This atrophy may be an unintended outcome of the longstanding government desire to harness education to the needs of the economy. Learning for learning's sake becomes an expensive luxury that the government is less and less keen to fund. This goes some way to explaining why mature and part-time students, once the focus of much lifelong learning rhetoric, receded (at least until the Leitch Report of 2006) from official widening participation discourse. As Ainley (1999, p.3) suggests, 'rather than a learning society, the current

direction of learning policy moves towards a certified society'. Warmington (2007, p.217) refers to this as:

'one of the contradictions of the so called "learning age". To stimulate participation in higher education...the desirability of qualifications must be *driven up* but, in extending credentialism, the value of qualifications as a commodity risks being *driven down* by qualification "inflation".'

Fevre (1997, cited in Coffield, 1999, p.486) has pointed out the risk that 'the UK will veer towards the US model of higher participation rates but with much education and training being of dubious value', because students will increase their credentials rather than their understanding. It is difficult to see how such a situation will develop 'the spiritual side of our lives', promote 'active citizenship' or help sustain a 'civilized society' (cf. DfEE, 1998, p.7). This is especially the case in a system that privileges only those students who are able to gain qualifications from the more prestigious universities. It could be argued that a government discourse that consistently presents participation in higher education as an 'investment' is therefore offering students a misleading picture of the benefits that will accrue. It at least neglects to acknowledge that potential students have different amounts of capital to invest.

Evidence from my research study suggests that certain HEIs are borrowing from this government discourse and are also choosing to present the idea of participation as an 'investment'. Indeed, one institution (Newdale) was using statistics in a selective way in order to suggest that a Newdale degree led to very competitive earnings after graduation. Students therefore experienced the reinforcement of the government

message. This was particularly evident during open days, where there was strong framing of the 'investment' discourse as well as the utilitarian and 'exchange value' (Ainley, 2003) of a degree. In a marketised system, this kind of rhetoric is perhaps inevitable, but it does mean that students are potentially making choices with imperfect information.

#### **6.4 The 'two-tier' system**

Both Archer *et al.* (2003) and Bowl (2003) interviewed students from groups that are under-represented in higher education as part of their research. They found, despite the Labour government's silence on the issue, that students were well aware of the hierarchy of institutions. Bowl (2003, p.130), as already mentioned in Chapter 1 (section 1.7), suggested that despite their awareness of the different status of institutions, some of the students deliberately chose to go to less prestigious universities because 'they sensed that they would feel more comfortable and less conspicuous there'. Reay *et al.* (2001a, p.338) found similar evidence of students attempting 'to match the habitus of the home with the habitus of the university'. Habitus is 'history turned into nature' (Bourdieu, 1977, p.78). It refers to the way in which the individual interacts with a given field to maintain the structure of the field. The working-class respondents in the Archer *et al.* (2003, p.129) study knew that widening participation for working-class groups effectively meant a 'restricted form of access to lower-status institutions'. This stratification appears to have either created, or is maintaining, a system that privileges middle-class students. As already mentioned in section 6.3, these students appear to go on to

receive higher-paid jobs within the labour market (Elias *et al.*, 1999; Jones and Thomas, 2005; National Audit Office, 2008). More recent research (Power and Whitty cited in Sutton Trust, 2008, p.16) found that '38 percent of graduates from a handful of elite universities were earning over £60,000 a year in their thirties, compared with eight percent of those who went to institutions designated universities in 1992'.

Despite these differentials between the experiences of students from certain under-represented groups and traditional university students, the Dearing Review (NCIHE, 1997) recommended that the expansion of higher education should happen at the 'sub-degree' level, and by 2000, the Labour government had committed itself to funding the development of foundation degrees (DfEE, 2000). The achievement of the 50% participation target therefore seemed to depend largely on the expansion of these new degrees. According to Greenbank (2006, p.149), foundation degrees were designed to be flexible and accessible, and to provide 'intermediate technical and professional skills'. Such degrees seemed to be targeted at students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as evidenced in the funding mechanism. One of the criteria for the funding for the foundation degrees was that courses should aim to widen participation (Greenbank, 2006). However, foundation degree courses, whilst operating both as a 'free-standing qualification but also one designed to function as a transfer qualification' (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2008, p.133) did not appear to have been designed to enjoy parity of esteem with the three-year honours degrees.

Jones and Thomas (2005), as already mentioned in Chapter 5 (section 5.4), argue that foundation degrees will perpetuate the two-tier system, whereby working-class students take the shorter vocational routes, whilst middle-class students retain their dominance of the traditional three-year honours degrees. Statistics from a recent report by HEFCE (2008b) lend some weight to this argument because it does appear that some under-represented groups are over-represented on foundation degrees when compared to the representation of students on three-year honours degrees. The statistics (HEFCE, 2008b) for foundation degree entry in 2005/06 suggest that 65% of enrolments were students over the age of 21. Forty two per cent were from NS-SEC occupational groups 4-7.

There is some evidence arising from my research study to support Jones and Thomas' (2005) argument that foundation degrees perpetuate the two-tier system. Neither of the case study Russell Group universities (Oldchurch and Oldbeam) had any plans to create new foundation degrees and if Jones and Thomas (2005) are correct in their suggestion that working-class students will lean towards shorter, vocational routes, then the social class intake of these universities is unlikely to change. It is already the case that Russell Group universities tend to enrol the lowest numbers of students from under-represented groups (Sutton Trust, 2008). Jones and Thomas (2005, p.623) therefore conclude that the 'classic factors underpinning certain cultural and socio-economic divisions seem likely to endure'.

Layer (2005) draws attention to this academic/vocational divide as an inhibitor of real progress in the area of widening participation. Despite the Labour government's rhetoric and actions in relation to widening participation, lifelong learning, and raising skills in the workforce, it could be suggested that there was little attempt to reform a system that leaves the holders of vocational qualifications in a disadvantaged position. This disadvantage might reduce over time, especially with the introduction of the 14-19 diploma qualification (DfES, 2005) and the new focus at degree level on work-based learning (Leitch, 2006). However, sceptics have suggested that the new diploma (with its vocational content) will do little to challenge the existing perception that academic qualifications are more valuable in terms of economic, cultural and social capital (Shaw and Mansell, 2008).

### **6.5 Participation as a 'good thing'**

Nevertheless, pro-widening participation discourses have routinely promoted the idea of (lifelong) learning as an unconditionally good thing. The way in which these discourses have emphasised the growth in opportunities and access, implicitly places a kind of blame for non-participation at the door of the individuals who 'choose' not to engage (Leathwood and Hayton, 2002, p.9). Indeed, the Labour government attempted to present aspects of the widening participation strategy as 'normalized' or 'common sense', with the result that other alternatives were, by implication, de-legitimized. It is a very powerful discourse that, according to Wetherall and Potter (1992), legitimates particular power relations and constrains alternative courses of action (cited in Archer

and Hutchings, 2000). In Bernstein's (1990) terms, the government achieved strong classification principles around the *ideology* of widening participation. In relation to Wetherall and Potter's point, Bernstein's (1990, p.25) notion of classification can be used to explain how the legitimisation of certain discourses, alongside the constraining of others, is achieved: 'power relations can accomplish their reproduction by establishing a principle of classification that suppresses its own contradictions and dilemmas through the insulation it creates, maintains and legitimates'.

Thus, despite the fact that evidence has shown that 'investment' and 'self-improvement' discourses do not appeal to certain non-participants in higher education (Archer and Hutchings, 2000), *The Future of Higher Education* (2003a, p.17) asserts that 'Universities are a vital gateway to opportunity and fulfilment in young people'. As a 'vital gateway', the suggestion is that it is not possible for young people (and why not 'older people'?) to find fulfilment in alternative ways. This is a very paternalistic discourse, which, as Gewirtz (2001) argues, is concerned with trying to make working-class people adopt middle-class values.

It could be argued, therefore, that Labour government discourse has tended to construct non-participants from lower socio-economic groups as potentially deficient in their aspirations; an attitude reinforced by the language used in *The Future of Higher Education* (DfESa, 2003, p.69): 'It is especially important that those who come from families without a tradition of going to higher education, and whose aspirations are low, are supported'. The assumption is that groups of people without a history of

participation in higher education are likely to have 'low aspirations'. It also suggests that for young people, progression to higher education is the only legitimate 'aspiration' to have.

The case study institutions in my research study drew on the discourse of higher education as a 'good thing' in a more muted way. Unlike the government discourse which (in the documents reviewed in Chapter 5) does *not* acknowledge structural barriers or legitimate alternative options, there was acceptance amongst widening participation managers that higher education was not necessarily the right choice for all students. Perhaps predictably, this attitude was strongest in the most selective institutions. The Widening Participation Manager in one of the Russell Group institutions said that the institution would regard it as a 'success' if a student attended an open day, and as a result of the experience, made an informed choice that higher education was not for them. In fact, respondents in all three of the pre-92 institutions subscribed to the view that higher education was not a suitable choice for every individual. This discourse was not in evidence in the post-92 institutions. This might suggest that the market (and an institution's status as either a so-called 'selecting' or 'recruiting' university) had a bearing on how individual institutions presented the benefits of participation in higher education.

## 6.6 The cost of higher education

Despite evidence to suggest that working-class students are more debt averse than middle-class students (Callender and Jackson, 2005; Callender, 2002; Connor and Dewson, 2001), Estelle Morris, as Secretary of State for Education in 2001, referred to this as a problem of 'perception of debt' (Thomson, 2001), rather than actual debt. This implies that 'working-class concerns about debt are in some way flawed or irrational, and if only they had the right attitude and realised that, in the long term, university study would pay off, they would be ok' (Leathwood & Hayton, 2002, p.9). This serves to deny not only the very real costs associated with university study, but also the cultural factors that may prevent some students (Muslim students or working-class students, for example) from borrowing money to fund their degrees. Staff in the case study institutions in this study, however, did appear to be very mindful of the importance of cost as an issue for students. All of the case study institutions offered information sessions about money as part of their open days. They also devoted several pages to this topic on their websites and in their prospectuses. However, the tone of this information did tend to play down the cost – perhaps suggesting that staff in HEIs shared Morris's view that it was a 'perception' of debt that was the barrier.

Despite government claims that tuition fees would not deter students from applying to university, there is evidence (Reay *et al.*, 2002; Frean, 2006) to suggest that the take-up of places dropped in the year (1998) that tuition fees were introduced. Initially, tuition

fees were set by government at £1,000 per year of study. Reay *et al.* (2002, p.6), drawing on UCAS data, have made the following point :

‘Analysis of the 1997 to 1998 data highlights large decreases in accepted applicants within those age, socio-economic and ethnic groupings which were the primary focus of the widening participation initiative.’

It should be noted that a majority of applicants for HE entry in 1998 would apply through UCAS in the academic year 97/98. This explains why accepted applications dropped in the academic year *before* the introduction of fees.

It could be suggested that the introduction of variable fees (or ‘top-up’ fees) added another potential disincentive to participants from under-represented groups. Variable fees were introduced in 2006 and allowed institutions to charge students up to £3,000 per year towards the cost of tuition. In the year that variable fees were introduced, Frean (2006) suggested that HEIs suffered an overall decline of 3.9% in applications. As already highlighted in Table 1 (section 6.2), the participation of students from low participation neighbourhoods dropped from 14% (as a proportion of the total UK entrants to first degrees) in 05/06, to 9% in 06/07. A very small number of universities (Greenwich, Thames Valley, Leeds Metropolitan, and Northampton) chose to ask for less than the £3,000 per year fee that was being charged by the majority of universities. Figures suggest that Leeds Metropolitan saw an increase of 8.3% in applications (Frean, 2006), which indicates that some students were drawn towards cheaper courses. These ‘lower fee’ universities were likely to appear attractive to the more debt-averse students,

but predictably, it was lower-status institutions that were offering this concession. It is difficult to see how this system will not result in a hierarchy of institutions charging fees according to their perceived status, with those students who can afford to pay, enrolling in Russell Group institutions, and those who cannot, enrolling in institutions that are perceived to offer degrees that are less valuable in the labour market.

In the current study, the case study institutions were all charging the maximum fee in the academic year 06/07. Widening participation managers from the three post-92 institutions all commented on the tension between widening participation and a variable fee structure. There was a fear amongst these staff that variable fees would put off the very students whom widening participation policies were designed to attract.

Part-time students, for example, who made up 42% of the higher education student population in England and Wales in 04/05 (BBC News, 2005), were not allowed to defer the cost of their courses until after graduation under the new fees regime. The opportunity to defer payment until after graduation was made available to full-time students. In a BBC report (BBC News, 2005), the President of Universities UK was quoted as saying that universities would feel unable to charge higher fees to part-time students, and might therefore tip the balance towards full-time courses, leading to the eventual disappearance of part-time courses. This could be seen as a potential policy contradiction under New Labour. On the one hand the government was trying to persuade students into lifelong education. On the other hand, by letting the market loose on the higher education sector, institutions were likely to focus on the most cost-

effective and popular types of provision. If universities were to cut part-time courses because they are not cost effective, then potentially 42% of the current student body would be denied access to higher education. It can reasonably be assumed that these part-time students would tend to be mature students with work and/or family commitments, students with disabilities who may not be able to cope with the demands of a full-time course, and students from lower socio-economic groups who needed to work, perhaps full-time, in order to fund their studies.

It could therefore be suggested that the juxtaposition of social justice (through access schemes) and marketisation (rationing scarce places) is highly problematic as a means of ensuring a quality experience of higher education for applicants from under-represented groups. It provides an example of the way in which a policy of widening access can be undermined or contradicted either by institutional structures or by other government policies.

### **6.7 Government 'regulation' of institutional widening participation policies and practice**

In 2004, the government established the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). However, as critics (Jones and Thomas, 2005; McCaig and Adnett, 2009) pointed out, OFFA had a limited remit, and was tellingly named the 'Office for Fair Access' rather than the 'Office for Fair Experience'. Jones and Thomas (2005, p.625) suggested that OFFA was only concerned with 'the early stages of the student life-cycle (concluding with admissions)

and may be thus somewhat incapable of transforming elite structures within higher education'. McCaig and Adnett (2009, p.21) suggested that OFFA did not even engage with the admissions process: 'OFFA has no remit to consider admissions criteria and its three current core aims make no mention of fair access or of promoting diverse student bodies within an HEI'.

OFFA was given certain powers to impose sanctions on universities who did not keep to the promises they made in their access agreements. OFFA could, for example, prevent a university from raising its fee levels if it had not delivered on these promises.

However, it was not clear what sanctions OFFA could impose in the cases of universities that already charged the maximum fee (as the vast majority were). In addition, OFFA seemed to have accepted and approved a number of access agreements from institutions that had made no effort to introduce targets to 'improve their recruitment of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds' (Stuart, 2005, p.29).

Widening participation managers in HEIs who were interviewed for this study all commented on the lack of power that OFFA seemed to have. There was a shared view that access agreements were not necessarily a good reflection of the *actual* work that an institution was carrying out in terms of widening participation. There was also a belief that very little would be done in cases where institutions failed to achieve the targets set out in their access agreements. One of the case study institutions had submitted a target that it later decided it could not meet. The institution simply informed OFFA that there had been a change in this particular target and this was accepted, reportedly

without question. Indeed, a close analysis of the access agreements of the case study HEIs revealed several examples of promises made that had not been delivered. These examples are discussed in more detail in Chapter 10, section 10.6. This would appear to lend some weight to the argument that OFFA was set up as a ‘toothless’ organisation (Palfreyman, 2004; Jones and Thomas, 2005).

Therefore, due to the limited nature of government regulation, institutions have been relatively free to spend their fee income in whatever way they see fit. A recent House of Commons Public Accounts Committee Report (2009, p.18) suggested that ‘In 2006/07, the proportion of tuition fee income redistributed by universities, as bursaries, ranged from 5% to 48%’. Research by McCaig and Adnett (2009, p.24) found that pre-92 universities had smaller numbers of students who were eligible for financial support. The pre-92 universities were therefore ‘providing larger bursaries to eligible students, applying less rigid eligibility conditions’. Callender (cited in McCaig and Adnett, 2009, p.24) ‘found that in 2006-07 the poorest students at the most prestigious HEIs received financial aid nearly three times greater than their peers in the least prestigious HEIs’. This finding is backed up by a representative from the Students’ Union at Oldchurch University who was interviewed as part of my research project. He suggested that at Oldchurch University (a Russell Group institution) ‘there is a lot of money swilling around if you look for it properly’. A similar comment was made by a student from an ‘elite’ university who was interviewed as part of Crozier *et al.*’s (2008, p.173) research study: the student indicated that her College was ‘throwing money at students who don’t really need it’. It is difficult to see how this differential bursary situation could result in anything

but a widening gap between the most and least prestigious institutions, and the most and least privileged students. A highly stratified system holds great disadvantages for students from under-represented groups because, as already mentioned in section 6.4, they are far more likely to be concentrated in the least prestigious institutions (Stanton, 2008). Lack of regulation is likely only to perpetuate this inequitable system.

Further evidence of the lack of regulation can be seen in the Labour government's attitude to benchmarks. Each institution has a benchmark to meet in terms of enrolments of students from under-represented groups. However, there is a clear statement on the HEFCE website (HEFCE, 2008c) suggesting that 'The benchmarks are not targets and have no financial incentives or penalties associated with them'. In 2006, when access agreements were introduced, institutions were told they no longer needed to submit widening participation strategies to HEFCE. However, a National Audit Office report (2008) highlighted a lack of transparency about how widening participation funds had been spent by HEIs. In 2009, there was a proposal to reintroduce the requirement for HEIs to produce a widening participation strategy (HEFCE, 2009). This strategy document would include clear evidence of how government funds had been used. This seemed to signal a move towards tighter regulation, but not before several years of institutional freedom had led to huge sector differences in terms of how widening participation work had been funded at a local level.

## 6.8 Conclusion

This literature review chapter has outlined *how*, in a general sense, the Labour government's widening participation policies might have impacted on applicants and entrants to HE from under-represented groups. It is important to understand the nature and perceived impact of the national widening participation agenda at the time, as a means of contextualising the ways in which the case study HEIs were responding at a local level. It appears that higher education opportunities, whilst being presented as a positive investment for students from under-represented groups, remain deeply stratified. It could be argued that the market mechanism ensures that institutions operate their widening participation policies within a wider 'competitive' context that does not always best serve the student.

This thesis is centrally concerned with the ways in which HEIs were translating some of these complexities at an institutional level. Having considered the ideological context of widening participation policy (the macro level), as well as how this impacts on the student experience (the micro context), the next section of the thesis presents a detailed analysis of widening participation discourse and practice in the six case study HEIs. This meso dimension, which encompasses institutional widening participation policies and practices, forms the focus of the remaining chapters.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES TO THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT'S WIDENING

#### PARTICIPATION AGENDA

##### **7.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to link widening participation work at an institutional level to the Labour government's broad widening participation objectives. It is an overview chapter that seeks to provide the reader with information about the sort of work that HEIs carry out as part of their widening participation remit. It begins with an outline of the government's widening participation objectives (as communicated by the then DfES and HEFCE). The chapter then describes some of the general widening participation activity that is carried out across a range of HEIs. The different types of HEI are explained as a means of enabling to reader to see the case study HEIs in context. The final section of this chapter provides key statistics for each of the case study HEIs in order to provide a comparison of their enrolments of students from under-represented groups. This chapter is moving towards the more detailed analysis of the widening participation work carried out by the case study HEIs.

## 7.2 An outline of the Labour government's widening participation objectives

As already mentioned in Chapters 1 and 5, in the 2001 election manifesto, the New Labour government set out a target for 50% of the 18-30 age group to have some experience of higher education (Labour Party, 2001). The aim was to increase and widen participation in higher education for all those who had the potential to benefit from it (DfES, 2003b, p.5). In 2003, when the document *Widening Participation in Higher Education* was published, the DfES (2003b) set out four main areas that they wanted to address in meeting these targets. The first related to attainment, with a recognition that 'raising standards of education and attainment is the best long term route to widening participation in Higher Education' (DfES, 2003b, p.2). The second target was to raise 'young people's' aspirations so that more students from under-represented groups would apply to University (DfES, 2003b, p.2). The third area for attention was applications – the aim was to encourage universities 'to do more to reach out to students and schools to encourage a broader range of applications' (DfES, 2003b, p.2). The fourth aim was to ensure that admissions to university were operating fairly (DfES, 2003b, p.2). The DfES convened a group to identify good practice in admissions. The Education Secretary, then Charles Clarke, also outlined the target to create an Office for Fair Access, which, as already mentioned in Chapter 6 (section 6.7), would require universities to produce an access agreement if they wished to charge higher tuition fees.

*Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b) (analysed in Chapter 5, section 5.5) is not a document that set out exactly what HEIs *needed* to do to widen

participation. Instead it aimed to provide ‘a range of incentives for institutions to increase their efforts to widen participation’ (DfES, 2003b, p.24). It suggests that ‘there will be no targets or quotas set by the government’ (DfES, 2003b, p.24). The only *requirement* was for higher education institutions to produce an access agreement if they wished to charge higher fees (DfES, 2004).

The widening participation landscape has shifted several times since *Widening Participation in Higher Education* was published in 2003. Following the Leitch Review (2006) and *Higher Ambitions* (2009), the focus turned to more flexible modes of provision (facilitating work-based learning), and creating stronger links between HEIs and employers. The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS)<sup>2</sup> suggested that 70% of the 2020 workforce was already beyond compulsory education age. The department was therefore looking to raise skill levels amongst the current workforce in order for Britain to be globally competitive (DIUS, 2008b). Competing in the global economy had long been a major theme of the widening participation agenda (DfEE, 1998; DfEE, 1999; DfES, 2003a; DfES, 2003b; BIS, 2009), and the Labour government had taken steps to encourage more overt employer participation in shaping higher education provision (DfES, 2003b; Leitch, 2006; BIS, 2009). The development of foundation degrees is one example of this trend. The advocating of partnerships between HE and employers was accompanied by familiar reassurances that widening participation and greater employer engagement could be achieved ‘without sacrificing

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<sup>2</sup> In 2008, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) replaced the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in taking responsibility for higher education. In 2009, responsibility for higher education passed to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).

quality', and in such a way that 'the future economic needs of the country can be met' (DfES, 2003b, p.24). HEIs were asked to widen participation for students from under-represented groups without compromising academic standards. They were expected to support through to graduation those students who had the 'potential to succeed' (DfES, 2003b, p.5) and to focus more explicitly on career destinations.

The strategic targets of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which allocates funding to HEIs on behalf of the government, gives more detail about the direction that HEIs were being expected to take in terms of widening participation. The strategic priorities for 2006-11 point to three main strands of activity. The first strand is 'Increasing demand for HE and opportunities to access it'. Within this, one of the targets is to encourage demand in 'strategically important but vulnerable subjects' (HEFCE, 2008a, p.19). The *Strategic Priorities* (HEFCE, 2008a, p.19) document suggests that 'We are particularly seeking to increase demand from groups who are under-represented in these subjects'. However, there is also a concern to 'work closely with learning and teaching staff to support curriculum and learning and teaching developments to make higher education more accessible' (HEFCE, 2008a, p.19). The framing of these targets is interesting because widening access is not being promoted in an unconditional way: the access that is being offered is in 'strategically important' subjects. In other words, widened participation must be tightly linked to the needs of the economy. Students from under-represented groups are to be encouraged to apply (and staff in HEIs are encouraged to make the curriculum more accessible), but this is set within a discourse of economic need rather than learning for learning's sake. The

problems with this rhetoric have been highlighted by researchers such as Avis (2007) and Ainley (1994) (see Chapter 2).

The second strand of prioritised activity commits HEFCE to 'offering new opportunities for progression on vocational courses and for lifelong learning' (HEFCE, 2008a, p.20). Within this, there is a commitment to strengthening HE provision in FE colleges 'in order to improve local access to HE and to provide opportunities for higher level learning throughout life' (HEFCE, 2008a, p.20). There is a further commitment to support 'close working relationships' between HEIs and FE colleges, and to support work with 'a broader age range' as well as 'part-time, work-based and distance learning' (HEFCE, 2008a, p.20). This emphasis on the broader age range and flexible learning patterns re-emerged as part of the focus on work-based learning (Leitch, 2006; BIS, 2009). Previously, as discussed in Chapter 6 (section 6.3), it appeared that the government had little interest in promoting participation amongst older learners.

The third strategic priority refers to the embedding of widening participation into the corporate policy and practice of HEIs. The aim is to make widening participation 'a core strategic issue for Higher Education Institutions.' Within this, institutions are allowed to develop and deliver widening participation work 'in ways that are consistent with their own mission.' HEFCE (2008a, p.21) suggests that its aim is to make widening participation sustainable and 'a norm for the sector'.

