

**Changing Landscapes – Conference at University of Wales, Swansea  
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**Transformation or Incorporation?  
New Labour’s Widening Participation Policy in Higher Education**

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**1. Introduction:**

- (i) Much of what I have to say is critical of the Labour Party’s WP policy – so perhaps I should mention that I have been a member of the Labour Party for more than thirty years and have always been and remain a ‘socialist’ – I am going to leave that undefined or we will be here all day!
- (ii) I also want to state a few ‘principles’ in relation to my perspective on adult learning in HE: (apologies for this being about HE only – but points are generic.)
  - I believe that the provision of liberal, critical adult education for those without HE experience is the single most important function of adult education in HE.
  - In a society permeated by inequality of all sorts, ‘WP’ is, or could be, of central importance.
  - Outreach and community education are essential to achieving this.
  - Finally, I believe that HE (and lifelong learning generally) has potentially an important role to play in achieving progressive social change.

**2. WP in the context of New Labour’s policy orientation.**

- (i) From the beginning, it is clear that education is, as a whole, seen as key, and that lifelong learning is central to this policy.

Speaking in 1999, Blair argued that:

*The old dispute between those who favour growth and personal prosperity, and those who favour social justice and compassion, is over. The liberation of human potential – for all the people, not just a privileged few – is, in today’s world, the key both to economic and social progress. In economic terms, human capital is a nation’s biggest resource.*

This was linked by David Blunkett in *The Learning Age* to a liberal, social purpose perspective (1998):

*Learning is the key to prosperity..... Investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based economy of the twenty-first century.....To achieve stable and sustainable growth, we will need a well-education, well-equipped and adaptable labour force.....We need the creativity, enterprise and scholarship of all our people.*

*As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship.*

- (ii) In my view, Blunkett believed this passionately, **but** it has been the human capital perspective which has **dominated**, and increasingly so. (cf. Coffield).
- (iii) This is linked to other ideological themes in education policy:
  - **meritocracy** – Fabian notions of equality of opportunity;
  - **marketisation** – via state, central legislative mechanisms.
- (iv) All this has produced a policy which