There were many ways in which HEIs were being encouraged in their widening participation work (via organisations like Aimhigher and Action on Access) when this research was carried out in 2007. However, as already mentioned in Chapter 6, section 6.7, there was very little *required* activity. In 1999, when HEIs were asked to produce initial statements on widening participation, Layer (2005, p.8) suggested that ‘the guidance given to HEIs was permissive and allowed for a variety of responses’. By 2007, there were only minimal signs of a change in approach. The government appeared keen to present itself as benign; fully respecting the autonomy of HEIs and their right to implement widening participation policy in ways that best fitted with existing institutional missions. There were many best practice guidelines and some minor targets around the profile of students taking part in widening participation activities but the only *requirement* was that institutions that wanted to charge higher tuition fees would have to produce an access agreement. In this way, the government’s framing of the need for institutions to engage with widening participation, was weak. This left institutions with a great deal of freedom in terms of their response to the government’s widening participation agenda – and a great deal of flexibility in fitting this approach (or not) with the institutional mission.

### **7.3 Widening participation work in HEIs**

Historically, the widening participation work initiated by HEIs has focused on aspiration-raising work with local schools and colleges. Staff from HEIs either visited schools and

colleges to talk about the benefits of higher education, or organised events for students at the university itself. Back in 1997, this work was aimed at the 16-18 age range, although more recently both the nature of the activities, and the age range of targeted students, has diversified. Some HEIs are now working with students as young as ten years old and there has been some refinement of the target groups so that resources are directed towards raising the aspirations of specific under-represented groups. There has also been an expansion in the range of activities that are offered, via summer schools, master classes, student shadowing, and mentoring schemes (National Audit Office, 2002; HEFCE, 2006).

Within individual HEIs, most of the above activity is organised by centralised widening participation teams. Academics and other staff might be involved, and in some institutions individual departments or colleges organise their own widening participation activities. However, much of the widening participation work is linked to the wider activity of the student recruitment or admissions office. In this way, some of the widening participation work becomes conflated with more general efforts to market the institution to prospective students (see Shaw *et al.*, 2007). Nevertheless, within student recruitment and admissions departments there are often specific widening participation schemes that go beyond the aspiration-raising work or the more general marketing activities that are designed to encourage students to apply for a university place. Such schemes are designed to help students from under-represented groups to gain an offer of a place, and are often specific to certain institutions. Students might be given lower

offers or be encouraged to submit some additional evidence for admissions tutors to consider. Some institutions also offer financial incentives to encourage enrolments from students who are local or who have taken part in widening participation activities that the university has organised. In many cases, and in order to aid widening participation efforts, there is a willingness on the part of HEIs to consider a wide range of qualifications when offering places: Access to Higher Education qualifications, for example, are welcomed (or at least considered) by many institutions.

A number of HEIs appear to see widening participation work as going beyond 'out-reach' and admissions activity and make specific adjustments to transition arrangements, course design, teaching and learning, and assessment arrangements (Thomas, 2001; HEFCE, 2006). In other words, they have adapted some of the internal structures of the institution in order to facilitate success amongst a more diverse student body (National Audit Office, 2008). Some HEIs have also changed their student support structures by, for example improving the level of support from personal tutors, in recognition of the different support needs of under-represented groups (HEFCE, 2006). These approaches suggest a movement away from the 'academic' model of widening participation that is described by Jones and Thomas (2005). However, these approaches have not been adopted by all HEIs.

In further moves to encourage access, the nature of HE provision has diversified in recent years, particularly with the introduction of foundation degrees. Foundation degrees provide an alternative to the typical academic focus of the three-year honours

degree and may be more attractive to people who are already in the workplace or who want to study with a particular career aim in mind. As already mentioned in Chapter 6, section 6.4, a HEFCE report (2008b) suggests there is evidence that the foundation degree attracts a greater proportion of students from under-represented groups than the three- year honours degree. HEIs that offer the foundation degree qualification can therefore appear to be more committed to the principles of widening participation than HEIs that do not. Amongst the case study universities, the pre-92 HEIs offer fewer foundation degree courses than the post-92 universities. The numbers are outlined in Table 4 on page 266.

Progression opportunities have also been encouraged via Lifelong Learning Networks. These networks, like foundation degrees, are designed to offer progression into higher education. Like foundation degrees, they offer a means of forging stronger links between FE and HE providers, thus potentially easing transitions for students (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2008).

There are many other unique activities that are offered by particular institutions, and the widening participation message can manifest itself in a range of settings. However, the aim of this section has been to provide an overview of the types of activity that might be considered to be direct 'widening participation work'; unique activities and manifestations of the wider widening participation message have not therefore been discussed in depth. Subsequent chapters develop these ideas in more detail, in specific relation to the widening participation activity that was taking place in the case study

institutions. As a means of understanding the ‘positioning’ of the HEIs selected as cases for this research, section 7.4 explains the different types of HEI currently operating in the UK’s HE sector.

#### **7.4 Explaining the different types of HEI**

Ten years after the election of the New Labour government, the Sutton Trust (2008) suggested that despite a participation rate of 42%, the mass HE system is best characterised as a system that is still hierarchical and sharply stratified by social class. Ainley (cited in Archer, 2007, p.638) argues that there exists a tripartite system of universities that has been reinforced by the New Labour government. This system, quoting Charles Clarke (then Secretary of State for Education), consists of ‘the great research universities, the outstanding teaching universities and those that make a dynamic, dramatic contribution to their regional and local economies’. Ainley (cited in Archer, 2007, p.638) suggests that these divide into ‘gold, silver and bronze universities’ and are indicative of New Labour’s diversified (or polarised) sector in which teaching and research are seen as separate entities. Archer (2007) suggests that within this model, ‘...“bronze” universities are responsible for ‘training’ and serving regional economies, adopting a distinctly “local” outlook and remit (predominantly catering for non-traditional students)’, whilst ‘gold’ universities have a more international focus with a remit which involves producing ‘great’ research (Archer, 2007, p.638).

HEIs reinforce this by dividing themselves into groupings that roughly conform to Ainley's 'gold, silver and bronze' tripartite system. For example, the Russell Group (as referred to in Chapter 3, section 3.4.1) comprises 20 'research intensive' universities and might therefore be characteristic of the 'gold' group in Ainley's tripartite system. The Million Plus group is made up of post-92 institutions that are committed to diversity (Million Plus, 2010), and this group might more closely represent the 'bronze' category of institutions.

The self-defined groupings do not suggest that all institutions are the same in terms of their character and what they offer. As Layer (2005) has pointed out: 'the new universities are not a homogeneous group' and some universities and university colleges remain non-aligned. However, this system does indicate that there is a perception of different *types* of university that many of the HEIs perpetuate through such alliances. Drawing on Bernstein (1990, 2000) and applying his ideas to the organisational setting (see Edwards *et al.*, 2009), certain HEIs seek to insulate themselves through such classification; ensuring that there is a boundary between the unique identities and specialised discourses of the various types of university.

Generally speaking, widening participation has always been part of the mission of post-92 universities and university colleges, and these institutions retain a strong commitment to this work. Widening participation is often a more recent innovation in the Russell and 1994 Group institutions, and therefore tends to be less well embedded (Shaw *et al.*, 2007). As a result, according to Jones and Thomas (2005), there are differences in the

way institutions define and carry out widening participation work. They suggest that there are three broad typologies which shape an institution's approach to widening participation work (see Chapter 1, section 1.4), and that institutions fit into these depending on the type of institution that they are (Russell Group, other pre-92 and post-92 institutions). Jones and Thomas (2005) do not include university colleges in their analysis. My research explores the extent to which this might be true of the case study institutions. Of the case study institutions that have been described in Chapter 4, section 4.3, Oldchurch, Oldbeam and Oldlaw Universities are pre-92 institutions. Oldchurch and Oldbeam are members of the Russell Group of self-styled 'elite' universities. Newdale and Neworth Universities are post-92 institutions. Newbede is a university college. Oldbeam University is the largest HEI in the study with over 30,000 students, whilst Newbede is the smallest with less than 2,000 students. All of the institutions offer both full and part-time, and undergraduate and postgraduate provision.

## **7.5 The statistical picture in the case study HEIs**

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) offers detailed figures on the characteristics of student entrants for each HEI. For the purposes of this study, it is important to build up a picture of the numbers of students from under-represented groups who were enrolled in the case study HEIs in the year that the research took place. In order to do this, HESA's widening participation performance indicator tables were studied in detail (HESA, 2010). Table 2 (on page 176) outlines the characteristics of students enrolled in the case study institutions in 2006/07.

Data (HESA, 2010) on young, full-time, undergraduate entrants to higher education in 2006/07 showed a direct correlation between the perceived status of an institution, as measured by league table results (Times Online, 2007, Guardian Online, 2008), and widening participation success. The most prestigious of the case study HEIs (Oldchurch) enrolled only 57.6% of its students from state schools or colleges in 2006/07. This can be compared to Newbede, the university college in the sample, where enrolments from state schools and colleges stood at 100%. Similarly, Oldchurch enrolled only 11.5% of students from NS-SEC groups 4-7 (see Chapter 6, section 6.2 for a definition of NS-SEC 4-7). This can be compared to an enrolment rate of 51.3 % for students from NS-SEC groups 4-7 by Neworth University. The other case study institutions ranged between these two extremes, but these statistics reflect the fact that the higher up the league tables the institutions were, the lower their widening participation 'success rates' tended to be (when measured via HESA's definition of participation by under-represented groups).

**Table 2 – Young, full-time, first-degree entrants to the case study HEIs in 2006/07  
(HESA, 2010)**

	<b>Percentage of 'young' students</b>	<b>Percentage of students from state schools</b>	<b>Percentage of students from NS-SEC 4-7</b>	<b>Percentage of students from low participation neighbourhoods</b>
<b>Oldchurch</b>	95.9 (90.1)	57.6 (57.6)	11.5 (11.3)	4.1 (5.4)
<b>Oldbeam</b>	91.5 (90.3)	78.1 (78.9)	22.1 (22.1)	6.8 (11.1)
<b>Oldlaw</b>	88.0 (92.7)	89.5 (87.5)	26.0 (26.1)	6.6 (10.8)
<b>Newdale</b>	78.6 (76.7)	97.0 (96.4)	41.9 (41.4)	9.7 (15.7)
<b>Neworth</b>	70.4 (62.5)	99.0 (98.6)	51.3 (50.9)	18.6 (24.7)
<b>Newbede</b>	71.2 (66.0)	100 (94.9)	43.0 (48.9)	15.9 (18.2)

NB. Data from 2002/03 is shown in brackets.

For comparative purposes, these statistics were compared against the same data for 2002/03. The data for 02/03 is marked in brackets on Table 2. Of note is the fact that all six of the case higher education institutions had seen a decline in the enrolments of students from low participation neighbourhoods between 02/03 and 06/07. Three of the case study HEIs had also seen no change or a decline in the number of entrants from NS-SEC groups 4-7. The three institutions that had seen an increase between 02/03 and 06/07 could only report a 0.2, 0.4 and 0.5 increase in enrolments from students in NS-SEC groups 4-7. Participation by young people, as a percentage of the total number

of entrants, had increased over the five year period in five of the case study HEIs. This indicates a decline in the proportion of enrolments by mature students in all but one case.

This analysis offers quantitative information to help contextualise the findings outlined in later chapters.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview both of the Labour government's widening participation aims and objectives (as communicated by the DfES and HEFCE), and the broad ways in which HEIs appeared to be responding to this agenda. The chapter provided the reader with some background information about the range of widening participation work that was being undertaken by HEIs in general, before introducing information about the different types of HEI and the enrolments of students from under-represented groups in the case study institutions in particular. The chapter has offered this overview as a means of helping the reader to understand how the case study institutions fit into the broader context.

Chapter 8 focuses on the case study institutions and specifically considers how institutional commitment to widening participation was framed by the widening participation managers of the case study HEIs. It considers how widening participation work is explained and justified in an organisational context. The purpose of Chapter 8

is to analyse the discursive practices and framing decisions of the widening participation managers as a means of assessing how the national widening participation agenda was being negotiated at a local level. Using interview data, it seeks to outline the level of 'fit' between the national widening participation agenda and the work that the case study HEIs were undertaking.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### FACTORS INFLUENCING DISCURSIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF WIDENING PARTICIPATION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

#### 8.1 Introduction

This chapter, in analysing how the case study HEIs present or ‘frame’ (Bernstein, 1990) their commitment to widening participation, outlines the relationship between the national and local widening participation agendas. The purpose of Chapter 8 is to explore in detail *how* the case study HEIs negotiated the national widening participation frame within their own local contexts, as well as potential reasons *why* there were differing attitudes towards the government’s agenda. The chapter is split into four sections. The first section explains how Bernstein’s (1990) notions of ‘voice’, ‘classification’ and ‘framing’ are used to analyse the messages that come from both government and institutions in relation to widening participation work. The second section considers the importance of individual institutional missions in determining institutions’ responses to the national widening participation agenda. The third section explores some of the possible motivations for differing levels of institutional commitment to widening participation work. The final section considers how institutions adapt to the national widening participation agenda, offering an analysis of why institutions appear to opt out of certain elements of widening participation work and what this might suggest about their commitment to the national widening participation agenda.

Alongside analysis of policy documents and marketing literature, this chapter draws on data from interviews with widening participation managers in the case study HEIs. It is recognised that these individuals cannot speak for the institution as a whole, and that care should be taken when interpreting their comments. As Dwyer (cited in Williams, 1997, p.17) suggests, ‘the diversity of actors at each level means that a range of discourses are available; rarely is there one “regime of truth”’. Nevertheless, the accounts do provide an ‘insider perspective’ on the rationale behind certain widening participation decisions. As such they are useful as one means of analysing the possible relationship between national and local framing decisions and commitment to widening participation.

## **8.2 Using Bernstein’s notions of classification, voice and framing**

Bernstein’s notions of *classification*, *voice* and *framing* are used in order to interpret the relationship between the national widening participation agenda and the localised widening participation work of HEIs. To draw once more on a definition used in Chapter 3 (section 3.4.1), Bernstein (1990, p.260) suggests that:

‘classificatory (boundary relations) establish “voice”. “Voice” is regarded somewhat like a cultural larynx which sets the limits on what can legitimately be put together (communicated). Framing (control) relations regulate the acquisition of this voice and create the “message” (what is made manifest, what can be realized)’.

In a basic sense, and as already mentioned in section 3.4.1, 'voice' communicates the culture or defining 'speciality' of an institution. Voice can be seen, for example, in the way in which an institution describes itself as 'elite' or 'research intensive'. Any attempt to challenge the classification or voice of an institution presents a threat to the culture, ethos and identity of the institution. This might go some way towards explaining some of the tensions that appeared to exist between the Labour government's widening participation priorities and the internal policies of certain of the case study universities.

It may be useful here to remind the reader of Bernstein's definition of 'framing'. Framing, Bernstein (2000, p.204) suggests 'is a measure of the degree to which the transmitter of a message maintains control over communicative text'. In the context of this study, and drawing on Edwards *et al.*'s (2009) application of Bernstein's framework to organisations, HEIs (via staff, marketing literature and information on websites) are the 'transmitters' of widening participation messages to potential students. Where strong framing is present, the smaller is 'the space accorded for potential variation in the message'. Where widening participation is strongly framed, staff within an institution are likely to appear to 'speak with one voice' about the institution's commitment to widening participation. Where the framing is weak, there is much greater scope for individual voices and multiple messages, some of which may be in tension with one another. In this case, the policy documents of an institution may state a commitment to widening participation that is different to the messages conveyed by certain members of staff. The staff themselves may convey a variety of messages.

At institutional and national level, policy documents may themselves be strongly or weakly framed: they may impose strict codes of practice or they may operate at a more rhetorical level, emphasising general, overarching widening participation aims. The framing of widening participation therefore takes place at multiple levels, in both national (via government departments such as BIS) and localised (institutional) contexts.

### **8.2.1 National framing**

National level framing refers to the manner in which government departments (such as DIUS and BIS) and government agencies (such as HEFCE) control and convey the widening participation message. Under New Labour, government departments and agencies arguably referred to widening participation in a way that was broadly defined and accommodating towards adherents to social justice on the left, whilst simultaneously embracing proponents of a marketised (and therefore stratified) higher education sector. This deliberately fuzzy definition (one which permits multiple messages) allows widening participation, on the surface, to appear to be the kind of policy that is uncontroversial – offering a win-win outcome to both students and society. Widening participation could be said to be weakly framed because the broadness of the definition allows multiple messages and some licence on the part of the *acquirer* or recipient of widening participation messages to apply his/her own interpretation to the concept.

However, as already highlighted in Chapter 2 (section 2.9), New Labour's widening participation discourse was predicated upon a strong framing of the relationship

between social justice and marketisation in HE. The New Labour ideology represented this relationship as being without contradictions; the government did not legitimate voices that suggested otherwise. So, within this loose definition of widening participation, there was a piece of tight framing which was 'non-negotiable'.

### **8.2.2 Local framing**

Local framing refers to the ways in which individual HEIs control the communication of the national widening participation agenda (as set out by government departments and agencies) within their own local contexts. Institutions have 'voices' of their own that are shaped by their declared missions. Framing, as Bernstein (1990, p.260) suggests, regulates this voice to create the message (or what can be realised). For example, Russell Group institutions tend to place a strong emphasis on their 'academic excellence in teaching and research' (Russell Group, 2010a) and refer to their students as 'talented and motivated' (Russell Group, 2010b). For these HEIs, the mission involves promoting an identity as an elite institution but one that is meritocratic, in that it does not discriminate against students from any background, as long as they meet elite academic criteria. The Oldchurch University prospectus suggests that 'It matters to all of us here that the doors of this University are open to all students *with the highest intellectual potential to succeed*' (my italics) (University of Oldchurch, 2007a, inside cover). In contrast, HEIs in the Million Plus Group focus more on accessible (or non-elitist) provision, whereby students are actively encouraged to apply and enrol on courses. There is less focus on rationing of places and exclusivity. For example, Neworth

University's prospectus (University of Newarth, 2007a, inside cover) says: '...you are welcome. Whoever you are, whatever your background, age, nationality or religion. Your ambitions are no less important than anyone else's; so take your place, take part and get on.'

Institutions must therefore interpret the government's widening participation aims and objectives against the backdrop of their own local agenda. In some institutions, this might create tension, and a certain level of anxiety about the preservation of 'quality and standards'. In other institutions, the government's agenda might fit more closely within an existing mission, and in this situation, there would be little sense of contradiction. Nevertheless, it could be suggested that the local agenda has the potential to exert a strong influence, constraining what staff can legitimately say. As an example, an institution that struggled to fill places might seek to silence a member of staff who claimed that the quality of students was poor and that entry qualifications should therefore be raised. In Bernstein's terms (1990, 2000), this represents a challenge to the voice and therefore to the classification of the institution. Similarly, it could be suggested (as an example) that an institution that was heavily over-subscribed might not legitimate the voice of a member of staff who claimed that A Level achievement should be rejected as a means of rationing places. Such examples represent a rejection of institutional 'realisation rules' that allow people to talk 'in a way that is seen as competent' (Edwards *et al.*, 2009, p.59) Instead, the 'acceptable', legitimate discourse is one that reinforces the institution's 'speciality' and positioning as an institution of a particular type (Russell Group or Million Plus for instance). The remainder of this

chapter analyses the ways in which the case study institutions balanced their local agenda against the Labour government's framing of widening participation work.

### **8.3 The potential impact of institutional mission on the negotiation of national widening participation policy**

Greenbank (2006, p.201) suggests that the English higher education system enjoys some degree of freedom when it comes to interpretation of national policy:

'...there is still room for policy to be reinterpreted and built upon as it migrates from government, through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and into HEIs. At each stage in the process of migration, policy is modified in an attempt to meet 'local' objectives'.

He argues that this leaves HEIs with 'scope for agency', a view that is backed up by data from senior members of staff in his research study. One Pro-Vice-Chancellor in Greenbank's (2006, p.201) study said: 'You can take widening participation very seriously or not nearly so seriously. So there is a definite choice, yes, no question about that'. This leads to a situation in which HEIs need to take decisions about the extent to which their own local priorities either fit with, or take precedence over, the national agenda. Greenbank (2006) suggests that an important factor in this decision-making is the organisational culture. Culture is defined by Greenbank (2006, p.201) as 'the set of key values, beliefs, understandings and norms shared by members of an organisation'. In the absence of direct observation, some clues about organisational culture can often be gained through studying the mission statements and corporate strategies of HEIs.

These strategies (respectively) outline the broad purpose of an institution and the targets that an institution has set itself in its attempt to carry out its mission.

In the mid-1990s, Williams (1997) carried out an analysis of mission statements in HEIs. She was looking for evidence of commitment to the widening participation agenda.

Williams (1997, p.100) found that:

‘All of the old universities used the language of excellence and scholarship, but the one which also laid claim to fostering access had the lowest percentage of alternative and access students of all 13 institutions....One (College of Higher Education) did not mention access at all and yet had the highest number of Access entrants of the three (other colleges in the sample)’.

Williams therefore concluded that the mission of an institution actually conveyed very little about institutional commitment to, and practice of, widening participation. Her study highlighted a key point about widening participation; that in some cases there appears to be a gap between what institutions say they do, and what they actually do. Discursive presentations of commitment to widening participation might be constructed in order to appear to comply with government policy or to combat perceptions of elitism. In contrast, actual practice might represent a closer fit with the institution’s existing mission or pre-existing local agenda. This mission might involve strong framing of selectivity rather than accessibility.

Since 1997, however, HEFCE has encouraged HEIs to embed widening participation into their corporate policy and practice (HEFCE, 2008a). It might therefore be expected

that there now exists a better ‘fit’ between stated aims and actual widening participation practice than there was in 1997. This will be investigated in more detail in relation to pre-entry and admissions practices, in Chapter 10. The purpose of this section of Chapter 8 is to consider the extent to which the culture or ‘mission’ of the institution appeared to impact upon the ways in which the case study HEIs presented (verbally and in writing) their widening participation work.

For some of the case study institutions, widening participation was described as a core part of their mission. Their work in this area reportedly pre-dated the government’s interest in widening access, and, according to Shaw *et al.*, (2007), was likely to be shaped by the original aims of the institution. Many post-92 institutions were originally technical colleges offering vocational courses, and therefore accessibility for students had always been a driving force. Since achieving university status, many of these institutions seemed to have retained this commitment to accessibility, offering a range of courses to students with a range of qualifications. As the Widening Participation Manager at Newdale said:

‘...why would you want to exclude people? It goes back to what higher education is. And actually we want to enable all those students who can complete, or with the appropriate support can complete – to access the course.’

The widening participation managers in the post-92 institutions often described a more embedded approach to widening participation, whereby there was no separate ‘widening

participation' function. Shaw *et al.* (2007, p.44) have suggested that distinct widening participation departments can indicate a pocket of staff with an inclusive ethos, sitting within a more traditionally academic (and by implication 'less inclusive') culture: They suggest that this is demonstrated via:

'the Widening Access team which has a progressive and inclusive ethos and promotes the institution in this way through a series of project activities whilst at the same time the Marketing team continues to produce prospectuses, websites and other materials that contain language and images that reflect a largely middle class and traditionally academic culture'.

The more embedded approach was explained by the Widening Participation Manager at Neworth University:

'I think, for this university, we attract a lot of students from under- represented groups, both ethnic minority students, and students from lower social classes, so we are a very high performing university in terms of widening participation. And the university's approach to students like that requires us to embed what our good practice is in terms of widening participation, both in terms of outreach, ...and working with partners, and also in terms of how we support students when they come into the university and achieve and are successful in their studies with us. Hence, we feel that having a unit of widening participation, or a separate area where you locate the responsibility for widening participation, is probably inappropriate. It's something that is embedded throughout the university, and that is seriously undertaken at this university. Widening participation strategies are threaded through pretty much everything that we do'. (Widening Participation Manager, University of Neworth).

In contrast to this, various statements made by staff in other case study institutions suggested that commitment to widening participation was weaker and not an important part of the institutional mission. For example, in the interviews with widening

participation managers in the case study HEIs, all the respondents were asked what changes they expected to see in the widening participation agenda in the next five years. There were both similarities and differences in the answers given to this question but in terms of commitment to widening participation, one of the most interesting answers came from the Widening Participation Manager at Oldbeam, a Russell Group university:

'I think it's important for the government to maintain the pressure if you like, or keep that message to the forefront – that this remains an important agenda. And that it's linked to a much wider agenda around skills, the economy, and so on. I think if those messages were to change, universities would respond accordingly, and if the perception was that this is no longer important and it wasn't being given the national input then I don't think organisations would support it in the same way'. (Widening Participation Manager, University of Oldbeam).

The suggestion here is that institutional commitment to widening participation was driven by government and that without this impetus institutions might not see it as a priority. This may particularly be the case with institutions that do not perceive widening participation as a key part of the institutional mission. However, Greenbank's (2006, p.208) analysis of the corporate strategies of 16 HEIs found that widening participation was identified as a 'key component' of the strategy in every single case. In my study, all six of the case study HEIs similarly outlined a commitment to widening participation in their corporate strategies. Like Williams (1997), this suggests that (in certain institutions at least) there is some ambiguity around commitment to widening participation, with strong discursive statements of support potentially masking a weaker practical commitment. This idea will be explored in more detail in Chapter 9.

However, the idea that widening participation work would dry up if government priorities changed might not be true of all universities. The Widening Participation Manager at Newbede suggested that the institution would still be committed to widening participation regardless of the benchmarks and any directives from government. She went on to explain:

'I think it's a desire to have a more diverse community, and a desire to sort of implement social justice...it is an Anglican College, so I think from that sort of point of view, [there is] a moral imperative behind having an equal community and a diverse community...when I came to work here, that struck me very much - that I was coming along to do this job about widening participation, and it seemed to be headlined in the mission of the institution, whereas you might not really expect that. It struck me that it was an issue that was taken seriously and was important, so, you know, right from the beginning, that's been my experience'. (Widening Participation Manager, Newbede University).

The term 'moral imperative' is noteworthy because it was not a phrase that any of the other case study institutions used when describing their widening participation work. In drawing on this phrase, the member of staff appeared to be signalling the fact that at Newbede, widening participation was seen as 'the right thing to do'; the phrase implies something more than a rhetorical commitment. This is not a unique discourse, as Shaw *et al.* (2007) found in their study of eight HEIs. It does, however, contrast starkly with the discourses of certain other institutions, where there was a much stronger sense of the government, the market, and/or institutional survival driving the agenda. In these institutional settings there seemed to be an external rather than internal motivation for carrying out widening participation work: one that was, as Greenbank (2006) argues,

strongly influenced by the external political and economic environment, and not the needs of the student. In Duke's (2005, p.150) terms, these institutions might be labelled as 'supply-side' driven.

This sense of widening participation being an important part of the mission of the institution was reinforced in Newbede's prospectus. There was a section headed 'Why choose Newbede?' and the institution's commitment to widening participation was given as the main reason why students should choose the College:

'Newbede is an open, forward looking community that celebrates diversity and welcomes applications from all students regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religious affiliation or disability. We are committed to widening access to Higher Education for all and providing any help necessary to people who are under-represented in the sector' (Newbede University, undated, p.4).

Drawing on the words of Newbede's Widening Participation Manager, the commitment to widening participation was 'headlined'. HEIs can choose the extent to which they background or foreground this message in marketing literature and open day settings. It could be suggested that institutions that foreground or strongly frame the widening participation message across a range of literature and settings, are more likely to be committed to inclusivity.

It is interesting to consider the extent to which different types of institution might scale back their widening participation function if government funding were to be removed.

The evidence above suggests that institutions that had embedded widening participation

as a core part of their mission would continue the work regardless. In Greenbank's (2006, p.203) study, one senior member of staff pointed out that: 'a lot of the activity stretches back piecemeal to well before the government's formulated policy'. In contrast, institutions that chose to highlight their 'elite' reputation might well decide that without the government's sticks and carrots, the widening participation agenda would not be worth pursuing. A desire to highlight the quality of the provision and the status of the university is perhaps seen by an institution to be an essential part of its 'classification' (cf. Bernstein, 1990); it is a way of insulating (or differentiating) itself from other universities. This was evidenced in policy documents from the two Russell Group universities in the sample (Oldchurch and Oldbeam). Words like 'excellence', 'success', 'quality', 'world class university' and 'highest calibre students' were much in evidence. This is not to suggest that there was no reference to the desirability of a diverse student population, but this appeared to be of secondary importance. In these cases, it seemed that maintaining a certain position in the higher education 'market' was key to what the university was trying to achieve, and that whilst widening participation was mentioned, it was not a core part of the university mission. The institution might simply have decided that in a market-driven sector, it was necessary to choose between institutional status and social justice. This highlights one of the difficulties of the New Labour government's conflation of social justice and markets: some institutions might feel justified in rejecting a social justice target where it is perceived that it might impact on market position (defined via league tables). This is not to say that certain HEIs failed to carry out any widening participation work; rather, it implies that the higher education 'market' was driving decision-making in a way that sometimes saw widening participation pushed

down the agenda of priorities. The 'moral imperative' that was referred to by the Widening Participation Manager at Newbede University might be seen as a dispensable luxury by staff in other institutions.

This suggests, in common with Greenbank's (2006) findings, that one of the key influences on how HEIs negotiated the national widening participation frame was how well that agenda fitted with the institution's pre-existing culture and ethos. Ideologically, institutions that viewed quality and access as mutually exclusive seemed to signal adherence to the 'academic' model of widening participation as set out by Jones and Thomas (2005). At Oldchurch (a Russell Group university), the Widening Participation Manager talked about ideological conflict between the national widening participation agenda and the university's local agenda. This was not framed as an explicit rejection of what the government was trying to achieve but was presented as a particular concern about how Oldchurch fitted into 'the rise in the skills and employer-led agenda'. Their Widening Participation Manager (who was one of three managers in Oldchurch's admissions office) explained this in the following way:

'...there are certain routes which won't bring candidates to institutions like Oldchurch. And we are very concerned that students are made aware of that. We know that certain disadvantaged groups are already more likely to go down vocational educational routes, often when their ability would suggest that they should be encouraged in other directions. And in fact we put quite a lot of effort into encouraging them to go down another direction. So sometimes I think we run counter to some of those agendas and one of things that we feel is being lost really, is an understanding of the ultimate transferability of a high standard academic qualification. So, we're very keen to make sure that our students are aware of the number of Historians that do Law conversion and work in the city, and the number of Zoologists who work for Merchant Banks. And here it's highlighting that actually, you don't have to specialise quite that early. And often

our advice I think runs counter to some of the advice that comes through, and that's something that we really worry about. We have a - it brings us into conflict with schools, and it brings us into conflict often with other institutions. Conflict might be a bit of a - ideological conflict I should say as opposed to actual conflict'. (Widening Participation Manager, University of Oldchurch).

Where there was a perceived tension between 'academic' mission and the national widening participation agenda's focus on employability, the institution chose to privilege its 'academic' mission. However, this did not appear to be the approach of all institutions. Those that placed access at the centre of their mission seemed to find a much closer fit between their local and the national widening participation agendas. Nevertheless, the 'real' picture is obscured by the difficulties of untangling the rhetoric of marketing literature and policy documents from actual practice. This will be explored in more detail in Chapter 9.

#### **8.4. Exploring motivations for commitment to widening participation**

Whilst the mission, culture and ethos of an institution seemed to play a part in determining the level of institutional commitment to widening participation, there were a number of other motivations that appeared to drive work in this area and that potentially impacted on the negotiation of national widening participation policy. The following subsections consider some of these potential motivations in the case study HEIs in more detail.

#### **8.4.1 Student recruitment: widening participation for market survival?**

The Widening Participation Manager at Newdale, a post-92 university, suggested that at her institution an inclusive approach was necessary, indicating that there was something more than just a simple commitment to social justice at work. She said:

‘In terms of a shared commitment to widening participation – there has to be...We have to have that kind of commitment because of the kinds of students that we have – we’ve got to be a welcoming institution...otherwise where are we going to get these students from?’ (Widening Participation Manager, Newdale University).

There was a suggestion here that market survival played a role in Newdale’s commitment to widening participation. Morgan-Klein and Murphy (2002, pp.69-70) found in the majority of their interviews (with staff in HEIs), that ‘social justice concerns were often eclipsed by concerns with recruitment, marketing and institutional survival’. If students from under-represented groups made up a large part of the university in-take, then failure to adapt institutional systems might well lead to failure to recruit enough students to courses. This might suggest that even where there was strong institutional framing of widening participation commitment - and seemingly a close fit between the national and local agendas - widening participation was, in part, embraced as necessary for survival in an increasingly marketised system. This view is backed up by findings from Shaw *et al.*’s (2007, p.42) research. They too indicated that widening participation and recruitment activity were underpinned by ‘a necessity of institutional survival’. This

is not to suggest that the widening participation work was of poor quality but rather a recognition of the fact that motivations can be multi-faceted.

In common with the findings of Shaw *et al.*'s (2007) research, the widening participation managers in the case study HEIs admitted that there were strong overlaps between recruitment and widening participation work. It was suggested by three of the widening participation managers, for example, that departments that struggled to recruit were more keen to embrace this work than departments that were over-subscribed. As the Widening Participation Manager at Newdale suggested:

'I can understand where people are with this. The argument would be – if you're a department that's recruiting well, why would you bother with widening participation when actually you know it helps your faculty to be taking people with better A Levels?'

This might explain why certain departments were more engaged with out-reach work.

On this point, the Widening Participation Manager at Oldbeam, a Russell Group University, made the following comment:

'I would say that like all universities, that those departments that find it slightly more difficult to recruit, are probably more... more sympathetic to this agenda than departments that are really well over-subscribed, and are selective. So, I think that pragmatism comes to be involved there, so in terms of your question about the departments that are most engaged – the departments that are the most engaged tend to be our science departments, computer science, engineering and so on. And it's not unfair to say that their motivation is linked to recruitment. And you know sometimes to help us achieve our objectives, we have to play more – perhaps more on the recruitment side than I might otherwise – I think it's just being pragmatic really. Yet out there are some very passionate

individuals who do this because they believe it's the right thing, they believe in social inclusion, social justice and so on, you know, and are champions for the cause ...in terms of motivation for their engagement, I think it's variable, and I think for some it is linked more to recruitment – and also recognition that, you know, you've got to start thinking about the fact that more students are likely to be staying local, so it's local activity that becomes more important, even though we are a national recruiter..., So in terms of the departments it's variable, and tends to focus more around our science areas and particularly departments like Chemistry, like Modern Languages, where they've all got issues around their subject and preserving their subject area as well'. (Widening Participation Manager, University of Oldbeam).

The word 'pragmatism' was used by the Widening Participation Manager at Oldbeam and this suggests that the institution was happy to accept this 'recruiting' position because of the benefits it would bring to the organisation. In relation to this point, Morgan-Klein and Murphy (2002, pp.69-70) suggest that 'professed aims such as social inclusion may mask or sit alongside more pragmatic concerns'. It is interesting to note that none of the widening participation managers who were interviewed made any reference to the negative impact that this recruiting position might have on students from under-represented groups. The position was described only in terms of the benefit to the institution; this is the 'supply side' that Duke (2005, p.150) refers to. This appears to reflect the Jones and Thomas (2005) 'academic' model of widening participation, rather than the 'transformative' model that is much more student-centred.

These 'pragmatic concerns' suggested that a rather instrumental view of widening participation work sometimes prevailed. However, the Widening Participation Manager at Oldlaw (a pre-92 university) was keen to point out that although certain departments undertook more work than others, it would be unfair to suggest that departments with

more popular courses did not do their share of widening participation work. She pointed out that departments that struggled to recruit undoubtedly did more of this work, but also cited the example of Psychology: 'Psychology don't have to lift a finger to recruit students, but they do revision schools, and hardly any of these students are coming here. So, it just happens. And there's stuff that happens beyond my team – it's going on all the time'. This member of staff also suggested that even where recruitment was a driver for widening participation work, it was not the sole motivator:

'...academics are always squeezed between teaching and research, and having this other thing placed in the middle – there has to be a strong rationale for them to be doing that – and if that strong rationale is about enhancing the teaching abilities of their own staff and their PhD students, and the possibility that they're doing good works in the community, then they do seem to - all of them - find energy to – not all of the academics but all of the departments – find some energy to do this thing'. (Widening Participation Manager, University of Oldlaw).

Note that the 'strong rationale' for carrying out widening participation work was framed in terms of benefit to individual members of staff, PhD students and departments. This was mentioned before the 'possibility' of 'doing good works in the community'. It could be argued that the order of priorities that was reflected here chimed with New Labour's habit of mentioning the social justice rationale as of secondary importance.

#### **8.4.2 Recruitment: information or persuasion?**

Many researchers (Ball, 2000; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Burke and McManus, 2009) have commented on the lack of transparency that is evident in prospectus documents and on institutional websites. Ball (2000, p.10) refers to the 'blizzard of hype' and 'impression management' that characterises much of the promotional literature. There is a concern that this approach makes it difficult for students to navigate through the information. These approaches appear to be driven by a desire on the part of HEIs to present their institution in the best possible light in order to attract applications from prospective students. In some of the case study HEIs, there appeared to be an element of the 'hard sell' in student recruitment strategies and a blurring of the boundaries between information and persuasion.

Callendar (forthcoming) refers to this in her analysis of bursaries, drawing attention to the ways in which some institutions seemed to be using the bursary system to 'cream skim' the best students and to aid their student recruitment strategies. In such cases, institutional commitment to widening participation might be strongly framed, but this commitment sits within a wider context of competition. Amongst the case study universities, Oldlaw offered entrance scholarships to students who achieved ABB at A Level (but not to students with vocational qualifications). The award of £1000, however, was only available in the first year and was only available to students studying certain subjects. The most popular courses were not on the list.

In Foskett *et al.*'s (2006, p.68) study, one HEI was linking bursaries to end of year results, thereby improving institutional success rates. This was explained in the following way:

'Those who obtain a 2.i grade at the end of each year will receive the whole award for the following year, whereas those falling below will not. However, should a student's performance improve and reach the standard at the end of year 2, they will receive the full award and the amount withheld in year 1. This is designed to encourage and reward achievement and drive up final degree classifications, thus stimulating a benefit to both the student (degree class) and the institution (reputation).'

It could be suggested, however, that the bursaries are more likely to be awarded to students who are already familiar with academic conventions. This privileges certain kinds of social and academic capital that are more likely to be held by middle-class students (cf. Reay *et al.*, 2005). These examples might suggest that institutional competitive aims have taken precedence over concerns about parity for students from under-represented groups. Students were being offered certain benefits as a means of coaxing them onto particular courses at particular institutions. Once there, incentives were being offered in order to encourage students to achieve results that benefitted the league table status of the institution. In this way, it could be argued that institutions were applying widening participation policies in a very instrumental way.

### **8.4.3 *Enthusiasm from individual members of staff***

Despite some evidence that recruitment and market survival played a part in driving an institution's commitment to widening participation, there also appeared to be a number of other motivating factors. As already mentioned, universities did not all exhibit the same levels of anxiety about under-recruitment but all engaged in widening participation activity. A number of the widening participation managers could point to particular members of staff, within their own institutions, who were very enthusiastic about widening participation, and who reportedly engaged in this work because they believed in promoting social justice. The Widening Participation Manager at Oldchurch said:

'we have incredibly high ranking academics come and do completely free work for us – you know, give up their weekends and summer holidays to do stuff for us and they don't take any of the money that they would be entitled to – they do it all for free. And similarly, we have some very early year academics who are not so famous but who will maybe give us 3, 4, 5 weeks of their year in work they will do for us...So I think that's something...right the way across the board there's support. (Widening Participation Manager, University of Oldchurch).

The member of staff at Oldbeam University suggested that the commitment of individuals was 'variable' due to personal views about the widening participation agenda. However, she qualified this by saying that all staff were bound by university policy, and that this ensured that no one department could opt out of widening participation work. This admission of 'variable' commitment came from the institution in the sample that appeared to exhibit the weakest framing of commitment to widening participation work.

In a general sense, it could be suggested that where institutional commitment to widening participation is weakly-framed, there is scope for a variety of different 'voicing sets' within the institution. Some staff will express a commitment to widening participation work whilst others will not. There are also likely to be different levels of commitment to both the national and the local widening participation agenda. In this sense it is possible to see a multi-tiered negotiation of the national widening participation frame. There are likely to be situations in which individual staff or departments strongly engage with the national frame, whilst feeling disappointed by the negotiation of this frame by their institution. This could equally work the other way, with staff feeling fully committed to the local widening participation agenda, whilst retaining some scepticism about elements of the national agenda.

However committed, it could be suggested that isolated staff who are committed to widening participation will find that the effect that they can have is limited if the institutional culture does not support their efforts (cf. Greenbank, 2006). A positive impact on the student experience is more likely to be achieved in a setting in which widening participation is part of the institutional mission, and where a commitment to widening participation is embedded and accepted by all staff (Shaw *et al.*, 2007).

### **8.5 Adapting to the national frame - or opting out?**

Some institutions seemed to pick and choose elements of widening participation work, depending on whether the work impacted positively or negatively on their standards,

perceived quality, and positionality. Greenbank (2006) found that institutions were highly attuned to stereotypes attached to their university and made strong efforts to counteract these stereotypes in marketing literature. As the widening participation managers at both Newdale and Neworth pointed out, there were some negative connotations around being a university that was effective at widening participation. The case study Russell Group institutions appeared to have realised this and were drawing on a more strongly framed discourse of 'prestige' in order to maintain their reputational status. Shaw *et al.* (2007, p.45) suggest that 'each institution has scope to create its own market niche and to recruit students that reflect its own culture, and there is much evidence that this is happening'. Foskett (2002), however, has argued that institutions are colluding with the stratification of the HE system in developing this market niche approach. It represents a way for Russell Group universities to insulate themselves from universities who are known to be effective at widening participation. This means that certain institutions appeared to be carrying out widening participation work performatively: that is, complying with the basic requirements set out by government insofar as these did not conflict with their institutional 'standards' agenda. They were opting out of elements of the agenda that were perceived to conflict with their own local aims and objectives. Comments such as 'This isn't for everyone. 50% of people are not expected to go on to higher education' contrasts with the statement made by the Widening Participation Manager in one of the post-92 institutions: 'Why would you want to exclude people?'

These competing discourses appeared to lead to antagonism between staff in the different types of university. In another example of Greenbank's (2006) institutional stereotyping, the member of staff from Newdale University (a post-92 institution) suggested that the Russell Group's approach to widening participation was 'about dispensing stuff to the poor; you know, what a shame that you weren't born into a middle-class family and could have come here directly; but don't worry, we'll help you on the way'. This member of staff was suggesting that Russell Group institutions were not trying to deal with structural inequalities – they were simply opening their doors to small numbers of students from lower socio-economic groups with 'appropriate' qualifications – but without changing anything about the institution itself. Shaw *et al.* (2007, citing Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p.26) describe this as recruiting 'the least disadvantaged of the most disadvantaged'. This may not be a wholly fair assessment of the situation, but it is interesting that the member of staff had this perception of the widening participation work that was going on in Russell Group universities. It reinforces the view that in certain institutions there was a great deal of negotiation between the national widening participation agenda and local priorities, with local priorities often achieving prominence at the expense of the national agenda. In the case of the two Russell Group universities, attitudes towards the widening participation benchmarks set by HEFCE provided a good example of this.

HEFCE's widening participation benchmarks are designed to give individual HEIs various targets in terms of recruitment of students from certain under-represented groups. Each year, HEFCE publish these benchmarks alongside the progress that has

been made by HEIs. The Widening Participation Managers at both Oldchurch and Oldbeam Universities were critical of the benchmarks. However, whilst the member of staff at Oldbeam University rejected their usefulness completely, the Widening Participation Manager at Oldchurch suggested that the institution had made efforts to work within the spirit of the HEFCE's aims in setting its own benchmarks:

'We do worry. Not about the benchmarks, but about our own figures. We do our own monitoring. So, in our access agreement...we were one of the very few universities who actually put our figures in - in admissions, not applications. We made one of our milestones that we would increase our *admissions* of students to certain percentages and certain numbers. And that was a measure of actually how seriously we were taking it, because we could double our applicants tomorrow if we wanted to'. (Widening Participation Manager, University of Oldchurch).

This seems to indicate a different attitude to that of the Widening Participation Manager at Oldbeam University. The Widening Participation Manager at Oldchurch pointed to some methodological flaws in the benchmarks but indicated that the institution was nevertheless adopting the spirit of HEFCE's agenda, and was seeking other ways to increase the representation of students from under-represented groups. In contrast, the Widening Participation Manager at Oldbeam seemed to disregard the purpose of the benchmarks entirely. Oldbeam's Widening Participation Manager justified this on the grounds that:

'...where we are as a university is reasonably well positioned within the pack and within the universities with whom we would compare ourselves, and I think for this institution, we are not strategically setting ourselves out with a mission to be first in the table'. (Widening Participation Manager, Oldbeam University).

This might indicate that the Labour government's aspirations in terms of getting more under-represented groups into higher education were perceived (by certain sections within Oldbeam University) to be less important than the university's own market position. Here, there was very little evidence of a balancing of the national and local agenda. The local agenda had been given priority.

However, Oldchurch University's first access agreement (submitted in 2005) seemed to demonstrate a more critical attitude towards HEFCE's benchmarks. This document, perhaps written by a member of staff other than the Widening Participation Manager, drew upon much stronger language in voicing concerns about the benchmarks:

'For the time being, our objectives are set against certain Performance Indicator Benchmarks...employed by HEFCE/HESA. These have, however, severe limitations in an Oldchurch context, in that they take insufficient account of the University's entry requirements both in terms of subject qualifications and of levels of qualification.' (University of Oldchurch Access Agreement, 2005, p.6).

The document goes on to suggest that Oldchurch would not aim to meet HEFCE's location-adjusted benchmark for participation from the state sector. Instead, the institution had set itself a target of meeting a lower, self-defined figure (University of Oldchurch, 2005).

These discordant views might suggest weak framing of commitment to widening participation by Oldchurch University. This demonstrates an important point about the extent to which there are multiple messages coming from an institution – both over time

and as a result of different staff perspectives (Shaw *et al.*, 2007). Parker *et al.* (2005, p.154), when interviewing staff in HEIs, found that some referred to 'a conflict between their own professional aims and the aspirations of the institutions in which they work[ed].' This inevitably led, on occasion, to mixed messages and a failure to project one 'institutional' voice.

A further tension point for a number of the case study HEIs (as articulated by widening participation managers) seemed to lie in the balance to be struck between widening participation and perceptions of quality. The Widening Participation Manager at Newdale University suggested that institutions that were committed to widening participation and did it really well, suffered from a perception that the quality of the education was lower: 'it's seen as being about letting people in and dropping standards, and that's what we're always up against.' Newspaper headlines such as 'Universities are dumbing down' (Lipsett, 2009) only add to the portrayal of widening participation as a threat to quality and standards. The Newdale Widening Participation Manager was highly critical of the structural factors that perpetuate educational hierarchies:

'I don't want to sound really negative about it, but all the structures are there to support our existing educational prism within which we operate. And none of that has been addressed, and I don't think it can be because we all have to hold on to A Levels as the gold standard and we've got to have good schools where middle class parents try to get their kids into.' (Widening Participation Manager, Newdale University).

This view is reinforced by Warmington (2007, p.219) who, drawing on McCaig (2003) suggests that before coming to power, 'New Labour began to promote a higher standards agenda as a political signal to aspirational parents that the state system was a safe place to school their children. The standards agenda was coupled with support for the retention of A Levels'. However, in holding on to this notion, it could be suggested that New Labour were effectively signalling that widening participation work was to take place primarily in less prestigious universities, thus preserving the 'elite' universities for the children of the middle- classes. Indeed, the original funding mechanism for widening participation work rewarded universities who did this work well, thus perpetuating the two-tier system that is referred to by Reay *et al.* (2005) and Archer (2007).

In retaining A Levels as the qualification of choice, students who take alternative qualifications, and institutions that welcome these, are perceived (often by the students themselves according to Archer (2007) and Reay *et al.*(2005)), to be of lower quality than institutions that insist on high A Level point scores. The member of staff at Newdale University explained that:

'...there are structural obstacles through the way in which everyone says they are interested in widening participation and actually if you did it really professionally, I bet your reputation would slide to the bottom of the heap. I think that goes back to the way in which the educational conversation is constructed'. (Widening Participation Manager, Newdale University).

Those resistant to the widening participation agenda argue that academic standards for entry cannot be lowered without compromising the ability of the institution to offer

professionally-accredited qualifications. Dillon (2007, p.827), for example, has outlined some of the challenges inherent in 'balancing widening participation with professional requirements'. It could be suggested that weak framing of the widening participation agenda, coupled with strong framing of the standards agenda (at both local and national level), invite such arguments from those keen to retain the status quo.

The Universities of Oldbeam and Oldchurch were aware of this tension between accessibility (widening participation work) and quality (as measured by A Levels). The Widening Participation Manager at Oldbeam said:

'within an institution like ours...there is also a tension between, a need to drive up, you know, a desire to drive up quality, and the way the quality tends to be measured is around A Level performance, therefore you will find that...you look at the University of Oldbeam, you look at Oldchase, you look at Oldmore, the tendency and trend is for A Level grades to be increasing. And obviously that does, sort of – conflict sometimes with some of the widening participation messages.' (Widening Participation Manager, University of Oldbeam).

Here there is a sudden shift in the speaker's phraseology, from 'the *need* to drive up quality' to 'the *desire* to drive up quality'. Where does this agenda come from? Is it a local awareness on the part of the HEI, as articulated by the Widening Participation Manager at Newdale, that there are two perceived types of institution – those that do excellent widening participation work but offer lower status qualifications, and those that exclude certain students but who offer qualifications that are perceived to be of higher value? Or, is this 'quality' discourse driven at a national level by government and the funding mechanisms that control universities? Whichever is the case, there can be no

doubt that widening participation work and quality are seen by some to be mutually exclusive. As already mentioned, it could be argued that this is reinforced by certain universities, who enact widening participation work selectively, and only where the work does not conflict with their market (or league table) position.

One example of this selectivity could be seen in institutional attitudes to 'alternative' qualifications. Much of the out-reach work in elite, over-subscribed institutions (such as Oldchurch and Oldbeam) focused on students with A Levels. Within the case study institutions there was a great deal of evidence of pro-active work – not only in encouraging students to apply to university, but also in making applications (via special access schemes) and supporting the transition to university. However, in concentrating their efforts on A Level achievers, institutions were targeting their widening participation work at quite a narrow spectrum of students. These institutions appeared concerned to avoid any threat to their perceived status. It could be suggested that this narrow concentration on A Levels militates against HEFCE's second strategic widening participation aim, which is to offer 'new opportunities for progression on vocational courses and for lifelong learning' (HEFCE, 2008a, p.20). However, a closer reading of this aim makes clear that such opportunities are largely to be offered in FE colleges and via partnership arrangements between FE and HE. Therefore, although a policy of encouraging widening participation *only* amongst the A Level cohort can be seen as limited in scope, institutions cannot be accused of subverting the government's widening participation agenda. HEFCE has made clear that offering vocational progression routes and lifelong learning is not necessarily expected of *all* HEIs. This has arguably

led to a situation in which HEIs can select the elements of the national widening participation agenda that they can enact without any threat to their existing ethos and structures. This indicates a weak relationship between national and local widening participation agendas.

Despite this national 'get out clause', it could be suggested that attitudes to alternative qualifications (such as GNVQ and Access courses) are highly revealing of institutional commitment to widening participation. The University of Oldbeame, unlike Oldchurch, stated in its prospectus that alternative qualifications would be considered. However, the Widening Participation Manager at Oldbeame qualified this: 'I will say that the nature of our courses – things like Medicine and Dentistry and Law – it's less likely that students will have come in with alternative qualifications, because of the portfolio of our offer'. This could be seen as another example of a two-tier system at work. Students from under-represented groups are being encouraged to invest in their education, with the promise of decent graduate salaries on completion (Warmington, 2007; Purcell *et al.*, 2002). However, Medicine, Dentistry and Law are three degree courses that are likely to lead to careers with very generous salaries, and yet to be admitted to these degrees in a pre-92 university, A Levels are preferred. Evidence (Stanton, 2008; Sutton Trust, 2008) suggests that students from certain under-represented groups are more likely than traditional students to be applying to university with *non-A* Level qualifications. This means that courses such as Medicine, Dentistry and Law are likely to remain the preserve of middle-class students and casts doubt on the Labour government's implication that all students will reap a decent return on their educational 'investment'.

As already mentioned, a Universities UK report found that only five percent of students accepted on medicine and dentistry courses in 2004 were from 'semi-routine occupational backgrounds' (Sutton Trust, 2008, p.17). Beyond university, Warmington (2007, p.224) suggests that 'the ...earning potential of graduates remains deeply furrowed by inequalities of social class, age, gender, [and] race.'

The University of Oldchurch did not accept vocational qualifications at all. As their Widening Participation Manager explained:

'our big argument, as is lots of Russell Group's, with the HEFCE performance indicators and benchmarks, is that they're based on the tariff, and we don't use the tariff because the tariff can include non-academic qualifications. So, loads and loads of people will have 360 tariff points but won't have the number of As that we would want them to have, so it just doesn't work for us...' (Widening Participation Manager, University of Oldchurch).

This clearly excludes large numbers of students from under-represented groups who have alternative qualifications. In this sense, the widening participation agenda implies access only to certain universities. Shaw *et al.*'s (2007, p.94) report cites a member of staff from a pre-92 institution who described widening participation as being about 'finding ways to tap the pool of available talent among under-represented and disadvantaged groups' but in ways that are 'firmly linked to meritocratic principles in terms of entry'. The discourse of 'meritocratic principles', in the context of admissions, allows HEIs to justify their retention of high A Level point scores as the main way of rationing places.

Shaw *et al.* (2007, p.65), however, suggest that some of the institutions that were drawing on this 'meritocracy' discourse were themselves cream-skimming students from under-represented groups who were perceived to be 'easier to support'. It is suggested by Shaw *et al.* (2007, p.66) that the 'lower ranking' institutions were finding that many of their core students were being tempted away, whilst they were increasingly engaged in teaching 'cohorts who would not previously have entered higher education.' Shaw *et al.* (2007, p.66) go on to suggest that this might mean that overall, participation is only 'genuinely' being widened in 'lower-ranking' institutions. They draw attention to the way in which certain institutions see widening participation purely as a pre-entry issue. Even where participation is encouraged, it is within institutionally-determined parameters. In this way, it could be argued that institutions are subscribing to only certain elements of the government agenda.

With the case study HEIs, an example of this can be seen in the way that neither Oldchurch nor Oldbeam had any plans to offer foundation degrees. As the Widening Participation Manager at Oldbeam explained: 'we are not in that market place'. Oldchurch, similarly, did not engage with the 'Looked-After Children' agenda. The Widening Participation Manager at Oldchurch justified this on the grounds that these students were most unlikely to hold top grade A Levels. The member of staff from Oldbeam University also stated that there were other institutions in the city that would be more suitable for mature students. This is despite the fact that one of HEFCE's key performance targets for 2006-11 was 'to increase the proportion of students (full-time and part-time, both young and mature) from under-represented groups in higher

education' (HEFCE, 2008a). These institutions, therefore, seemed to be allowed to opt out of widening participation initiatives that they felt conflicted with their 'quality' or reputational objectives. In common with Foskett *et al.* (2006), Shaw *et al.* (2007, p.45) suggest that this is an example of certain HEIs 'colluding with the stratification of society in selecting their market niche'.

A simplistic reading of this situation would suggest that institutions (such as Neworth, Newdale and Newbede) that accept vocational qualifications were working within the spirit of the government's widening participation aims and objectives, whilst institutions that were luke-warm or resistant to alternative qualifications, were not. However, the picture is not quite so clear cut. The HEFCE strategic priorities state that institutions should be allowed to develop and deliver widening participation work in ways 'that are consistent with their own mission' (HEFCE, 2008a). Therefore, institutions could argue that accepting students with vocational qualifications is not consistent with their mission to educate 'the brightest and best students' and to maintain their position as a 'world-class university'. As already mentioned, HEFCE have effectively written a 'get out clause' for institutions that consider that certain widening participation activity clashes with other institutional priorities. These institutions can therefore legitimately claim that they were working within the spirit of the government's widening participation agenda, despite the fact that they were excluding large numbers of the widening participation cohort via such a policy. An optimistic reading of this is that the Labour government (via HEFCE) was concerned to allow degrees of local autonomy. A less generous reading is that the government was unwilling to oppose institutions whose commitment to widening

participation was uncertain. Weak framing at national level had arguably led to a 'picking and choosing' culture where HEIs and widening participation work was concerned.

In such cases, the local agenda and mission of the institution had been privileged over the Labour government's national aims and objectives. It could be suggested that Oldchurch regarded the government agenda as a threat to its classification (or identity) as a selective, elite institution. The University therefore responded via strong framing of its 'quality' and 'prestige'. Bernstein (1990, p.25) explains that 'any attempt to weaken the classification – that is, to reduce the insulation so as to change 'voice' (discourse) will provoke the power relationship to re-establish the relations between...categories by restoring the insulation'. In this case, the Labour government was perhaps attempting (albeit weakly) to reduce the insulations between universities by promoting the access agenda, so that widening participation at least sat alongside the 'quality' discourse. However, in certain institutions this seemed to represent a threat to 'voice', which in turn resulted in efforts to re-stress or strongly frame the discourse of elitism and selectivity. Thus the local, institutional framing of the standards/professional identity discourse was strong, and framing of widening participation was weakened.

Despite this, there were elements of the Labour government's agenda that seemed to be wholly embraced – particularly where this dovetailed with the institution's own ethos and mission. Oldbeam University undoubtedly *rejected* certain elements of the government's widening participation agenda but it did use the language of the market

when talking about widening participation. Widening participation was described by Oldbeam's Widening Participation Manager as being the 'core business' of 'old polytechnics', and much of the decision-making around widening participation was described in business-like terms. It was explained, for example, that courses that once attracted mature students had been cut back because of a strategic decision on the part of the University that 'that's not really a large percentage of our market place'.

This alignment of business and widening participation could also be seen in the Oldlaw Widening Participation Manager's description of progress: 'I think if you're doing this right, then what you're doing is building on the back of the big motor that drives everything forwards – which is business. It's about having a strong business case for doing an activity, and if you're doing that right you can start to be inclusive'. This perhaps suggests that the New Labour habit of aligning interests that seem to be at odds with one another (Fairclough, 2000, referred to in Chapter 2, section 2.8) had been unproblematically embraced by staff in two of the case study institutions (Oldlaw and Oldbeam). Mirza (2003, cited in Archer, 2007, p.643) has suggested that New Labour policy discourse was focussed on an 'economics of diversity', where diversity work was encouraged only where it made economic sense. Greenbank (2006, p.203), drawing on evidence from the HEIs in his study, indicated that this had filtered down to HEIs, arguing that universities of all types 'articulate[d] an economic rationale for adopting widening participation policies'. This 'economics of diversity' seemed to have permeated the thinking of certain HEIs such that widening participation only had a place where it could contribute to the institution's broader competitive aims.

One of the case study institutions, however, was able to give some examples of pro-activity in terms of widening participation work, showing a willingness to go above and beyond the requirements as laid out by government. This particular institution, Newbede (a university college), had set itself a number of targets that were unrelated to its benchmarks. As an institution, Newbede recognised that it had a particular problem attracting men onto its teaching courses, and, as a result, 85% of students at the institution were female. This challenge, being unique to the institution, did not form part of the benchmark targets that were set for Newbede University by HEFCE. Nevertheless, Newbede University had highlighted it as a widening participation challenge, and decided to address the issue regardless of the fact that there was no funding to do it. As the Widening Participation Manager pointed out, 'I think the College would be seeking a more diverse population whether those benchmarks were there or not.' This attitude stood in stark contrast to that of certain other institutions, where there was very much a sense of seeing the benchmarks as unhelpful and something to be either ignored or complied with in a limited way.

Despite strong framing of the Labour government agenda around benchmarks, there were other areas in which Newbede University seemed to reject some of the government discourses around widening participation. As an institution, Newbede avoided the language of business and 'market forces'. The Widening Participation Manager framed widening participation purely in terms of social justice, inclusivity and fairness; justifying widening participation work as a 'moral imperative'. Widening

participation seemed to form a core part of the mission of the institution, and this was evident both in the literature and in the way the Widening Participation Manager talked about Newbede's approach to widening participation. As with other case study institutions, this could be seen as an example of the local agenda taking priority over the government agenda. However, in this case, there seemed to be no particular conflict with the government's aims and objectives. There was simply a sense that there was no need to use the language of the market in order to justify widening participation work.

## **8.6 Conclusion**

Drawing on Bernstein (1990), the tensions reported by widening participation managers in the pre-92 universities, might suggest that the New Labour government's widening participation agenda represented a challenge to the way in which the pre-92 institutions were seeking to classify themselves. This tension seemed to manifest itself at local, institutional level via strong framing of discourses of 'quality' and a reassertion by these institutions of what they saw as their 'speciality' or defining values. This led to a sense of rejection of the national widening participation agenda (or access discourse) in favour of local priorities built around exclusivity. However, it is important to point out that these tensions were not reportedly experienced by all of the case study HEIs, and at times they were only reportedly experienced in certain areas of work. There were also examples of widening participation managers drawing on government discourse to describe their widening participation work, and expressing their commitment to certain elements of the national agenda in strong terms.

Survival in a competitive higher education market led some staff to suggest that commitment to widening participation was an economic necessity, rather than an ideological or positive political choice. Thus positionality appeared to play its part in the negotiation that took place in terms of widening participation work and commitment to it. It could be suggested that such work drifted away from 'benefit to the student', and towards 'benefit to the institution'. Even in institutions where there was a good 'fit' between institutional aims and objectives and the national widening participation agenda, there was also an element of tension around doing what might be best for students and organising for survival in a competitive market. As Duke (2005, p.150) has suggested, institutions are still focussed on the 'supply-side' rather than the student.

The negotiations were therefore multi-layered and worked in different ways in different institutions. Nevertheless, the fact that such negotiations took place at all indicated that the national widening participation agenda had not radically altered the pre-existing culture and ethos of the case study institutions. Most institutions seemed to be engaged in fitting widening participation into their culture rather than altering the culture to accommodate the Labour government's agenda. This desire to retain the status quo has been commented on by a number of researchers (Bowl, 2003; Parker *et al.*, 2005; Reay *et al.*, 2005). In this sense, the government's attempt to change the 'voice' of institutions that fore-ground their elite credentials has had little effect. In cases where there was dissonance within and between national and local agendas, the local agenda seemed to take precedence, indicating that institutional ideology exerted a more

powerful influence than government policy. It could be suggested that by co-locating social justice and markets – and by allowing institutions autonomy in the way they implemented widening participation work - the government were giving HEIs licence to use widening participation work to serve their competitive and market-based aims and objectives. In this way, weak framing at the national level allowed certain HEIs to ‘corporatise’ the widening participation agenda at the local level.

Having analysed the ways in which the case study HEIs discursively justified and accounted for their widening participation work, the next chapter considers the operationalisation of widening participation activity. There is a particular focus on the balance between in-reach and out-reach work as described by widening participation managers and via institutional websites. This information acts as a context for the more detailed analysis (in chapter 10) of pre-entry and admissions activity.

## CHAPTER NINE

### **OUT-REACH OR IN-REACH? THE CASE STUDY HEIS' BROAD APPROACHES TO WIDENING PARTICIPATION**

#### **9.1 Introduction**

The information in this section draws on data from the case study websites and interviews with widening participation managers in order to outline the scope of widening participation work in the case study HEIs. There is a particular focus on where in the student lifecycle widening participation work would appear to take place. The chapter does not claim to provide an exhaustive list of widening participation activity and is based on reported activity rather than direct observation. Nevertheless, this information is useful in building up a picture of how much of the widening participation work in the case study HEIs was focussed on the 'out-reach' or pre-entry stage, and how much was focussed on the 'in-reach' (Osborne, 2003) or post-entry stage. In this way, the information provides a means of assessing broad institutional commitment to widening participation.

#### **9.2 Defining 'in-reach' and 'out-reach' work**

The difference between in-reach and out-reach is an important one. Out-reach broadly focuses on pre-entry work, and is designed to encourage people (usually in schools and

colleges) to 'aspire to' a university education. More specifically, out-reach work might involve encouraging students to make applications to universities, with staff from HEIs making efforts to explain the application and admissions process to potential applicants. In-reach refers to the work that a university does to support their students once enrolled. This might involve tailoring courses to meet the needs of students who require flexible provision (movement between full and part-time study, for example), and adapting teaching and learning practices to suit a range of learning styles (as well as variable levels of preparedness for higher level study). In relation to the Jones and Thomas (2005) models, it could be suggested that an out-reach focussed approach fits more closely with the academic model. An in-reach focussed approach could be said to be more transformative.

The range of widening participation work that was carried out in the case study HEIs appeared to vary widely. Some institutions seemed to take the view that widening participation work spanned the entire student life-cycle and involved every aspect of the student experience. Other institutions focussed very much on pre-entry work: in these cases, the post-entry stage, which included the structure of courses, and teaching and learning, remained largely untouched by the widening participation agenda. Similar findings have been reported by HEFCE (2006) and Shaw *et al.* (2007).

### **9.3 Out-reach activity in the case study HEIs**

A Universities UK report in 2005 (cited in HEFCE, 2006), found that the majority of widening participation work was focused on the pre-entry stage (64%). Only 6% of work was focused on retention and success. A broadly similar picture emerged from the case study HEIs in this research study in 2007. The majority of widening participation work seemed to be based on working with local schools and colleges at the pre-entry stage. Students from years 6 to 12 were targeted, and either received visits from university staff, or were invited to the university to attend specific activities. Some of these activities appeared to be similar across the range of institutions. For instance, summer schools were offered by all six case study HEIs, as were 'taster days' or 'HE experience' days. However, there were variations within this. Oldchurch University had replaced HE taster days with 'challenge days'. These interventions were reportedly designed to introduce students both to the range of subjects that could be studied at Oldchurch and to the teaching and learning styles that were used in higher education. Similarly, some of the summer schools (at Oldbeam, Oldlaw and Newbede University) had a subject-specific focus which set them apart from more general introductions to the HE environment.

Most of the case study HEIs were also offering mentoring schemes, where university students volunteered to spend time with students in schools and colleges in order to encourage them with their studies and to promote the benefits of participation in higher education. Most institutions also worked in conjunction with Aimhigher to offer specific

events, such as the Aimhigher Roadshow. The Aimhigher Roadshow is ‘a DIUS initiative designed to promote the benefits and dispel the myths about Higher Education’ (Aimhigher, 2008a). Aimhigher itself is a government-funded programme ‘which aims to widen participation in higher education by raising the aspirations and developing the abilities of young people from under-represented groups’ (Aimhigher, 2008b). Other activities that were offered by HEIs included workshops to introduce students to specific subjects. These might be subjects which generally attract low numbers of students from under-represented groups. Some events were offered to a range of students who were under-represented in higher education, whilst others targeted a specific under-represented group.

Whilst there was some similarity in these out-reach activities, there was also a great deal of variation and some of the case study HEIs offered activities that were uniquely associated with their particular institution. The range of widening participation activities was therefore wide and each institution had the flexibility to offer unique provision to address local issues. Some of the initiatives had been running for many years, and pre-dated the New Labour government’s interest in widening participation. The University of Oldchurch’s scheme to encourage ethnic minority applications, which was reported to have been operating since 1989, was one example of this. The case studies’ range of widening participation activities included locally and institutionally driven projects, as well as projects incentivised by the government, such as summer schools.

The pre-entry stage also includes the application and admissions process. Some case study institutions operated special initiatives designed to assist students from under-represented groups in gaining an offer of a place at university. Neworth (a post-92 university) was involved in a scheme that guaranteed a conditional offer of a place at university for 14 year old students who were identified as having the potential to go on to higher education. It was designed to motivate students who might otherwise become disengaged. The students had to fulfil certain criteria, one of which was 'to be diligent in handing work in... and actually achieving in the school setting' (cited from an interview with Neworth's Widening Participation Manager). However, if students met the criteria, they were guaranteed a place at one of the universities in the scheme.

Oldbeam (a Russell Group university) offered an alternative route through which students from under-represented groups could apply. After completing a supplementary application form, successful students received an offer of a place that was slightly lower than the standard offer; typically amounting to 40 UCAS points. Oldchurch (another Russell Group university) operated a similar scheme at the application stage although it did not necessarily make lower offers. The Oldchurch scheme invited applicants to apply for a place if their grade predictions were lower than Oldchurch expected, but where there was some circumstance that accounted for this (such as disrupted schooling, ill health, or where the student's school and family background did not support progression). Oldchurch also offered a week-long residential course to support students who had been offered a place that was dependent upon success in the Step

papers. 'Step' is a qualification beyond the A Level that is sometimes part of the offer made to students applying to elite universities.

It could be argued, however, that special access schemes are of little benefit to students from certain under-represented groups if the courses that are offered by the institution are inflexible and geared towards 18 year old school-leavers with A Levels. Offering a range of courses (such as foundation degrees, part time degrees, and 'bite-sized' learning opportunities) and accepting alternative qualifications (such as GNVQ, BTEC and Access to HE qualifications) would therefore seem to be one means by which institutions could show commitment to the widening participation agenda. The case study HEIs, however, did not all offer foundation degrees, and in some cases there was no evidence of courses being tailored to the needs of a more diverse student population. Similarly, whilst some of the case study HEIs welcomed alternative qualifications, others set out a clear preference for A Levels. The Oldchurch prospectus (University of Oldchurch, 2007a), for example, suggested that vocational A Levels and GNVQs were not a good preparation for Oldchurch courses, and would therefore not be considered. This can be contrasted with the situation at Neworth University, where the website made it clear that lack of educational qualifications need not be a barrier to participation: 'We look at a full range of experience and qualifications when working out if you are eligible to apply' (University of Neworth, 2008).

#### **9.4 'In-reach' activity in the case study HEIs**

Most of the case study institutions talked about a range of support available to aid students at the post-entry stage. It was suggested by widening participation managers at four of the six institutions that their institutions had good support structures for all students, and that these support structures would suit the needs of students from under-represented groups. The Widening Participation Manager at Oldbeam commented that 'the ethos of the University in that area...is to develop frameworks for all students – recognising that for some students it is more applicable or they are more likely to access them than perhaps others'. The implication was that students from under-represented groups did not have support needs that were radically different from the traditional student population. Once again, this conforms to the 'academic' model of widening participation as outlined by Jones and Thomas (2005). The structure of the university had not been adapted to meet the needs of a more diverse student body. Instead, students from under-represented groups were expected to use existing facilities that were developed with 'all students' in mind.

The types of support that were mentioned by staff in the case study institutions broadly fell into three categories: financial support, pastoral support, and teaching and learning support. Staff at Neworth and Newdale (both post-92 universities) pointed out that retention was a key issue, particularly with students from under-represented groups, and that decent support structures were therefore very important in retaining students. Both of these institutions seemed to recognise that the support structures needed to adapt to

the needs of students, rather than expecting students from under-represented groups simply to tap into pre-existing support.

The members of staff from Neworth, Newdale (both post-92 institutions) and Oldchurch (a Russell Group institution) mentioned the importance of teaching and learning as a means of supporting students. The Oldchurch Widening Participation Manager drew attention to the fact that much of the teaching was one-to-one, or in very small groups, and that this 'personalised learning approach' was very beneficial to students, and thus aided retention. Existing structures were therefore thought to be suitable for under-represented groups without any need for institutional change. The Widening Participation Manager at Neworth, however, talked in more transformative-inspired terms, and suggested that the teaching and learning needed to adapt to the diverse student population, and should take account of a range of learning styles. Research carried out by Hockings *et al.* (2007) reinforces this point. Similarly, the Widening Participation Manager from Newdale recognised that induction to teaching was something that should happen over a long period of time in recognition of the fact that not all students arrived at university fully prepared for higher level study. Newdale also tracked students through mechanisms such as attendance registers for certain courses. This allowed for non-attendance to be picked up, and problems addressed at an early stage. The Widening Participation Manager at Newdale said:

'It might seem a little bit school-like, but the whole element of register taking is part of professionalisation; but also it's a sign that the institution cares – instead of taking a register as a negative thing, actually it's about saying "we really want you

here, you're paying money for this, and if you can't do that, we want to know if you're ill, can we help you?"

This support was offered within departments, rather than by a centralised student support service.

The other three case study institutions (Oldbeam, Oldlaw and Newbede) did not mention teaching and learning issues in relation to support 'on course' but they did draw attention to the centralised student support services. These services were often referred to as pastoral 'care' or support, and included the disability service, the counselling service, careers guidance and study skills support. This confidence in the 'peripheral' support services suggested that the teaching and learning environment had remained largely unchanged. In an earlier research study, Layer *et al.* (2002 cited in Thomas, 2005b, p.100) had found that 'less than one third of HEIs [had] explicit links between learning and teaching and widening participation strategies'. This indicates a failure to recognise that students from diverse backgrounds might require some attention to be paid to the delivery of the course itself because this is where their success or failure will take place (cf. Hockings *et al.*, 2007; Shaw *et al.*, 2007).

Neworth (a post-92 institution) seemed to have the most acute awareness of the importance of an embedded rather than 'bolt-on' approach to support. This was summarised by their Widening Participation Manager:

'it would be a complete avoidance of our responsibilities not to embed a strategy for supporting students when they come to us – and it is about the whole time that they're with us, and we know that students will come...to some extent prepared in certain areas but not so much in others, and we need to work with them on that. So the teaching and learning is very important around this, and, you know, it's about good access to tutors, it's about good feedback, it's about assessments that are clear and understandable, it's about pastoral support, it's about good student support services, it's about a whole range of things which is about making life within the institution, not just comfortable, but a very happy experience really, and that's partly about the social – the non-work related elements of being part of a university community, but it's also very much about teaching and learning, and what goes on in the classroom, and about being flexible enough to deal with different types of learning styles that students bring with them.' (Widening Participation Manager, University of Neworth).

Staff from some of the institutions also referred to financial support as an important element in terms of supporting students from widening participation backgrounds.

Neworth offered a regional cash-back scheme as part of their bursary structure.

Similarly, Oldchurch's prospectus and website suggested that the university had made a commitment that 'no UK student should be prevented from taking up their place or forced to leave for financial reasons'. Other members of staff referred to financial support as part of the wider student support service but this again was based on the premise that this existing provision would meet the needs of a more diverse population without any need for change.

There was no clear divide between *types* of university in terms of the support that was provided to students who were enrolled, although Newdale and Neworth, both post-92 universities, spoke of the widest range of support, including both transitions and adaptations to the teaching and learning environment. Therefore there was a sense that support for students from under-represented groups in these two institutions was more

embedded than elsewhere. Oldchurch, a Russell Group university, seemed to be in a unique position due to its one-to-one tutorial system and its ability to provide financial support to a level that could prevent students from leaving. The generous level of resources available at Oldchurch partly explains this approach but it could also suggest that widening participation was taken seriously beyond the pre-entry stage. The other three institutions spoke only of the 'on course' support provided by centralised services, with no reference to teaching and learning or transitions arrangements. This might suggest something about the ethos of these institutions. It might alternatively reflect the fact that those in the widening participation manager role were only concerned with out-reach and admissions work. Their remits did not stretch to support for students from under-represented groups who actually enrolled. In this way, out-reach and in-reach were insulated from one another. In-reach was largely seen as the responsibility of other sections of the university. As already mentioned, this approach seemed to reflect the academic model that Jones and Thomas (2005) refer to, and stands in contrast to the more transformative approach that would involve altering the structures of the university in order to better support a more diverse student body.

### **9.5 Organisational structure as a facilitator of widening participation work?**

Arguably, the place of widening participation in the organisational structure suggests something about the relative importance attached to in-reach and out-reach activity in the case study HEIs. There appeared to be a number of different models at work in the case study institutions. In some cases, there were 'widening participation departments'

that existed as part of the central administration. In other cases, there were no separate widening participation offices, and the widening participation work took place across the institution. However, most institutions had members of staff whose sole remit involved the co-ordination of widening participation work. It is suggested that where these staff were positioned within the organisational structure was quite revealing of the institutional balance that was struck between in-reach and out-reach.

At Newdale (a post-92 university), the Widening Participation Manager worked in the Strategic Planning Department, whilst at Neworth (another post-92 university), the equivalent role was based in a Department for Educational Partnerships. At these universities, where widening participation could be said to be a core part of the mission, searching for 'widening participation' on the website yielded no results. This was because the widening participation work spanned several divisions within the University, and perhaps also because these institutions, as the member of staff from Neworth suggested, saw widening participation as 'so much a part and parcel of what we do'.

This is in contrast to the Russell Group institutions, where there were clearly defined widening participation departments. At Oldchurch, widening participation was part of the admissions office, although the Widening Participation Manager pointed out that other areas of the university operated their own widening participation schemes, often drawing on their own staff to carry out this work. At Oldbeam, the widening participation function (called 'outreach') was placed within marketing services. This could suggest a 'bolt on' rather than embedded approach, with the focus on recruitment at the pre-entry and

admissions stage, rather than support on course. As Shaw *et al.* (2007) have suggested, a 'bolt-on' structure encourages the view that widening participation work is carried out by a handful of people within a dedicated part of the university administration, which militates against an embedded approach.

Until mid-2007, this was also the case at Oldlaw, the other pre-92 university in the sample. However, in 2007 there was a restructure so that the 'Assistant Registrar (Widening Participation)' working within the admissions office, became 'Head of School and College Services' working within the marketing department. The 'Widening Participation' department had disappeared from the organisational structure, to be replaced by a department of 'School and College Services'. The placing of this department within the marketing office perhaps suggests that widening participation had come to be viewed as synonymous with student recruitment. This change was accompanied by some alterations to Oldlaw's widening participation web pages. Where previously there had been references to support on course and mature students, after August 2007, such references had disappeared. This implied a shift of emphasis towards the pre-entry stage; the new focus being on recruitment of school and college-leavers.

A similar model could be seen at Newbede (a university college), where the Schools and Colleges Liaison Manager was responsible for both widening participation and student recruitment. This merging of the two functions again suggested an emphasis on widening participation as simply being about pre-entry and admissions, rather than

support throughout the student lifecycle (as highlighted by Shaw *et al.*, 2007 and Dodgson and Bolam, 2002 ). The Widening Participation Manager at Oldbeam certainly suggested that there was a clear boundary around her role:

'my role...really, stops when they get through the door. I'm not about support when they get here. We have a division called Student Life, and in there is someone called an Induction and Progression Manager, and that general support, once the student gets here, really sits within the area of Student Life. And actually when the previous person who did my role left, it was a conscious exercise to split that work really, and also why my job title is actually outreach, rather than widening participation'. (Widening Participation Manager, University of Oldbeam).

The member of staff at Oldbeam University did, therefore, describe a commitment to 'on-programme' support for students. However, it is interesting to note that there was a separate department to deal with the pre-entry and admission of students from under-represented groups, but not a separate department to deal with support 'on course' for students from under-represented groups. Once the students arrived, although support was available, the support was offered in exactly the same way as it was for the traditional students. Burke (2006) argues that this avoids 'othering' students in the provision of a 'remedial' service. Evidence (Dodgson and Bolam, 2002; Bowl, 2003; Crozier *et al.*, 2008), however, suggests that some students want some additional support, at the transitional stage and beyond, in order to succeed in their studies.

The variety of 'umbrella' terms for widening participation might suggest that widening participation held an ambiguous place within institutional structures. In the six case study institutions, there was certainly a lack of uniformity in terms of the larger

department that widening participation was positioned within. These variations suggested very different interpretations of how widening participation fitted into the work of the university, with different balances struck between in-reach and out-reach activity.

## **9.6 Conclusion**

In conclusion, whilst all of the case study HEIs could report on a range of out-reach activity, the range of in-reach activity appeared to be more limited. Thomas (2001, p.12) has argued that commitment to in-reach is important as a means of retaining students from under-represented groups, pointing out that 'providing education in a more accessible location, without offering appropriate personal and support services, may be insufficient.' The chapter has provided an assessment of the relative importance that the case study HEIs seemed to attach to the pre-entry versus post-entry stages of the student lifecycle. It has revealed that whilst all of the case study HEIs could report extensive out-reach activity, there was much patchier commitment to in-reach activity. There seemed to be an expectation (in some cases) that once admitted, students from under-represented groups would fit into existing structures. It has been suggested (Bowl, 2003; Reay *et al.*, 2005) that this is highly problematic in widening participation terms.

Having provided this contextual information, the next chapter offers a detailed analysis of the 'operationalisation' of widening participation at the pre-entry and admissions stages in the case study HEIs. These stages have been chosen because the extensive

pre-entry and admissions work of the case study HEIs provides for a degree of comparison across the case study sites. More specifically, and in keeping with the focus of this thesis on discursive representations, the chapter considers the practice of widening participation in the case study HEIs as it is presented via prospectuses, websites and open day discourses. These documents and settings represent a key interface between institution and prospective student; indeed, the prospectus is often the first contact that a student will have with an HEI. It is therefore important to consider the extent to which these mediums 'speak to' students from under-represented groups, particularly when the broader target audience includes more traditional students. An analysis of the discourses used in prospectus documents and in open days settings will reveal something about the 'message' that the institution wishes to present; providing an indication of the positioning of both the speciality of the institution and the positioning of student applicants. The purpose of this analysis of discourse practice is to assess the ways in which the case study HEIs were constructing and framing their commitment to widening participation within institutional marketing objectives.

## CHAPTER TEN

### 'OPERATIONALISING' WIDENING PARTICIPATION AT THE PRE-ENTRY AND ADMISSIONS STAGES

#### 10.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the 'whole institution' (Shaw *et al.*, 2007, p.44) presentation of commitment to widening participation by the case study HEIs (as expressed in marketing literature, policy documents and via staff in open days settings). In other words, having outlined in the previous chapter the broad range of widening participation activity that HEIs (including the case study HEIs) engaged in, this chapter focuses on the practice or 'operationalisation' of widening participation at the pre-entry and admissions stages. It identifies potential connections or disconnections between staff descriptions of commitment to widening participation and certain elements of practice, offering an analysis of what this suggests about the place of widening participation within the wider institutional culture. The pre-entry and admissions stages have been selected because work in this area can be readily compared across the six case study sites. This comparison would have been more difficult for later stages of the student life-cycle because some of the case study HEIs appeared to offer only limited support beyond the admissions stage.

The first part of the chapter draws on elements of Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis in relation to specific features of the prospectus documents of the case study HEIs. The second part of the chapter considers the framing devices used to construct institutional attitudes towards alternative qualifications and the positioning of students from under-represented groups. This part of the chapter draws on information from policy documents, open day observations and interviews with widening participation managers in the case study HEIs. The final part of the chapter analyses the access agreements of the case study HEIs as a means of assessing practical commitment to the widening participation agenda.

## **10.2 Discourses of widening participation in the prospectus**

When studying the decision-making process in relation to university applications, Reay *et al.* (2005, p.142) found that 'by far the most widely used source of information cited by both the mature students and the younger students and their parents were universities' own prospectuses'. The same research study found that some working-class students were reliant solely on the prospectus when deciding which university to attend (Reay *et al.*, 2005, p.142). This was because the students often did not have the time or money to attend open days (Reay *et al.*, 2005, p.147). Prospectus documents therefore represent a key means by which the widening participation message can be conveyed (or not) to prospective students.

It might be assumed that institutional literature, such as prospectuses, would reinforce the widening participation messages that were reportedly highlighted to students via specific outreach activities. However, there were some heterogeneous discourses at work in the prospectus documents of the six case study institutions. The prospectuses did not always appear to mirror the commitment to widening participation that was articulated by the widening participation managers. Many researchers (Ball, 2000; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Shaw *et al.*, 2007) have commented on the tendency for institutions to use prospectuses as a marketing tool; helping to present the institution as a 'brand' (Foskett, *et al.*, 2006). It could be suggested that the information contained within these documents is therefore highly stage-managed. Shaw *et al.* (2007, p.44) argue that this 'whole institution' marketing relies on the HEI:

'building on the existing cultural capital of the recipient...in other words creating marketing materials that appear culturally familiar to some groups while risking excluding others'.

In Bernstein's (1990, p.24) terms, this sort of document sets down 'demarcation markers' and 'recognition rules' that classify the institution and its students in particular ways.

When analysing texts, Fairclough (1995, p.2) suggests that 'Vocabulary, grammar, metaphor, presuppositions, structure and style all provide a useful means by which an analyst can draw some conclusions about the positioning that is going on in a text'. Within the context of this chapter, it is the positioning by the case study HEIs of both

student applicants and the 'speciality' of the institution, that is of particular interest. As Shaw *et al.* (2007, p.44) argue:

'the way the HEI presents itself, in the broadest sense, tells the market what sort of student it is looking to recruit'.

In this way, it is possible to draw some conclusions about the framing (strong, weak or otherwise) of certain elements of the institutional agenda. It is the prospectuses that will form the main focus of this section, but it is worth pointing out that much of the information in the prospectus documents of the case study HEIs was mirrored on the case study websites.

### **10.2.1 The 'Welcome' Message and the positioning of widening participation**

Prospectuses were requested via on-line ordering forms for all six of the case study institutions in February 2007. There were notable differences in terms of the information that arrived. The University of Neworth sent a detailed welcome letter, a 'Money Matters' leaflet (University of Neworth, 2006) and a 'Visitor's Guide' (University of Neworth, 2007b) in the prospectus pack. Newbede University included a letter and a 'welcome' booklet (Newbede University, undated). These letters, in which the tone was welcoming and where further enquiries were encouraged, gave the impression of institutions that were seeking to include rather than exclude prospective students. Reay *et al.* (2005, p.140) found that the new universities in their study 'promote[d] themselves as accessible, with wide appeal, and emphasise[d] social aspects of university life as

much if not more than academic aspects'. The short leaflets (Neworth's 'Money Matters' and Newbede's 'Welcome') similarly suggested accessibility by demonstrating a recognition of the barriers that might prevent prospective students from applying. The Newbede welcome booklet said:

'Newbede is an open, forward looking community that celebrates diversity and welcomes applications from all students regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religious affiliation or disability. We are committed to widening access to Higher Education for all and providing any help necessary to people who are under-represented in the sector' (Newbede University, undated, p.2) .

In this case, the framing of the widening participation message appeared to be strong due to the consistency with the description of institutional commitment that was provided by Newbede's Widening Participation Manager.

There are several stylistic features of prospectus documents that mark them out as a particular genre. The 'welcome message' on the inside cover is one example of this. Four of the case study HEIs included a welcome message from the Vice Chancellor or Principal (Oldlaw, Oldchurch, Oldbeam and Newbede Universities). In contrast, the welcome messages included in the Neworth and Newdale prospectuses (both post-92 institutions) had no author. This could be seen as a positive move in terms of widening participation because it avoided the alienating potential of a message from a white, middle-class, male professor: the image of such a person as the leader of the university might be suggestive of the type of student potentially seen as desirable by the institution. In contrast, the disembodied author reduces the sense of 'otherness' that

might otherwise be felt by non-traditional students (cf. Archer *et al.*, 2003; Bowl, 2003; Reay *et al.*, 2005). Neworth and Newdale Universities therefore seemed to reject the elite, exclusive image that was drawn upon by some of the other institutions in their welcome message to students (outlined below).

The Vice Chancellor at the University of Oldbeam (a Russell Group university), used exclusive language on almost every line of the welcome message, forcefully positioning the institution as an old, selecting institution. The age and established nature of the University were stressed first and foremost, and the University was described as a place that has 'welcomed scholars and academics' for 'over 100 years'. Students were not mentioned until the second paragraph, and even then they were mentioned in the same sentence as 'academic ancestors' and 'world class achievement' (University of Oldbeam, 2006, p.4). No mention was made of widening participation, or the importance of including a diverse range of students. Bernstein (1990, p.47) suggests that 'subjects are selectively created, positioned and oppositioned' through these 'semiotic grammars'. In this case, it could be suggested that it is high-achieving school-leavers with A Levels who are the intended target of the strongly framed messages of high 'academic' standards (standards that were also described by the Widening Participation Manager of the institution). Drawing on Burke (2006, p.87), this discourse 're-privileges...certain middle-class tastes, values and cultural capital'. From a widening participation point of view, this message fails to take account of the exclusionary potential of certain discursive practices.

The Oldchurch University welcome message also drew on academic, traditionalist language (cf. Williams, 1997) that could be seen as exclusive in tone (University of Oldchurch, 2007a). Oldchurch was described as 'one of the world's great universities', and the message referred to its 'great teaching strength'. Words like 'quality', 'leaders' 'succeed', 'intellectual potential' and 'highest levels' all promoted a sense of elitism and exclusivity. The intended audience seemed to be the 'gifted students' that were mentioned in the message. However, the Oldchurch welcome message also specifically referred to widening participation:

'It matters to all of us here that the doors of this University are open to all students with the highest intellectual potential to succeed. There is no 'right background', no hidden test of social or economic circumstances, no right school to have attended. We work hard at making sure of this, assessing each applicant individually, and encouraging the widest possible pool of talented applicants. In particular we have created the Oldchurch Bursary Scheme to ensure that financial considerations are not a barrier to applications from gifted students. Whoever you are and wherever you come from, if you have the ability, enthusiasm and the motivation, then we want to hear from you.' (University of Oldchurch, 2007a, inside cover).

The message here seemed to be that the university was committed to widening participation but only where the student could show 'the highest intellectual potential' and where s/he could demonstrate 'talent'. According to Burke (2006, p.87), words like 'talent', 'ability' and 'potential' are all 'socially constructed discourses that are tied to classed, gendered and racialised values and perspectives'. Whilst there was some attempt to marry up a discourse of access with the idea of admission only for those with 'the highest intellectual potential', this was contingent upon the student demonstrating

the 'ability, enthusiasm and motivation' deemed appropriate for admission to an elite university.

Drawing on Archer *et al.* (2003) and Reay *et al.* (2005) it could be suggested that discursive practices of this kind might act as a barrier for some students, who due to lack of confidence and cultural capital, will assume that they do not fall into the category of students with 'the highest intellectual potential'. In this way, the language and tone encourages certain students to self-select out of the pool of eligible applicants. Shaw *et al.* (2007, p.44) suggest that HEIs engage in 'relationship marketing' in which 'it is the HEI itself, rather than its products, that is marketed'. In this way, it might be argued that Oldchurch University as a whole is marketed as elite and exclusive, whilst widening participation is simply a 'product' or niche within this. It could be suggested that 'whole institution' branding is more powerful and pervasive than the marketing of specific 'products', with the perhaps inevitable result that the strongly framed brand of an institution (that in certain institutions is designed to appeal to traditional students) overrides messages about widening participation (that are designed to appeal to a limited number of students from under-represented groups). Drawing on Shaw *et al.* (2007), it could be argued that the language and tone used to describe the values of the institution operate in subtle ways to appeal primarily to students who are already culturally familiar with the ethos being described.

At Neworth, a post-92 institution, the welcome message was very different in tone. There was no elitist or 'academic traditionalist' (Williams, 1997) language, and the

university did not make any claim to be 'top ranking' or 'leading edge'. The focus was on the student, and the experience that the student might expect. The tone was inclusive: 'you are welcome. Whoever you are, whatever your background, age, nationality or religion.' (University of Neworth, 2007a, p.1).

There was an assumption that the reader was going to university in order to improve his/her job prospects and this was emphasised by the reference to education as an 'investment', and something which 'the employer values' (University of Neworth, 2007a, p.1). This provided evidence of strong local framing of the Labour government's employability agenda (also reflected in the discourses drawn upon by Neworth's Widening Participation Manager) and projected an image of a more vocationally-oriented culture. It also suggested an allegiance to the 'utilitarian' model of widening participation as outlined by Jones and Thomas (2005, described in Chapter 1, section 1.4) in which serving the needs of the economy is viewed as a key function of higher education.

The employability message was similarly present in the Newdale welcome message: 'We develop interesting, industry relevant courses that support graduate careers' (Newdale University, 2007, p.3). In common with Neworth, this implied strong local framing of government messages about employability and the 'exchange value' (cf. Ainley, 2003) of a degree. However, the University's commitment to widening participation was also stated in this section: 'We look for potential to succeed from students from all ages and backgrounds.' (Newdale University, 2007, p.4) The

University was described as 'friendly'; a description that was also used by the University of Neworth. This might perhaps be seen as an appealing statement to students from under-represented groups and who might be unsure about applying. The post-92 universities therefore seemed to be projecting messages that stood in contrast to the pre-92 universities. The 'whole institution' marketing appeared to incorporate a commitment to inclusivity, indicating that widening participation was part of the culture of the institution, rather than standing as a 'product' for a niche market within a broader culture of exclusivity.

In contrast to other institutions, the Principal of Newbede suggested that 'Our ambition for all students is that they will go on to make a difference in the world, whatever their chosen career, and that their time at Newbede will help support them in this' (Newbede University, undated, pp.2-3). This 'making a difference' ethos was at odds not only with other institutions, but also with the Labour government's discourses around the purposes of higher education (DfES, 2003a; BIS, 2009). As already mentioned in Chapter 8 (section 8.3), the Widening Participation Manager referred (in an interview) to widening participation as a 'moral imperative' for the institution. This suggested strong framing of a discourse of 'civic duty', rather than employability or selectivity. A commitment to social justice and widening participation was also voiced as part of this moral imperative. The 'speciality' of Newbede, or its classification (Bernstein, 1990), appeared to be the desire to shape a certain type of graduate: one who would go on 'to make a difference in the world'. This marked it as different to the other case study HEIs, where the focus was more on creating employable graduates (in the case of the post-92

institutions) or on admitting selected students to a community of 'scholars' (in the case of the Russell Group universities).

The case study institutions appeared keen to use the welcome message in the prospectus as a means of 'branding' their values and projecting a particular image of the institution. In many ways, it could be suggested that the place of widening participation even within these short introductory messages, indicated something about the relative commitment of the institution to principles of accessibility in practice. Subsequent sections, by considering various framing devices used in the case study prospectuses, will develop this idea in more detail.

### ***10.2.2 The positioning of students in prospectuses***

There were notable differences in the ways that the six case study institutions positioned their prospective students. Four of the case study HEIs (Oldchurch, Oldbeam, Oldlaw and Newdale) positioned their prospective students as firmly outside the institution; there was no assumption that these students would apply and be admitted. Efforts were made to encourage applications, but in some cases this was conditional upon 'talent' and 'academic ability' (University of Oldchurch, 2007a, inside cover and p.13). In the case of Neworth, it was made clear that enquiries from any part of the community were welcomed, regardless of existing qualifications (University of Neworth, 2007a, p.209). Newbede University, however, went a step further in seeking to encourage and include prospective students. Newbede assumed that the prospective student would apply, and

therefore positioned prospective students as already part of the university community. In her welcome message, the Principal talked about '*when* you come for interview', not '*if* you come for interview' (Newbede University, undated, p.3). This helped to reinforce the welcoming and inclusive tone of the prospectus, implying strong institutional framing of commitment to widening participation and was consistent with statements made by Newbede's Widening Participation Manager.

In contrast, the University of Oldbeam prospectus used the word 'our' in a way that arguably excluded prospective students. Throughout the prospectus, there were references to 'our University' (University of Oldbeam, 2006, p.4), as well as 'our halls of residence', 'our Arts and Humanities students' and 'their learning facilities' (University of Oldbeam, 2006, p.9). This positioned the reader as outside of this community, with no assumption that they would become part of it. This sort of language potentially serves to exclude, and, in common with the discourse of high academic standards drawn upon in marketing literature, reinforces a sense that the university is only for a selected group of students (Burke, 2006).

### **10.3 Fees and bursary information in prospectuses**

Most of the case study institutions showed an awareness (via prospectus documents, open day discourses and interviews with staff) that cost was a potential barrier to widening participation – both in terms of students being put off from applying, and being

a factor in a decision to withdraw from a course. However, their approaches to the presentation of fees and bursary information were very different.

The first point to note is that the presentation of the 'cost' issue in the prospectuses showed a clear divide between pre and post-92 universities. The headings of the relevant pages in the prospectuses perhaps reflected the relative concern that each institution had about the effect of tuition fees on student applications. Oldchurch, Oldbeam and Oldlaw Universities (all pre-92 institutions) chose factual headings – 'What are the costs at Oldchurch?', 'What will it cost?' (Oldbeam) and 'Fees, Scholarships and Bursaries' (Oldlaw). Newdale University's heading was 'Financial Support', Newbede's was 'Money Matters', and Neworth chose 'Investing in your future'. For these three institutions, the focus was drawn away from the cost and towards the benefits or support that was available. The pre-92 institutions were more 'bald' in their presentation of the costs, and did not make any attempt to gloss over the fact that there was a cost involved in attending university. The pre-92 universities could perhaps afford to be direct in their statements about fees because many of their courses tended to be over-subscribed. This was not always the case in the post-92 universities.

In a competitive market place, institutions might feel that it is imperative that they fill places. The negotiation of the Labour government's widening participation agenda was therefore potentially informed by this necessity for market survival, resulting (in some cases) in persuasive rather than purely informative tactics in student recruitment discourses (see Chapter 8, section 8.4.2). It could be suggested that Newdale's

promotional literature provided an example of this. In the Newdale prospectus, there was evidence of the financial implications of degree-level study being played down. Whereas most of the case study institutions made early reference to the existence of tuition fees in their finance pages, Newdale placed this information, using tiny print, in the middle of a section entitled 'Applying to Newdale'. The information was tempered by a reference to the alleged high earnings that could be achieved by Newdale students after graduation:

'At a cost of £3,070 per year to earn an average of £27,587 after graduation – the odds are in your favour'. (Newdale University, 2007, p.39).

The source of this information was cited as the 'Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey' but the figure of £27,587 did not correspond with the average earnings of Newdale graduates that were quoted elsewhere in the prospectus. On page 24 of the prospectus (Newdale University, 2007), the average earnings of Newdale graduates were cited as between £14,730 (for Humanities graduates) and £23,979 (for Business and Law graduates). So, whilst there was clearly an awareness that cost may deter potential students, the response seemed to be to suggest that a Newdale degree would more than compensate for this – using an average earnings figure that did not correspond to information contained elsewhere in the prospectus.

This situation could be seen as an example of Fairclough's (1995, p.8) heterogeneity - 'of text coding social contradictions'. Newdale University clearly recognised the potential for the costs of university study to act as a barrier to student applications, and yet the

institution also recognised the potential for fees to impact negatively on its ability to fill places and to justify the viability of the institution. This tension appeared to have led to a situation in which tuition fees were presented as unproblematic: there was a great deal of financial information in the prospectus in terms of the support available to students but the information about the cost of study was contained in the small print elsewhere in the document. Students were being persuaded that the cost was worth bearing, using some unsubstantiated average salary data.

Alongside information about the tuition fees, each case study HEI set out the range of scholarships and bursaries available to its students. Under the terms of the access agreements, if HEIs wanted to charge the highest fee of £3,000 per year, they were obliged by the Office for Fair Access to outline a bursary scheme that would help the poorest students (DfES, 2004). The minimum that they must offer was £300 per year for eligible students (DfES, 2004). All of the case study institutions were offering support beyond the minimum level in 2007/08. However, it was difficult for students to ascertain (from information contained in prospectuses and on institutional websites) exactly what they might receive. Most of these awards had to be applied for and were contingent upon certain requirements being met. There appeared to be large variations in terms of the support that was available in the different case study institutions. For example, if a prospective student had a parental income of £38,330 or less, they would receive a bursary of £1,025 per year from Newbede, £1,000 a year from Neworth, £800 from Oldbeam, £520 from Newdale, and an unspecified amount from Oldchurch and Oldlaw depending on parental income and the level of maintenance grant received from the

government (figures correct for the academic year 06/07). Indeed, as already mentioned in Chapter 6 (section 6.7), in that same year at national level, the proportion of tuition fee income redistributed by the different HEIs as bursaries ranged from 5% to 48% (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2009).

Foskett *et al.* (2006, pp.5-6), who interviewed students about their knowledge of the new fees regime in 2006, reported that students found the financial information 'confusing, erratic, incomplete, conflicting and not easy to access. For many, the complexity and difficulty related to accessing information was a deterrent to applying to HE.' The implication here is that many institutions were not able to present their information about fees and bursaries in an accessible way. It could be suggested that brand management around the perceived 'speciality' of an institution, or anxiety around filling places, sometimes masked information that students from under-represented groups might find helpful.

Evidence of the use of the bursary system to improve institutional status could be seen in Newdale, Oldlaw and Oldbeam Universities' policies to offer bursaries linked to exam performance. In the cases of Oldlaw and Oldbeam, this was linked to exceptional A Level grades, and by implication was not available to those taking BTEC, GNVQ or Access qualifications. It could be suggested that exam performance bursaries militate against the aims of widening participation (see Callender, forthcoming) because they might encourage a student to accept a place at a university that either does not reflect his/her potential, or perhaps does not offer the right course. Arguably, it is likely to be

cash-strapped students from lower socio-economic groups who are influenced by these offers, rather than traditional students.

#### **10.4 Accepted or rejected? The framing of alternative qualifications**

As indicated in section 10.3, two of the pre-92 case study universities were only offering exam performance bursaries to students with A Level qualifications. However, the acceptance of alternative qualifications is a key way in which institutions can illustrate their commitment to improving student access (Thomas, 2001). The following section therefore assesses the attitudes to alternative qualifications revealed via the prospectuses, policy documents and open day discourses of the case study HEIs; comparing these to descriptions drawn upon by widening participation managers when describing the institutional position in relation to alternative qualifications.

Neworth, a post-92 university, set out the entrance requirements for particular courses as UCAS points. No reference was made to specific qualifications being more suitable than others and this suggested that a range of qualifications were welcomed. On the rare occasions where A Levels were mentioned, they were referred to as 'A Level or equivalent'. It was clear to the student that other qualifications would be considered. Neworth's positive attitude to alternative qualifications was conveyed in the prospectus and on its website: 'You don't always need traditional qualifications because we value the life experience you've gained' (University of Neworth, 2007a, p.209). This suggests

strong framing around the value of alternative qualifications, and very little sense that A Levels were preferred at this institution.

This was in marked contrast to the attitude of Oldchurch, a Russell Group university. Here, entrance requirements were expressed only as A Level grades, and in the section on 'entrance requirements' in the prospectus it was made clear that alternative qualifications were not acceptable:

'VCE and Applied A levels have been developed as a vocational qualification equivalent to GCE A level. VCE A levels, Applied A levels, GNVQs and/or BTECs are *not an ideal preparation for most Oldchurch courses, where the emphasis is more academic than vocational.*' (University of Oldchurch, 2007a, p.146 – italics added).

Further evidence of a heavily contingent approach to widening participation could be seen in a statement about admissions made in Oldchurch's access agreement (University of Oldchurch, 2005, p.6):

'Oldchurch will continue to strive to encourage applications from qualified applicants from groups currently under-represented and to admit a greater proportion of them within the context of our admissions policies and without compromising entry standards.'

The Widening Participation Manager at Oldchurch justified this position in the following way:

'the clear message is "we've got to make this fair so that everyone's got a fair crack at it, but we cannot compromise on the academic standards"... there comes

a point where if we lower academic offers, the student simply won't cope when they're here'. (Widening Participation Manager, Oldchurch University).

However, 'fairness' can be construed in many different ways – and may also be 'qualified' – as can be seen in the above statement. Thompson (1997, p.114) has written about this in the context of admissions. Despite the fact that she was writing in the 1990s, her views on 'fairness' and the admissions process still seem highly relevant, and are therefore worth quoting at length:

'All admissions tutors wish to be fair but conceptions of 'fairness' reflect ideological (Clark, 1995) and discursive positions. Fairness may be equated with giving students the opportunity to show how they are capable of benefiting from HE based on demonstration of skills, competencies and experience, or with the use of apparently objective measures based on qualifications and grading. Applicants to HE may be positioned as individuals who can demonstrate an ability to benefit in a variety of ways, or, more mechanistically, as bearers of evidence, or recognized currency, in the form of standard qualifications where 'standard' is narrowly defined. In a competitive market, the latter approach appears to dominate and A Levels operate as the preferred currency.'

Oldchurch's presentation of this issue in the prospectus was consistent with wider messages (expressed by the Oldchurch Widening Participation Manager in interview and by staff in open day settings) that reiterated the fact that the institution was not willing to relinquish its classification as a highly selective institution. A Levels were the only qualifications referred to at the open day for FE students, and a vodcast on the website (filmed at a general open day in 2007) similarly expressed entrance requirements only in terms of A Levels. Burke (2006) has outlined the potential negative impact (for widening participation) of A Levels being regarded as a 'preferred currency'.

In *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES, 2003b), the government referred to the 'potential to benefit' and the 'ability to benefit' as key determinants in promoting wider access. However, the document also acknowledged that 'admissions...are a matter for universities themselves' (DfES, 2003b, p.2), and that 'A Levels are the chief indicator for assessing merit' (DfES, 2003b, p.2). This allowed institutions to act as they wished in terms of admissions processes, leading to situations in which institutions could legitimately reject alternative qualifications on the grounds that they had certain standards to maintain. In such cases, the discourses of selection took precedence over discourses of widening participation. Certain institutions, therefore, appeared to use their admissions processes to perpetuate 'whole institution' branding around the idea of quality and selectivity; classifying themselves primarily as elite institutions for a limited number of 'the brightest and best' students.

The Widening Participation Manager at Oldchurch (a Russell Group university) suggested that some staff at the institution did feel that there was a case to be made for adjusting the entry criteria and making lower offers to certain students. However, she said that more experienced members of staff had tried this 'and got their fingers burnt'. She therefore implied that these less experienced members of staff were misguided in their views on this issue:

'So you'll talk to some admissions tutors who have been here for a long time, and they will say "when I was first an admissions tutor, I made offers to kids who I didn't think were as strong as some of the others, but I felt like they needed a

break because they were from a certain socio-economic group - and they didn't do very well and they were really unhappy, and they would have done much better going to a different university where they would have been the top drawer of another university, and they were struggling here. And actually it was a mistake for us and it was a mistake for them, and it didn't serve them. They would have done better getting a 2:1 at that university than getting a third here." But of course that tends to be the people who have got the experience and who have seen it. I mean there are probably some candidates out there who would come here on a three B ticket and it would give them the motivation to be fine – but it's a big risk when we've got so many students who we know are at the right standard'. (Widening Participation Manager, Oldchurch University).

This statement expressed a clear ideological position in terms of Oldchurch's widening participation policy. It was repeatedly stated in marketing literature and open day settings that the institution was not interested in the background of a student and did not discriminate on this basis. However, in common with Jones and Thomas's (2005) academic model of widening participation, it was made clear that 'Oldchurch is looking for the brightest and best students'; students who are 'academically able' and have 'the highest intellectual potential' (Oldchurch Open Day, 2007) . The institution therefore appeared to draw on a highly contingent definition of widening participation.

This highly selective attitude to candidates and their qualifications (only those with three A grades at A Level were at 'the right standard') was not evident in the prospectus documents or in discourses drawn upon by staff in the other case study institutions. Newdale (a post-92 institution) and Newbede (a university college) suggested that they would accept a range of qualifications, and the range was often spelled out rather than implied. Oldlaw, a pre-92 university, referred to A Levels before any other qualification in official literature, although they also set out the entrance requirements for those with

Access to Higher Education and BTEC qualifications. Other national and international qualifications were 'welcomed' and alternative qualifications were 'considered' (University of Oldlaw, 2005b, p.157) Oldbeam University set out their 'typical offer' as A Level grades rather than UCAS points (University of Oldbeam, 2006), implying that A Levels were preferred. There was a section in the prospectus entitled 'other qualifications considered', and it was here that Access and BTEC courses were listed. Oldbeam and Oldlaw (both pre-92 universities) avoided suggesting that alternative qualifications were 'welcomed'. This is problematic in widening participation terms, because students from under-represented groups are more likely to take vocational or other 'non-traditional' qualifications (Sutton Trust, 2008, p.36). This highly selective attitude also works against the Labour government's efforts to promote a range of routes into higher education and is further evidence of a contingent approach to national widening participation policy.

### **10.5 Attitudes towards under-represented groups in the context of 'whole institution' marketing**

This preference for A Levels could equate to a preference for the kinds of students who are more likely to hold A Level qualifications. Evidence suggests (Sutton Trust, 2008; Stanton, 2008) that students from higher socio-economic groups are more likely to hold A Level qualifications. Institutional discourses reinforce the privileging of certain groups by highlighting particular pieces of information (such as the preference for A Levels), and by positioning students in certain ways in literature and open day settings. This

strategy could be seen in the extent to which it was assumed (by staff in the pre-92 institutions) that their open day audiences were made up of 18 year old school-leavers and their parents. A member of staff at Oldchurch University (Oldchurch Open Day, 2007) referred to the need for students to be organised 'and not reliant on someone calling up the stairs that it's time to get up for school'. This comment revealed that the target audience were neither mature students, nor students who could not rely on their parents for this kind of alarm call. References to 'school' rather than college or the work-place appeared a number of times in the open days of the pre-92 universities. Such examples might well serve to make some prospective students feel that their background did not fit with the culture that was being conveyed by such examples.

The Widening Participation Manager at Oldlaw University not only pitched much of her open day information towards parents, she also suggested 'You're all going to be 21 by the time you graduate' (Oldlaw University Open Day, 2007). References to 'young people' abounded in all three of the pre-92 university open days, with promotional videos showing young students moving into halls of residences and enjoying the sporting and social activities that universities had to offer. Within the pre-92 university prospectuses and open days, commitment to widening participation seemed to be expressed in just two ways. First, efforts were made to reiterate 'mission statement'-type commitments to widening participation. These statements were repeated often, but were sandwiched between broader statements that implied a traditional target audience. Second, as already mentioned in Chapter 9, institutions focussed on the financial support that was available to students in higher education. This implied an assumption

that finance is a key barrier to participation by under-represented groups, and that if financial information is conveyed to these students, this barrier will have been addressed. The problem with this approach is that it fails to consider some of the more subtle barriers around culture and identity that can also act as significant barriers to participation (see Archer *et al.*, 2003; Bowl, 2003; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Burke, 2006). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to draw conclusions about the extent to which these tactics by institutions might be deliberately exclusionary. However, it is clear that whether unwittingly or not, some institutions appeared to be addressing messages to prospective students from traditional, rather than non-traditional, backgrounds.

In practical and operational terms, these examples might indicate a weak commitment to widening participation. Many of the examples from the pre-92 case study universities stood in contrast to the discourses that were evident in the prospectuses and open day settings of the post-92 universities. In the post-92 institutions, whilst a number of assumptions were made about the *motivations* of prospective students in applying for degree courses, (with much emphasis on the utilitarian value of a degree) the messages appeared to be directed at a much more diverse group of students. Staff delivering messages at the open days avoided referring to 'schools'; spoke directly to students rather than parents; and made specific references to bits of information that would be particularly relevant to mature students and students with disabilities. These institutions therefore conveyed that they expected to admit students from a diverse range of backgrounds.

## 10.6 Access agreements

The policy documents of the case study institutions all stated a commitment to the widening participation agenda. However, as Williams (1997) has pointed out (referred to in Chapter 8, section 8.3), policy statements can bear little correlation with actual practice. Interviews with widening participation managers and analysis of the discourses used in the open days of the case study HEIs revealed that there were, in some cases (and in common with Williams' (1997) findings), caveats around institutional commitment to widening participation that were not always outlined in the policy documents. This was particularly the case in pre-92 institutions in relation to the maintenance of high academic standards that must be met by students.

In 2007, the access agreement represented a key widening participation policy document for each of the case study institutions. As already mentioned, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) required institutions to submit an access agreement for approval if they wished to charge full tuition fees. However, certain institutions appeared to be making commitments in their access agreements that they subsequently withdrew or did not deliver. Oldbeam University, for example, made a commitment in its access agreement in 2005 to increase to 10% the number of students from under-represented groups being admitted to the university through its special admissions scheme (University of Oldbeam, 2005). When asked in an interview about progress towards this commitment, the Widening Participation Manager said that the 10% target was thought to be too ambitious. The Office for Fair Access had been contacted and it had been

agreed that the university need not deliver on this promise. Similarly, Oldlaw University, in its 2005 Access Agreement (University of Oldlaw, 2005a), had made a commitment to employ a new member of staff in order to help students from under-represented groups to develop their study skills. By 2008, this member of staff had still not been appointed. Oldlaw University had also committed itself in the access agreement to 'set up a special fees website so that subsequent developments can be broadcast without delay, and it will publish its approved access agreement on this site' (University of Oldlaw, 2005a, p.4). By 2009, the site had still not been published and there was no evidence of the access agreement on the institutional website.

Some commentators (Palfreyman, 2004; Jones & Thomas, 2005), as already mentioned in Chapter 6, section 6.7, suggested that OFFA was a 'toothless' body, and there was concern that institutions were not bound by the promises they made in the agreements (Jones & Thomas, 2005). The above examples would seem to provide some evidence of this being the case. It suggests that access agreements have a questionable value, and that institutions are free to opt-out of promises that they make. A report by the National Audit Office in 2008 suggested that the Office for Fair Access had not identified 'any breaches of access agreements to date' (NAO, 2008, p.7). It could be suggested that this was bound to be the case where institutions could simply contact OFFA to revise or withdraw targets that had not been reached.

## **10.7 A summary of widening participation pre-entry and admissions practice in the case study HEIs**

Tables 3 and 4 summarise institutional commitment to pre-entry and admissions elements of the widening participation agenda. This approach could be accused of over-simplifying the complex issues; reducing institutional commitment in a particular area into a basic 'committed' or 'not committed' category. However, laying out the data in this way is an aid to conceptualising some of the key issues. The tables draw on information from policy documents, interviews with widening participation managers, open day observations and document analysis. In keeping with the focus of this chapter, the tables only summarise commitment to widening participation in the context of pre-entry and admissions activity. However, data has been compiled using the wider findings outlined in chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10.

### **10.7.1 A summary of outreach work**

Based on the research findings, Table 3 (on page 264) attempts to summarise levels of commitment to widening participation at the outreach stage in the case study universities. A tick suggests broad commitment, whereas a cross indicates evidence of lack of commitment. The presence of both symbols indicates a mixed picture suggestive of commitment in some ways, but not in others.

**Table 3: Levels of commitment to widening participation at the out-reach stage in the case study HEIs**

<b>Type of work</b> <b>Institution</b>	<b>Active in outreach work with schools and colleges?</b>	<b>Inclusion in outreach work of full range of under-rep groups?</b>	<b>Inclusive language in official literature (ie prospectus)?</b>	<b>Inclusive language on open days?</b>
<b>Oldchurch (Russell Group)</b>	✓	x	x	x
<b>Oldbeam (Russell Group)</b>	✓	x	x	x
<b>Oldlaw (pre-92)</b>	✓	✓	✓ x	x
<b>Newdale (post 92)</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Neworth (post 92)</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Newbede (university college)</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓

It can be seen from Table 3 that the post-92 institutions and the university college seemed to be committed ‘across the board’ in terms of out-reach work. The practice of widening participation at this pre-entry stage appeared to be inclusive. In contrast, the

pre-92 institutions reported that they were active in their out-reach work with schools and colleges, but official literature and open day discourses (where the audience included the traditional cohorts) revealed some evidence of a 'sidelining' of widening participation messages. Furthermore, the Russell Group universities were selective in their targeting of under-represented groups.

### **10.7.2 A summary of admissions work**

Admissions work is broadly defined for the purposes of summarising widening participation activity in the case study HEIs. It is suggested that evidence of work to address under-representation at the admissions stage can be seen in:

- 1) special access schemes;
- 2) the provision of flexible learning options;
- 3) the ability to offer foundation degrees; and
- 4) institutional attitudes to alternative qualifications.

All institutions (with the exception of Oldchurch) stated that they would at least consider alternative qualifications. Judgements about whether the case institutions could be said to 'encourage' alternative qualifications were made based on the language of prospectus documents and statements made by the widening participation managers in interviews and at open days.

**Table 4: Levels of commitment to widening participation at the admissions stage in the case study HEIs**

<b>Type of work</b>  <b>Institution</b>	<b>Special schemes to help students from under-represented groups gain a place?</b>	<b>Flexible learning options? Eg. Part time, distance learning.</b>	<b>Offering foundation degrees? (Number of foundation degrees in brackets)</b>	<b>Encouragement of alternative qualifications?</b>
<b>Oldchurch</b>	✓	Limited	✗	✗
<b>Oldbeam</b>	✓	Limited	✓ (1)	✗
<b>Oldlaw</b>	✗	Limited	✓ (4)	✗
<b>Newdale</b>	✗	✓	✓ (9)	✓
<b>Neworth</b>	✓	✓	✓ (19)	✓
<b>Newbede</b>	✗	✓	✓ (3)	✓

N.B. Information about the number of foundation degrees was taken from the UCAS website (UCAS, 2009).

It is clear from Table 4 that flexible learning options were limited in the three pre-92 institutions. There was a greater choice of part-time and distance provision at the post-92 universities and the university college. The provision of foundation degrees was also

more limited when the total number offered by the pre-92 institutions was compared to the total number offered by the post-92 institutions.

In their encouragement of alternative qualifications, there was a clear divide between the pre-92 institutions on the one hand, and the post-92 institutions and the university college on the other. The post-92 institutions and the university college appeared to encourage applicants with alternative qualifications, whilst the pre-92 institutions did not. As already mentioned, Oldchurch University explicitly stated in the prospectus that 'VCE A Levels, Applied A Levels, GNVQs and/or BTECs are not an ideal preparation for most Oldchurch courses' (University of Oldchurch, 2007a, p.146). In the other pre-92 institutions, evidence from the prospectuses suggested that non-A Level qualifications would be 'considered'.

There was a less clear 'post and pre-92 institutional divide' with regard to special access schemes. Both Russell Group institutions (Oldchurch and Oldbeam Universities) offered such schemes which were designed to provide admission to students who did not meet the standard entry criteria. So too did Neworth University, a post-92 institution. Neworth offered such a scheme to year 9 students who were 'at risk of under-achieving' in the school setting. However, it is difficult to draw inferences about levels of commitment to widening participation simply by the existence of special access schemes. Oldlaw, Newdale and Newbede Universities did not offer such schemes, but these institutions met their widening participation benchmarks and might therefore have decided that there was no need to adapt existing admissions processes.

Table 4 therefore suggests a mixed picture in terms of the admissions work that institutions were carrying out. It is noteworthy that foundation degree provision was non-existent in one pre-92 HEI. The existence of special access schemes appeared to show some level of commitment to addressing patterns of under-representation in student applications. However, in the case of the pre-92 institutions, this could be set against the clear preference for A Levels which might serve to exclude many potential students from under-represented groups. In this sense, special access schemes could be seen to be making limited concessions to a very limited pool of students. Once again, this might indicate that commitment to widening participation took place within existing, highly selective, parameters.

## **10.8 Conclusion**

It seemed that the practice or 'operationalisation' of widening participation work at the pre-entry stage in the case study institutions could not be divorced from a consideration of a whole range of internal and external factors that impacted upon institutional positioning in the HE market place. This market positioning and institutional awareness of 'place' within the hierarchy appeared to exert a strong influence on the presentation of widening participation work, particularly in the pre-92 institutions that remained focused on projecting perceptions of 'selectivity'. It also seemed to impact upon the post-92 universities, where the more inclusive discourses of the prospectus and open days nevertheless sat alongside a discourse of persuasion that seemed to be fuelled by the

need to fill places. Therefore, whilst the post-92 institutions appeared to present a much more strongly framed commitment to widening participation through the language, tone and form of their widening participation discourses, this was contingent upon minimizing perceptions of financial barriers to participation, and fore-grounding messages around employability and the 'exchange value' (Ainley, 2003) of a degree.

Ball (2000, p.10) has drawn attention to the tension that exists for HEIs between providing information and the 'impression management' that is deemed necessary in promoting institutions. The findings outlined in this chapter certainly suggest that this may have impacted upon the widening participation work that the case study institutions were carrying out at the pre-entry and admissions stages. 'Whole institution' (Shaw *et al.*, 2007) marketing efforts, particularly in the pre-92 universities, seemed at times to weaken, and sometimes even to counter, messages about commitment to widening participation that were articulated by the widening participation managers. These findings might suggest that the classifications that universities had set up for themselves remained the dominant force in institutional decision-making, leading to a highly contingent approach to widening participation work that was manifested via weak framing. It could be argued that this position is of limited benefit to students from under-represented groups.

This idea is explored in more detail in Chapter 11, in which staff from the case study FE colleges describe some of their perceptions of the widening participation work that HEIs were engaged in. These perceptions around widening participation work in the HEIs

are compared to the widening participation work that was reportedly taking place in FE colleges. A key focus of the chapter is the potential impact of these different approaches upon applicants and students from under-represented groups.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### HEI COMMITMENT TO WIDENING PARTICIPATION: PERCEPTIONS OF STAFF IN FE COLLEGES

#### 11.1 Introduction

This thesis has analysed the framing devices used by the case study HEIs when attempting to construct their commitment to widening participation. It has considered a range of sources that are internally produced by HEIs (marketing literature, websites, policy documents) as well as drawing on observations from open days and interviews with staff. However, some of these sources represent stage-managed features of what can be termed 'relationship marketing' (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Shaw *et al.*, 2007). Using elements of Fairclough's (1995) CDA and Bernstein's (1990) notions of classification and framing, such sources can reveal a great deal about how an institution wishes to be perceived, who the target audiences are, and what is portrayed as distinctive about the institution. However, these sources cannot reveal how an institution is perceived by external audiences. Neither can these sources shed any light on the impact of self-presentation and image management on students from under-represented groups.

This chapter, therefore, views the widening participation work of the case study HEIs through the critical gaze of staff in FE colleges. This is important because, as Stanton

(2008, p.16) points out, FE colleges 'provide for the majority of 16-19 year olds'. When compared to schools and sixth form colleges, 'they also contain much higher proportions of learners from the social and ethnic groups that are under-represented in HEIs'. The chapter presents a comparative analysis of the 'operationalisation' of widening participation work in the FE and HE sectors. It should be pointed out that this analysis is largely based on events as reported by staff in the FE colleges. No attempt has been made to corroborate the accounts that were given about the work taking place in the FE colleges. Analysis of a range of sources from the case study HEIs does, however, make it possible to compare perceptions of this work (by FE staff) to the data gleaned from interviews, open day observations and document analysis in the HEIs. These perceptions provide an alternative insight into the ways in which the case study HEIs frame their widening participation work, and what this framing suggests about HEI commitment to widening participation.

The chapter is split into three parts. The first section considers the different approaches to supporting students from under-represented groups, and how and why this might differ between the FE and HE sectors. The second section considers the perceived degree of movement by HEIs towards providing accessibility for under-represented groups. This section includes a detailed consideration of the role of FE/HE partnerships in aiding student progression between sectors. The final section considers the potential impact (on students from under-represented groups who progress to a HEI) of weak framing of widening participation work.

## **11.2 A difference in ethos? Comparing reported approaches to widening participation in FE and HE**

As mentioned in Chapter 4, section 4.2, staff in six FE colleges were interviewed as part of the research project. These staff, eleven in total, held various roles but all were directly involved with the progression from FE to HE of students from under-represented groups. Two FE colleges were selected for each of the three case study regions. These colleges therefore had a relationship with at least one of the case study HEIs and were able to comment on outreach work, transitions arrangements and the experiences of some of the students who progressed into these HEIs.

The restricted focus on the pre-entry stage that seemed to be characteristic of widening participation work in some of the case study HEIs, stood in contrast to the widening participation work that was reportedly carried out in FE colleges. Staff in the case FE colleges suggested that within their institutions, there was not only an emphasis on supporting students 'on course', but also a targeting of highly practical support. For example, one college (Stoneleigh) used Aimhigher funding to pay for bus fares to college and UCAS application fees for students who would otherwise face this very practical barrier to participation. This college was also exploring the idea of providing breakfasts for students before the working day started. In 2007, there was no evidence of support of this nature being offered in the case study HEIs.

It could be suggested that FE commitment to widening participation was also evident in the level of support 'on course' that was reportedly offered by the case institutions to their students. All of the FE respondents said that they thought they offered a good level of support to their students and that the support was tailored to individual needs. There was an awareness that this sometimes led to a 'culture shock' when students went to university, because the support was not so easily available. However, staff in the FE colleges maintained that the intensive support that they offered to students was essential in terms of helping students to succeed. They highlighted the fact that many of their students were coming back into education and therefore needed some help to boost their confidence levels, as well as support in developing academic skills. The Access to HE Co-ordinator at Hayle College said: 'We are very supportive here, but then it is often somebody's first step back into education and you have to be supportive or else they would walk out.' The staff from North Kilworth College said that some of their students were working night shifts in a local supermarket and then coming into college during the day, and others experienced very difficult domestic situations whilst studying. The support therefore reflected the needs of the student group.

The staff in the FE colleges reported that students progressing to HE complained that support was harder to access in higher education than it had been in the further education setting. Two of the respondents (from Hayle and Lyme) said that they thought that the independent learning environment of a university would be good for the students, and that perhaps FE colleges supported students too much. Bathmaker *et al.* (2008, p.134) similarly found that subject tutors in one FE college in their study 'were

often critical of the supportive structures of teaching and learning in further education'. These subject tutors felt that certain practices 'were at odds with the demands of higher education and therefore equally inappropriate on courses preparing students for these levels'. However, staff from three case study colleges (Churston, North Kilworth and Stoneleigh), thought that universities could usefully mirror the FE model of student support and should be doing more to help students. It was suggested that universities and colleges could work more in partnership to help ease transition – perhaps offering particular sessions that would introduce students to the different cultures they might experience in higher education. There was some evidence of students telephoning tutors at the case study colleges for help even after they had progressed to university – often because they did not know whom to ask at the university. Other students telephoned and asked whether they could transfer back to the college to take a higher education course because they felt out of their depth at university. Staff in the case study FE colleges reported that there seemed to be different levels of support available in different universities. Russell Group and other pre-92 universities were viewed, in general, as less supportive than post-92 institutions.

There was no directive from the Labour government to suggest that HEIs *needed* to adapt their internal structures but to do so would undoubtedly support efforts to widen participation. The fact that FE colleges did offer flexibility in course design and delivery (not timetabling classes in half-term week, for example), perhaps suggests that the FE colleges were adopting a more student-centred approach. Using the Jones and Thomas (2005) models of widening participation, it might be fair to suggest that the case study

FE colleges were therefore adhering to a more transformative approach to widening participation. One of the features of the transformative approach is a more student-centred ethos. There were reports of this approach in a limited way in some of the case study HEIs (most notably Neworth and Newdale where there were transitions programmes and adaptations to the curriculum in recognition of a range of learning styles) but the academic or utilitarian models seemed to be more prevalent, particularly in the pre-92 institutions in the sample (Oldchurch, Oldbeam and Oldlaw).

All of the staff who were interviewed in the case study colleges were confident that there was a strong and embedded commitment to widening participation that was shared by all staff within their institution. The 16-19 Curriculum Manager at North Kilworth College said that 'the front line staff seem to have an ideological commitment to getting people re-engaged and helping people who are non-traditional entrants to get into HE.' Staff in the case FE colleges therefore reported institutional cultures that better reflected Jones and Thomas's (2005) transformative approach to widening participation rather than the academic or utilitarian approach. When staff in FE colleges gave examples of HEIs that they thought were committed to widening participation, the examples always related to post-92 institutions. There was a sense that some of these institutions more closely mirrored the commitment of FE colleges, which suggests that the framing of commitment to widening participation was perceived by FE staff as being much stronger in new universities.

### 11.3 Maintaining 'speciality' by type of institution?

The ways in which certain case study universities classified themselves (as providers of 'academic' rather than vocational education; as institutions for school-leavers rather than mature learners) perhaps makes this perception inevitable. Some of the case study HEIs seemed keen to retain their insulation, not only from different types of university, but also from FE colleges. To adopt a more transformative approach to student support (and to communicate this via open days and marketing literature) might threaten the 'speciality' of the HEI, and thus the degree of insulation. As Bernstein (1990, p.28) suggests, changing the degree of insulation removes 'the condition for the speciality of the original "voice"'. In other words, it threatens the culture and ethos of the HEI in a way that is seen as unacceptable by the 'insulation maintainers' (Bernstein, 1990, p.24). Bernstein (1990, p.28) says that the consequence of such a threat is for agents (in this case university staff) 'to exert their power through the hierarchy(ies) they regulate to induce a return to the original "voice"'.

This is potentially evidenced through the ways in which staff in some of the case study HEIs talked about commitment to widening participation in highly contingent terms, drawing on discourses of selectivity in open day and interview settings in order to make clear that the institution was not willing to put its 'elite' reputation in jeopardy. The Widening Participation Manager at Oldbeam University demonstrated 'insulation maintenance' in more obvious terms when she said: 'our infrastructure does not really support what I would call mature students and more flexible learning patterns in a way

that an institution down the road like Elmdene or Applewood College of Higher Education might'. This statement seemed to imply that mature students would not find a natural home in a selective university such as Oldbeam, and should therefore seek their degrees elsewhere. The phrase 'down the road' is suggestive of the type of institution that can be commonly found on every street corner. Such an institution is framed as 'non-special' in relation to the sharply classified 'elite' HEIs.

#### **11.4 A movement towards a more accessible culture in HEIs?**

Despite a perception that the commitment to widening participation in some HEIs was limited, staff in the case study FE colleges did acknowledge that efforts were being made by HEIs to reach their students:

'...traditional bastions are making an attempt to reach us – a really determined attempt to reach us – to get staff engaged and to get applicants. The problem still of course is the number of places they have'. (16-19 Curriculum Manager, North Kilworth College).

Most of the staff in FE colleges commented, for example, that they were now receiving far more information from pre-92 universities, as well as Oxbridge, and that this was translating into more applications from their students (although not necessarily more admissions). Staff suggested that these efforts to reach them were relatively recent.

The Access to HE Co-ordinator at Hayle College reported that one student a year was accepted at Oldchurch University (perceived to be an elite institution) from Hayle's

'Access to Higher Education' programme. She suggested that every year, an admissions tutor from Oldchurch proactively telephoned Hayle College to ask if anyone would like to apply. Interestingly, however, a Curriculum Manager at Stoneleigh College commented that although one elite institution had telephoned her, when she mentioned BTEC Nationals 'they blanched a bit and went away'. The reluctance to accept vocational qualifications was seen by the Curriculum Manager at this FE college as a barrier to her students progressing – not just to elite institutions, but to a number of universities – although there was a recognition that some universities (including some Russell Group institutions) were now accepting students with distinctions at BTEC National level.

It could be suggested that offering places to students with a range of qualifications is key to widening participation in any meaningful and significant way. Sinclair and Connor (2008, p.6) indicate that 'only around a quarter of students who started a BTEC National Diploma in 2002/03 had progressed into HE by the end of the 2003/04 academic year'. This is despite a growth in BTEC enrolments. This compares to nine out of ten students with two or more A Levels progressing to HE (DfES, 2003b, p.2). As already mentioned in Chapter 10 (section 10.4), not all of the case study HEIs welcomed students with alternative qualifications, thus cutting off one potential progression route between further and higher education.

The selective approach of certain HEIs to widening participation was commented upon by some of the staff in the case study FE colleges. These staff (at North Kilworth, Lyme,

Hayle and Churston Colleges) noted the fact that HEIs employed different interpretations to their own when it came to widening participation work. They suggested that the term 'widening participation' was much more narrowly defined in higher education, and there was some suspicion about the motivations driving widening participation activity. As one member of staff at Hayle College explained:

'I think they all just see it as ticking a box. I've got so many students from social class such and such, and so we've widened our participation. Whereas I don't see it like that. I see it as an inclusion of anybody and everybody'. (Access to HE Co-ordinator, Hayle College).

The member of staff from Lyme College similarly suspected less than altruistic motivations on the part of HEIs, suggesting that funding was the primary motivator. There was a suggestion (from a careers adviser at Churston College) that the different approaches to widening participation could be explained by the existence of league tables. This staff member had worked closely with staff at Oldbeam University, and he drew on his experience of working with this particular institution to make his point:

'They are on the league table at the end of the day and that's what they look at. It's almost like – it's an inconvenience – an interruption to what they're doing – and they're playing along with it because they know that it's a government initiative that they have to play along with – and sometimes you feel that 'yes, we'll go along with it, but we'll introduce other things on top of it to make it even harder for someone to get into the institution".' (Careers Adviser, Churston College).

This chimes with Loxley and Thomas's (2001, p.299) suggestion that 'What is happening is the layering of policies that have as their notional objective "inclusion" on

top of policies that have demonstrably contrary effects'. It also resonates with Duke's (2005) argument that the language of equality is sometimes simply rhetoric. It implies a weakly framed commitment to widening participation that has been over-ridden by concerns about league table status and the institution's more strongly framed 'quality' objectives. There was, however, a recognition amongst staff at North Kilworth College that the picture was mixed in this area and that some universities mirrored the FE way of defining and operationalising widening participation much more than others.

### **11.5 The role of, and motivations for, FE/HE partnerships in efforts to widen participation**

Five of the case study FEIs (Stoneleigh, Churston, North Kilworth, Lulworth, and Hayle) reported strong and active partnerships with certain universities in order to aid student progression. They spoke very highly of these partner institutions which were often within the same region, if not the same city. The reported links were both formal and informal – either with departments, particular individuals within those departments, or the university as a whole. 'Whole' university links tended to be with post rather than pre-92 institutions. In the pre-92 institutions, strong links (where they existed) were with key individuals or with particular departments. There was a view that, in general, certain academic departments within the pre-92 universities were very much less keen to support the widening participation agenda than staff working within dedicated 'widening participation' departments. The Higher Education Manager at North Kilworth College

reported some of the difficulties the college had experienced in trying to establish a

Youth Access Programme:

‘The widening participation managers in HE were brilliant. They came along, sat in this room, took the papers and said “great - this is just what we want - get non-traditional students who might have failed – get them back into HE.” They were very enthusiastic and very encouraging. The problem, if I can put it like that, was when we got into the universities to talk to the admissions tutors who were responsible for these programmes. So on one side of the table were the widening participation people, who had said “come along, tell us about this – we’ll make some arrangements – a bit of a protocol – so we can build it around interviewing and getting these students into the programmes”. And what we felt was - and I’m generalising – but what we felt was – that was where the problem came – the gatekeepers who were in charge of the admissions. The widening participation people were brilliant – really brilliant – encouraging, enthusiastic... What we got when we got in to talk to some of the admissions tutors was “Oh well, the mature access students aren’t what they used to be, and these are going to be failed A Level students aren’t they” ...so there was a kind of reticence about accepting it as a legitimate, alternative qualification’. (Higher Education Manager, North Kilworth College).

This implies that even within the same HEI, there were different discourses at work, and variable levels of commitment to the widening participation agenda. Institutional framing was weak because it allowed for a range of diverse and contradictory voices.

Tension in partnership arrangements was also highlighted as an issue by staff at Stoneleigh College and Lyme College. They made reference to competition for students as the cause of this tension. The Higher Education Manager at Lyme College, for example, suggested that they had a poor relationship with Newlyn University (a non-case study university): ‘They seem to want – rather than to work with the college, they want to kind of own them. Mould them into how they want to do things rather than

actually recognise the values that colleges have and bring them together'. Part of this attitude seemed to be rooted in the fact that Newlyn University was relatively new to the city, and when the University arrived, it wanted to deliver higher education courses that the college was already offering. This competitive mindset had reportedly caused bad feeling; prejudicing any possibility of a partnership arrangement. This might be partly due to the fact that progression to higher education was limited in this particular region, and therefore both institutions had to work hard to survive. This may not be the case in other regions.

There was evidence of a similar mindset from a member of staff at Stoneleigh College. The Curriculum Manager acknowledged that they did not always want to set up partnership arrangements in areas where they offered their own higher education provision:

'because we've got our own HE, we're odd, because therefore we've got quite a big provision here, you don't necessarily want to build huge relationships with an Art place, when we've got our own Fine Art degree, Graphics, HN Photography. You know, so you have to be fairly cautious with some of those relationships'.  
(Curriculum Manager, Stoneleigh College).

This is an interesting example of how the market and competitive relationships might play a part in student progression. It is not necessarily simply about finding the 'best fit' for the student.

In some cases compact schemes existed; a form of partnership between an FE college and a local university that involved students being actively encouraged to progress from their college to the local university. Evidence (Reay *et al.*, 2001a; Reay *et al.*, 2001b; Shiner and Modood, 2002; Sutton Trust, 2008) indicates that students from lower socio-economic groups are far more likely to stay local, to study in a post-92 institution, and to avoid applying to the more 'prestigious' universities. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to investigate whether partnership arrangements between FE and HE providers were contributing to this pattern. However, the research has revealed evidence that one of the case study HEIs (Newdale) used marketing literature to actively encourage students to stay local in order to minimise debt. This position was criticised by the Widening Participation Manager at Oldlaw University, who suggested that this 'pushed comfort zone buttons quite hard' in an attempt to serve an institutional aim to fill places.

Statements made by some of the staff in the case study FE colleges suggested that they tended to believe the rhetoric that partner HEIs employed in order to attract students. One particular post-92 HEI (not a case study institution) had told staff at Stoneleigh College that it was so popular that it did not need to use clearing to fill places. It had claimed that with six applicants for every place, the courses were over-subscribed. The institution was drawing on strong framing around the quality and popularity of their courses in order to classify the institution as 'elite'. However, as students are allowed to choose six institutions on their UCAS form, an institution that has six applications for every place is likely to only just fill its places. Indeed, in this case the rhetoric was not borne out in practice because the HEI in question was advertising through clearing in

August 2007. Therefore students in FE colleges, through the contacts their tutors may have with certain HEIs, might be given a false image of the popularity and desirability of an institution as a result of such marketing. Students might then make choices based on this information and only later discover that the institution is not as prestigious as they had believed.

### **11.6 The potential impact of weak framing of commitment to widening participation by HEIs**

Positive relationships with HEIs seemed to lead staff in FE colleges to encourage students towards these particular institutions. Staff felt happy to do this where they knew that support structures were good and where other students had succeeded in making the transition. If staff had a bad experience in talking to an admissions tutor in a non-partnership university, they would store up this information, and at least one member of staff (at Hayle) said she would pass the information onto students. She said she would also do this if ex-students telephoned from non-partnership universities and complained about lack of support. This indicates that there is potentially an element of 'hot knowledge' playing a part in the advice that is passed to students. 'Hot knowledge' is a term used by Ball and Vincent (1998, p.380) to describe 'grapevine' knowledge. Staff in some of the case study colleges reported concern about the extent to which their students would be supported in higher education, and felt much more comfortable in encouraging transition to partner institutions where they knew the support was good.

There were assumptions amongst some of the staff who were interviewed that certain HEIs would not be interested in taking their students. These assumptions seemed to be particularly focussed on Russell Group institutions. It might be suggested that the classification of these institutions as 'elite' and selective (an image which individual institutions were keen to perpetuate) had damaged their chances of also being viewed as accessible. Churston College cited Oldway University (not a case study HEI) as an institution that was not interested in its students. However, two other institutions (North Kilworth and Stoneleigh) had good partnership links with Oldway University, and spoke very highly of the support that was offered there. A similar mixed picture emerged about Oldchurch University. Hayle College had a good relationship with Oldchurch but staff at Stoneleigh College assumed that Oldchurch would not be interested in their students. In general, a pro-active relationship between named staff in the FE and HE institutions seemed key to dispelling myths. However, where no such relationship existed, the vacuum was sometimes filled by 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent, 1998), negative feedback from students, and negative perceptions formed by staff in FE as a result of 'whole institution' marketing by HEIs. In these cases, it could be suggested that weak framing of commitment to widening participation by HEIs was resulting in potential students being encouraged to undertake their studies elsewhere.

## **11.7 Weak commitment to widening participation: the potential impact on students progressing from FE into HE**

The reported differences in ethos between (and sometimes within) the FE and HE sectors, might present students with a dilemma. In crude terms, it appears that in FE colleges that offer higher education, students can choose to study within an inclusive and supportive culture but sacrifice the prestige attached to a degree awarded by a university. At the other extreme, they can enrol in an 'elite' HEI which may be highly regarded but lack the levels of support that might be necessary for a positive experience. Perhaps it is not surprising that large numbers of students from under-represented groups opt for a post-92 university (Reay *et al.*, 2001a; Shiner and Modood, 2002; Sutton Trust, 2008), that offers the status of a university degree within a culture that might more closely mirror that of an FE college.

From the student's point of view, it may be difficult to work out how committed to widening participation his/her chosen institution is prior to entry, because most HEIs have become very adept at publicly proclaiming their commitment to widening participation via websites, prospectuses and open days. As Greenbank (2006, p.209) has argued, institutions have 'learnt to develop the right form of words'. It is perhaps not until students are actually enrolled and have experience of the system that they realise that the institution's commitment to widening participation is limited beyond the pre-entry and admissions stage. A member of staff at Hayle College commented that one unhappy student telephoned her after having been enrolled in a Russell Group

university for one term, and was very aware that students who had chosen the local post-92 university were much better supported. This student stayed at the Russell Group institution and successfully completed the course, but felt that she might have had a happier experience elsewhere.

Most of the staff in the case study FE colleges could think of students who had either telephoned them after starting a HE course at a university and asked to return to college, or had chosen to stay at college in order to undertake higher level study. One member of staff at Hayle College suggested that some student parents stayed at college studying a subject that was not their first choice because they knew that the local university took no account of childcare issues in its timetabling decisions:

'We have had students who have stayed here when History and English isn't their first love. They would love to have done Sociology say – but the ease of staying here makes it better than studying Sociology at Newton University where they've got to travel and where they've got all the problems with childcare and so on'.  
(Access to HE Co-ordinator, Hayle College).

The students who were asking to return to college reportedly felt out of place at university and/or could not access the support that they needed. Of course, it could be argued that if switching back to college, or choosing the local university, enables students to gain degrees which they would otherwise not have, then this might be a positive outcome. However, this situation does appear to perpetuate the two-tier system and the stratification of higher education provision (cf. Jones and Thomas, 2005; Archer, 2007).

As already mentioned in Chapters 9 and 10, evidence (HEFCE, 2006) has suggested that much widening participation work in HEIs has been focussed on the pre-entry stage. However, from the student's point of view, it is important that he/she is supported throughout the entire student life-cycle. It is known that socio-economic status can have an impact on completion:

'Young people from low-participation neighbourhoods are more vulnerable to non-continuation than those from other neighbourhoods. Around 9.4 per cent of young, full-time, first degree students from low-participation neighbourhoods starting in 2004/05 did not re-register on a higher education course in the following academic year, compared with 6.3% of those from other neighbourhoods' (National Audit Office, 2008, p.16).

It also known that 'being from a minority ethnic group (except the Other Black, Mixed and Other groups)' has 'a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment' (Equality Challenge Unit/Higher Education Academy, 2008, p.2). These statistics suggest that there is some way to go before it can be claimed that HEIs are inclusive and able to offer a positive experience to students from under-represented groups. In this context, it seems particularly important that HEIs recognise their duty to support these students throughout the entire student life-cycle, rather than simply focussing on pre-entry work, or assuming that their existing support structures are adequate.

## 11.8 Conclusion

There was recognition amongst staff in the case study FE colleges that HEIs were making more efforts than ever before to encourage participation. However, there was some suspicion about the motivations behind these efforts, with the inclusive culture and practices of FE colleges being contrasted with the (reportedly) less supportive cultures of some of the case study HEIs. There was a perception on the part of some of the staff in the case study FE colleges, that certain HEIs were motivated by funding and league table status rather than any genuine desire to widen participation.

Staff in the case study FE colleges suggested that staff in widening participation departments in HEIs were uniformly helpful, but that this commitment to encouraging students to progress was not always mirrored by staff in admissions departments. This mixed picture contributed to a sense that in some institutions, commitment to widening participation (expressed via weak framing) was patchy. Based on anecdotal evidence, the high levels of student support that were reported as a feature of FE provision, was not perceived to be emulated, to the same extent, in the Russell Group HEIs.

The findings from the research suggest that partnership arrangements between FE and HE were perceived by staff in the FE colleges to be an important means of aiding the progression of students into HEIs. Indeed, Stanton (2008, p.16) has suggested that 'If HEIs wish to widen their intake, they should target colleges'. Whilst these arrangements were not unproblematic, evidence suggests that these relationships could stave off the

poor impressions of HEIs that built up via informal channels and perhaps also via the exclusive images that some institutions presented in marketing literature. There was little reported evidence of confusion, suspicion or hostility between an FE college and a HEI where such partnership arrangements existed. There might be a risk, however, that whilst partnership arrangements are reassuring for students, they actually limit choice. HEIs could address this by building up links with an increased number of FE colleges. This would help to ensure that perceptions of universities were not based solely on prospectus documents and open days, thus aiding students in the decision-making process.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### TOWARDS A TRANSFORMATIVE HIGHER EDUCATION

#### 12.1 Introduction

Drawing on interview data, documentary analysis and observations at open days, this thesis has considered how six case study HEIs framed their commitment to widening participation in a range of different contexts. In re-stating the key themes to emerge from the research, the aim of this concluding chapter is to highlight how institutional positioning of widening participation is affected by institutional concerns around image and self-presentation. It argues that, in some cases, the branding of institutional 'speciality' can serve to dilute messages about widening participation.

The first section of the chapter explains how Bernstein's (1990) ideas around classification and framing offer a new way of understanding the positioning of widening participation by the case study HEIs. The second part of the chapter suggests a range of policy recommendations that could be implemented at both national and institutional level in order to bring about a more embedded and less rhetorical commitment to widening participation. The third section outlines possible future avenues of research that might follow from the research findings. The concluding section argues that the market-based nature of the higher education sector is in tension with efforts to widen participation, leading to problems with the operationalisation of widening participation

work. This makes it difficult to envisage any movement beyond the weakly transformative model of widening participation.

## **12.2. Classification and framing as a new way of understanding institutional approaches to widening participation**

Evidence from my research project suggests that the case study institutions rarely employed one, unified approach to widening participation. Instead, individual institutions drew on different discourses and practices in different elements of their work.

Prospectus documents, for example, often used strong framing of the self-styled 'speciality' of the institution, in ways that were at odds with the messages projected by widening participation managers. This suggests that, when analysing institutional approaches to widening participation, there is a need for a more finely tuned tool than that offered by the Jones and Thomas (2005) typologies. Bernstein's (1990) notions of classification and framing provide this by offering ways of looking beyond the rhetoric that is employed by institutions, towards a deeper understanding of the ideological base underpinning institutional positions (Bernstein, 1990). An analytical framework that enables the deconstruction of the codes, frames and discursive strategies that are drawn upon by the case study HEIs, offers a more nuanced and less 'action-oriented' means of investigating the level of commitment to the national widening participation agenda.

The Bernstein-derived concept of classification revealed ways in which the case study institutions positioned themselves and their missions within the broader higher education market place. The concept of framing provided a tool by which the contradictions inherent in this positioning, and the implications for widening participation, were made clear. By considering the ways in which policies and practice were discursively framed by staff in a range of settings, it has been possible to highlight the extent to which there appeared to be tension within institutions, and between HEIs and government, in the operationalisation of widening participation at the pre-entry and admissions stages. . It is argued that the tensions between commitment to widening participation and the need to fill places (in the case of the post-92 institutions) and commitment to widening participation and a highly selective approach to admissions (in the case of the Russell Group universities), led to mixed messages for students and other external audiences.

Institutions employing weak framing (or lack of consistency) in discursive statements of commitment to widening participation seemed to be resisting government attempts to change their 'voice'. These institutions had built up a legitimacy and 'specialty' around the idea of themselves as selective, and seemed unable or unwilling to accept any weakening of this identity. In Bernstein's (1990, p.28) terms:

'To create a message beyond these limits is to change 'voice'. Such a change entails changing the degree of insulation, which initially was the condition for the speciality of the original "voice".'

The Labour government appeared to be challenging an element of the speciality of 'elite' institutions (as defined by selectivity) in asking them to make their provision more accessible:

'Our universities have succeeded in widening access to poorer students over the last decade, but this progress has been uneven across the system, with our most selective institutions seeing only modest increases. Fairer access for educationally disadvantaged but able UK pupils has to remain a key part of how our world class universities see their missions'. (BIS, 2009, p.8)

The selective institutions seemed to view this as a threat to the insulation between themselves and other types of HEI, and were responding by seeking to defend their existing boundaries. This could be seen in the way in which these HEIs conflated verbal commitments to widening participation with discourses of exclusivity. It could also be seen in the ways in which discursive commitments to widening participation (as expressed by widening participation managers) were blurred by the discourses drawn upon in prospectus documents and open day settings. These institutions were keen to protect their existing classification as providers of education to selected A Level students. The Labour government's widening participation policies appeared to threaten this (albeit weakly) because they were suggesting that there was also legitimacy in the idea of these elite institutions providing educational opportunities to a wider group of students.

The widening participation message, however, was not without its tensions even within the post-92 institutions (Newdale and Neworth), where there appeared to be a much

greater level of commitment to accessibility. Here there seemed to be some evidence of widening participation being used as a recruitment tool. Prospectus documents and open day discourses played *up* the 'investment' discourse, whilst playing *down* the cost of participation. It could therefore be argued that widening participation was moulded by each institution primarily to meet institutional needs.

There did appear to be an alternative position epitomised by Newbede, the University College in the sample. Newbede drew on a 'moral' discourse both when describing widening participation work and in presenting the values of the institution to students through marketing literature. The discourses drawn upon by the institution therefore seemed - certainly at surface level - to be unaffected by government policy. There was no evidence from this study of the use of government discourses when describing and justifying widening participation work, and no evidence that students were being coerced by the economic rationale that was prevalent in national policy documents. Instead, Newbede appeared neither to be challenging certain government discourses, nor to overtly embrace these discourses. In this case, it could be suggested that the institution had a distinct mission and organisational culture that certainly appeared to be unaffected by external factors.

Arguably, due to the Labour government's own weakly framed approach to widening participation, institutions were largely able to retain their existing classifications. In some institutions (Newdale, Neworth and Newbede), commitment to widening participation appeared to be a core part of the institutional identity. In other institutions (most notably Oldchurch and Oldbeam), the institutional identity was built up around selectivity rather

than accessibility. In these cases, widening participation activity seemed to be focussed on 'bolt-on' (Jones and Thomas, 2005) activity at the pre-entry stage. It is argued that a lack of government regulation made this situation inevitable. The Labour government (via HEFCE) rarely insisted on money being spent in a prescriptive way, and had not (until 2009) engendered a culture of targets or quotas. Similarly, there was little evidence to suggest that the Office for Fair Access had used its powers to impose sanctions on institutions that had not complied with commitments set out in their access agreements (National Audit Office, 2008). This appeared to be symptomatic of the entire Labour government approach to widening participation, which, until 2009, was based on 'guidelines' and 'best practice' rather than hard targets (cf. Layer, 2005). By suggesting that widening participation work should not interfere with corporate objectives, the Labour government was effectively inviting institutions to 'opt out' of, or at the very least to play down, a commitment to widening participation. As a result, it is perhaps unsurprising that certain institutions (Oldchurch and Oldbeam in this case) stated a commitment to widening participation, whilst actually appearing to practise a very narrow definition of widening participation work. Institutions could hardly be blamed for taking this approach when they were offered such freedom of interpretation and delivery. However, it is difficult to see how this will result in anything but a continuation of the two-tier system (Archer, 2007; Reay *et al.*, 2005) in which the opportunities for students from under-represented groups are largely offered by, and taken up in, the post-92 institutions (cf. Modood, 1993; Archer *et al.*, 2003).

### **12.3 Ways forward for government widening participation policy?**

In 2009 the Public Accounts Committee (2009) published a report that outlined the amount of money that had been spent on widening participation in relation to statistics on participation by under-represented groups. It suggested that despite heavy spending, progress towards widening participation had been limited. In the autumn of 2009, however, there was some evidence of a government shift towards a more tightly controlled widening participation agenda. Under new guidelines (HEFCE, 2009), HEIs were asked to submit widening participation strategic assessments. Institutions were required to report in detail on the ways in which their widening participation grant was been spent. There was also a greater focus on the characteristics of the student population, particularly in relation to the participation of students from under-represented groups (Public Accounts Committee, 2009). In these assessments, HEIs also had to outline widening participation aims and objectives with a new emphasis on admission processes and the measurement of 'success'. *Higher Ambitions* (BIS, 2009) similarly restated the importance of widening participation, suggesting that widening participation must become part of the mission of universities. However, *Higher Ambitions* (BIS, 2009, p.4) ominously indicated that 'universities themselves will have to be more efficient and effective...[needing] to be rigorous in withdrawing from activities of lower priority and value...'. It is not clear whether these activities would be identified by the government or by HEIs. Evidence from this research project suggests that if HEIs are given freedom to decide, some will mark out widening participation as 'of lower priority and value'.

One of the starting points of my study was the observation by Duke (2004) that researchers needed to focus on organisational behaviour as a means of bringing about institutional change. The findings of this research suggest that such institutional change is unlikely as long as institutions are permitted by government to interpret and implement widening participation in their own ways. Tighter regulation by government would therefore appear to be key to creating a higher education sector in which every HEI takes widening participation seriously, rather than a sector in which widening participation work is concentrated in the post-92 HEIs. The introduction of widening participation strategic assessments (HEFCE, 2009) perhaps indicated a movement in this direction. However, there were a number of other ways in which the government could have induced greater levels of commitment to widening participation amongst HEIs. These recommendations, aimed at the government and its agencies, reflect the focus of this research on pre-entry and admissions. The recommendations acknowledge the fact that a radically transformative approach to widening participation is not achievable without major structural change. The scope of the recommendations therefore reflect the more limited aspirations of a weakly transformative approach to widening participation:

- 1) Hold HEIs to their benchmark targets for under-represented groups. Withhold money from institutions that fail to meet their targets and reward institutions that do meet their targets.

- 2) Give OFFA the power to take fee income away from institutions where they find that promises made in access agreements have not been met. The money should be put into a centralised bursary fund to be distributed to students from lower socio-economic groups. This might help to avoid the confusion (reported by Foskett *et al.*, 2006) and unfairness (reported by Callender, forthcoming) caused by the current, localised bursary system.
  
- 3) Financially reward the embedding of widening participation into the institutional culture. Use the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) or its equivalent to check the extent to which an embedded commitment is reflected in the practices of the institution.
  
- 4) Use the QAA or its equivalent to check the accuracy and inclusiveness of statements made in official university literature aimed at prospective students. Penalise institutions that are deemed to be hindering efforts to widening participation.
  
- 5) Ask the QAA or its equivalent to monitor open day events to ensure that widening participation messages are not being undermined by members of staff who assume that they are talking to an audience of traditional students. Routinely feed back findings to institutions.

- 6) Incentivise more diversification in the partnerships and/or relationships between FE colleges and HEIs so that students are provided with a range of information and choices.

These measures should induce HEIs to bring about the embedding of commitment to widening participation. .

#### **12.4 Ways forward for institutional widening participation policy?**

Evidence from the current research seems to suggest that certain case study HEIs regarded widening participation as a 'bolt-on' issue. In some cases, particularly in the Russell Group universities (Oldchurch and Oldbeam), widening participation seemed to be weakly framed and unevenly put into operation. Three case study HEIs (Newdale, Neworth and Newbede) appeared to evidence a stronger commitment to access and inclusion. Nevertheless, although only based on anecdotal evidence provided by staff in FE colleges, there was a suggestion that the widening participation work of HEIs was more limited in scope than the work that was taking place in the six case study FE colleges.

In terms of widening participation practice, this research project has focused closely on pre-entry and admissions. The recommendations for HEIs outlined in this section therefore relate only to this stage of the student life-cycle, although it is acknowledged

that an achievement of a more embedded approach to widening participation would be likely to lead to improvements at the post as well as pre-entry stage.

Of particular concern was the way in which marketing literature and open day discourses sometimes conveyed messages that were at odds with statements of commitment to widening participation. Prospectus documents, websites and open days are a key interface between student and institution, and if messages are not inclusive, potential students from under-represented groups may not apply. This is why it is important that the government takes action to critically analyse and draw institutional attention to the messages that are being projected in these settings, perhaps via QAA or other type of audit. The first recommendation for HEIs that arises from the research therefore relates to the language and tone being used in marketing literature and open day settings. May and Bridger (2010, pp.98-99) have argued that 'attention should be paid to the terminology of messages used to communicate "inclusion". Language is a powerful instrument by which to move towards a more inclusive culture'. In support of this recommendation, it is suggested that:

- 1) Institutions should routinely consider, via internal audit, whether the language, tone and form they use (when talking to prospective students in a variety of settings), sends an inclusive message to certain students from under-represented groups. Efforts should be made to adopt inclusive language, tone and form in all institutional marketing literature and outreach settings.

The need to make commitment to widening participation a part of the culture and ethos of HEIs has been highlighted by a number of researchers (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Shaw *et al.*, 2007). Evidence from the current research lends weight to these arguments. Institutions will never be able to speak with 'one voice'. However, a more embedded culture of inclusion would seem to offer a powerful way of ensuring that there is a strongly framed commitment to widening participation that is not only communicated to students, but also borne out in practice across the student life-cycle. The second and third recommendations are suggested as a means of achieving this:

2) Organisational structures should be designed in a way that supports the embedding of widening participation. This might involve a move away from separate widening participation departments towards a more integrated approach with, for example, individual departments responsible for their own widening participation work.

In line with the Labour government's vision, outlined in *Higher Ambitions* (BIS, 2009), the third recommendation is that:

3) A commitment to widening participation should form a part of the mission statement of the institution, and it should be highlighted in a range of policy documents. Staff should be made aware of this at induction and staff training events, and efforts should be made to make commitment to widening participation a part of the culture and ethos of the institution.

The fourth recommendation draws on a point made previously by Shaw *et al.* (2007, p.45). They suggest:

4) 'a complete re-working of an institution's brand' to reflect the importance of inclusion and diversity. 'All aspects of the public face of the institution would have to be informed by this branding, whether formal or informal, and existing cultural assumptions embedded in the marketing mix would have to be challenged in the context of the new brand'.

Shaw *et al.* (2007, p.45) argue that the realisation of this recommendation 'takes us close to Jones and Thomas' (2005) view of a "transformative" institution'. If successful, an embedded and rebranded commitment to widening participation would be reflected in marketing literature and in institutional discourses. This could potentially change the nature of the relationship between prospective student and institution at the pre-entry stage, as well as between student and institution at the post-entry stage. It is likely that this projection of a more inclusive culture would also filter through to groups (parents, friends, tutors, careers advisers) who are involved in helping students to make decisions about progression to university. In the context of this study, the projection of a more inclusive culture might help to address some of the 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent, 1998) that seemed to exist in FE settings (and was leading to tutors and students building up negative images of the commitment to widening participation in certain

HEIs). As an aid to this, the fifth recommendation relates to the need to improve the relationship and the information that flows between FE colleges and HEIs.

5) HEIs should diversify their relationships with FE colleges so that students and tutors in FE are not solely dependent upon feedback from ex-students and messages contained in official marketing literature. This might involve HEIs directing resources away from compact schemes and isolated partnership arrangements, towards a greater number of (albeit weaker) relationships with greater numbers of FE colleges.

The purpose of this is to facilitate greater student choice. It is borne out of findings indicating that whilst staff in partner FE colleges were positive about the case study universities, staff in non-partner FE colleges were often dubious about whether they should encourage students to apply. Negative perceptions were often fuelled by 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent, 1998) rather than good sources of institutional information. Evidence suggested that this, at times, impacted upon the information passed on by college staff to prospective students.

These recommendations are not aimed equally at all universities because some institutions already demonstrated strong commitment to the concept of widening participation. This current research project revealed practices in the two post-92 institutions and the university college in the sample that were more student-centred (the inclusive tone of the prospectus document and open day discourses reflected this). This

good practice could, however, usefully be shared with institutions that are more traditional in their approach.

Some institutions may not be committed to widening participation and existing strategies might simply reflect this. As highlighted in Chapter 1, the political climate and media coverage of access issues has made it increasingly difficult for HEIs to admit that they are not wholeheartedly committed to widening participation. However, this situation does not benefit students who are trying to make informed decisions, and who are finding it difficult to untangle the myriad of rhetorical statements around institutional commitment to widening participation.

### **12.5 Possible avenues for future research**

This study has examined the pre-entry (outreach and admissions) dimensions of widening participation policy and practice in the case study HEIs; it has therefore focused on the organisational perspective (via documentary and discursive presentations) rather than student perspectives. However, the motivation for the research came from a desire to promote organisational change as a means of improving the experience of HE for students from under-represented groups. One way of developing the research would, therefore, be to carry out a student-focused study that gathered views about the extent to which institutional discursive practices were including or excluding students at the pre-entry stage. A study that focussed on student

perceptions of pre-entry information would lend weight to arguments for changes in institutional approach.

Another area of future research might focus on the support available to students in different HEIs at the post-entry stage. There would be scope within this to consider the experiences of students from particular under-represented groups. A study of this nature would certainly be interesting at a time of expected budget constraints.

In organisational terms, a study that considered the approaches to widening participation of a broader range of HEIs would also be highly useful. The study might focus on the extent to which proposed tighter regulation (BIS, 2009) brings about reforms of institutional practices by HEIs. Another area of interest might be the extent to which institutions track the success rates of students from under-represented groups, and what actions they subsequently take in order to aid retention and success rates. Both of these studies would help to uncover the nature of institutional commitment to widening participation work.

## **12.6 Conclusion**

This thesis has argued that after thirteen years of a New Labour government that was ostensibly committed to extending access to HE, there remain deep contradictions in widening participation policy and practice. Not least of these is the way in which HEIs 'talk' to prospective students. Websites, prospectuses and open day discourses are

primarily marketing tools and they therefore present glossy, stage-managed images of institutions. In the pre-92 case study institutions, messages about widening participation were often included, but they were positioned alongside discourses that suggested a more exclusive approach to the selection and admission of students. This can lead to what Avis (1998, p.6) refers to as:

‘the discursive trick’: ‘we are offered the language of inclusion and yet this is set within a thoroughly conservative appropriation’.

In the post-92 case study HEIs, there was evidence of a pre-occupation with filling places. As Duke (2005) has pointed out, the ‘supply-side’ dominates institutional thinking, so that students are treated much like potential consumers. The problem with this is that students do not always have the information they need in order to make informed decisions. Instead, institutions seemed to be allowed to employ rhetoric and persuasion in order to fill places. It could be suggested that the Labour government’s sympathy towards a ‘free market’ ideology unleashed market forces into the higher education sector, but with no accompanying will to correct the resulting inefficiencies. Without greater regulation, it could be suggested that widening participation in higher education had little chance of success in any but the most committed of HEIs.

It is useful to draw on Bernstein for the last word. Bernstein (1990, p.30) offers some hope by suggesting that:

'...there are potential contradictions and dilemmas in the order created by the principle of classification which serve as sources for a "yet to be voiced", for alternative discourse, other subject relations of power'.

Bernstein (1990) suggests that the existing order is maintained by insulation which suppresses these alternative discourses. However, if the government (in addition to correcting market failure), could successfully challenge the existing classifications in higher education (by changing the 'voice' of HEIs) it becomes possible to imagine an HE sector that is less hierarchical and more inclusive. Effective commitment to widening participation, rather than the chimera that it currently represents in some HEIs, might then start to mirror Jones and Thomas' (2005) transformative approach.

## Appendix 1

### USE OF PSEUDONYMS IN REPORTING THE RESEARCH

The staff in the HEIs who agreed to take part in the research were concerned that the anonymity of both themselves as individuals and their institution be protected. Therefore, the job titles of the staff in HEIs who were interviewed have been standardised in order to achieve anonymity. The HEI staff are referred to throughout the thesis as 'Widening Participation Managers'.

To protect the anonymity of the institutions (both in HE and FE), each institution has been allocated a pseudonym. In order to help the reader to identify the type of university that is being referred to, the pre-92 universities are pre-fixed with 'Old', ie. Oldchurch, Oldbeam and Oldlaw. The post-92 universities and the university college are prefixed with 'New', ie. Newdale, Neworth and Newbede. The FE colleges have all been given names based on the name of a small town or village that does not, in 'real life', have an FE college.

Part of the research also involved analysing the websites, prospectuses, policy documents and other official literature of the HEIs that took part. Whilst this information *is* in the public domain, including web addresses and complete prospectus details in the references list would have compromised the anonymity of the institutions involved. Documents such as prospectuses are therefore listed under their pseudonymous name, eg. *University of Neworth Undergraduate*

*Prospectus*. Place of publication and name of publisher have been deliberately excluded from the reference list, because these too would have compromised anonymity.

Information from institutional websites has been drawn on in the thesis and this presents a similar problem in terms of compromising the anonymity of the case study HEIs. It was therefore decided that the pseudonymous name would be used where appropriate when listing the title of a webpage, eg. '*Welcome to Neworth*' in the thesis itself. The exact web address has been deliberately excluded from the reference list. This is because the web addresses of most HEIs contain the name or part-name of the institution concerned.

For ethical reasons, it would have been wrong to have promised anonymity to interview participants, only to have cross-referenced something said in an interview with a prospectus document or webpage that is clearly listed in the references list. Efforts have therefore been made to protect anonymity across the board, including in cases where documents are publicly available.

## Appendix 2

### **METHODOLOGY FOR THE ANALYSIS OF HEI WEBSITES**

*Analysing the case study website as it appears to prospective students:*

- 1) Who is the intended audience? Is the student addressed directly, or is the information directed at teachers/tutors/parents?
- 2) What tone is used? Is there evidence of either exclusive or inclusive language?
- 3) What (if any) assumptions are made about the audience?
- 4) What information is contained on the home page on an ordinary day, and what effect might this have on a prospective student reader from an under-represented group?
- 5) Is there evidence of information targeted particularly at students from under-represented groups? Eg, information on the home page about financial support?
- 6) What do the home pages of the case study institutions contain after A Level results are released in August? Is there evidence, for example, of institutions trying to recruit students via financial incentives?

*Searching for widening participation pages on case study websites*

- 1) From the point of view of a prospective student, how easy is navigation to the widening participation web pages?

- Any links from the home page?
  - What happens if the term 'widening participation' is entered into the search engine on the home page?
  - Is 'widening participation' listed in the A-Z list for the institutional site?
- 2) If found, where are the widening participation pages located? Eg. Within the Marketing Department, Admissions Service?
  - 3) If not found, what does this suggest about the institution?
  - 4) Is there a pattern in terms of institutional typology and the place of widening participation on the institutional website? Eg. Are pre-92 institutions more likely to have separate widening participation pages than post-92 institutions?

*Where widening participation web pages exist:*

- 1) Who is the intended audience? Is the student addressed directly, or is the information directed at teachers/tutors/parents?
- 2) What tone is used? Is there evidence of either exclusive or inclusive language?
- 3) What (if any) assumptions are made about the audience?
- 4) What sort of information is contained on widening participation webpages? Eg. Financial information, academic information, information about pastoral support?
- 5) How does the above compare across the case study institutions?

### Appendix 3

#### **METHODOLOGY FOR THE ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL PROSPECTUSES**

##### *Prospectus information pack*

- 1) What is contained in the prospectus information pack? Eg. just the prospectus, or prospectus plus other leaflets and information?
- 2) What does the inclusion of other information suggest about the institution?

##### *Welcome note from Vice Chancellor/Principal*

- 3) What is mentioned in the note and in what order?
- 4) What is the tone of the letter?
- 5) Who is the intended audience?
- 6) What assumptions are made (if any) about the audience?
- 7) What sort of language is used, eg, academic traditionalist, access-oriented, inclusive, exclusive?

##### *The prospectus document in general*

- 8) In what order are things mentioned? Eg. facilities and student life emphasised before course information?

- 9) Any specific mention of widening participation? If so, what form does this take? Where in the prospectus? What is emphasised?
- 10) What sort of language is used? Eg. academic traditionalist, access-oriented, inclusive, exclusive? Are New Labour discourses drawn upon?
- 11) Who is the intended audience? Is the student addressed as 'you' and is this consistent throughout the document?
- 12) What is the form of the text? Eg. Is it easy to read? How is it laid out?

*Comparisons between prospectuses*

- 13) Are there similarities or differences in terms of the priority given to different elements of the student experience?
- 14) Are there similarities or differences in terms of the tone and form? Eg. familiar or formal?
- 15) Any observations about the language that is used by different types of HEI?
- 16) Are there differences in the assumptions that are made about the intended audience?

## Appendix 4

### LETTER SENT TO WIDENING PARTICIPATION MANAGERS

1<sup>st</sup> March 2007

Dear .....

I am a PhD student in the School of Education at Birmingham University, and I am currently carrying out a piece of research that considers the different ways in which Higher Education Institutions are responding to the Government's widening participation agenda.

My interest in widening participation stems from my work as a Study Adviser at Leicester University. This role has given me an increased awareness of some of the challenges that are faced by students, and I have therefore become interested in the different ways in which universities are responding to a more diverse student body.

I have spent some time looking at the access agreements and widening participation web pages of a number of universities, and I am now keen to identify key members of staff who might agree to talk to me about the interpretation of widening participation that guides institutional activity in this area. Any contributions from members of staff will be kept anonymous, and the names of participant universities will not appear in the PhD thesis. I would be happy to share the findings with institutions who agree to take part in the research.

If you would like to know more about the project, I can provide further details. My email address is [clg20@le.ac.uk](mailto:clg20@le.ac.uk), or telephone 07811 281597. I have a list of questions that I would like to ask and I could show these to you in advance of the meeting.

I appreciate that you must have a heavy workload and I would therefore be extremely grateful for any help that you feel you can provide. I hope you won't mind if I telephone within the next few weeks to ask whether you could agree to meet with me.

Many thanks in advance for your help.

Yours sincerely,

## **INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: WIDENING PARTICIPATION MANAGERS IN HEIS**

### **Opening questions**

- 1) What is your understanding or interpretation of the term 'widening participation'?
- 2) What influences the institution's approach to widening participation?
- 3) Which groups of students are widening participation activities aimed at?
- 4) Of the students who might be included in widening participation activity – are there certain groups who might be targeted more than others? I.e. Are students from lower socio-economic groups more of a target than students with disabilities for example?
- 5) How is this decided?

### **Activities**

- 6) I am interested in what institutions are doing to achieve their widening participation objectives. I can see from your website that the university runs a number of events for school pupils. Is there anything else that the institution is doing to achieve its widening participation objectives – particularly once the students have enrolled at the university?
- 7) Are there any obstacles to achieving these objectives?

### **Strategy documents**

- 8) Does widening participation have a place in university strategies? Is it part of the core strategic aims of the university? the marketing strategy? the teaching and learning strategy?
- 9) Do you have a separate widening participation strategy? (Is this different to the Access Agreement?) Who wrote the widening participation strategy and the access agreement?

### **Embeddedness**

- 10) Is there a shared commitment to widening participation across the institution? (For example, is it shared by senior managers and colleagues in the academic departments?) Where is the interpretation shared? Where is it not shared?
- 10) Would you say that widening participation activity is embedded in the work of the institution? Can you give examples of this?
  - Which departments engage with widening participation?
  - What is the motivation for their engagement?
  - How widespread (or embedded) is this kind of commitment throughout the institution?

### **Tracking and monitoring**

- 11) Do you measure how successful your widening participation activities are?

- *How do you know that widening participation activities are being received or taken up by the intended target group?*
- *Are you able to see how many students who have taken part in widening participation activities actually enrol at the university?*
- *Are you able to identify certain 'widening participation' students who are then tracked throughout their time at university?*
- *If tracking does take place, do you collect evidence of the success rates of 'widening participation' students?*

### **Who does the work?**

12) Who is involved in widening participation work across the institution? (ie, staff in the widening participation office, academics, senior managers?)

13) What is the division of labour in terms of widening participation activity?

14) How much autonomy do you have in your work?

### **Changes in the widening participation agenda**

15) Has the institution's widening participation activity changed significantly over time? I.e. Increasing use of the term 'outreach' rather than widening participation? A new focus on 'employability'? Amalgamation with admissions teams or student recruitment?

16) Do you anticipate any changes to widening participation activity in your institution over the next 5 years, and what will these changes be influenced by?

### **If time....**

17) What is your overall assessment of the government's widening participation policies for higher education?

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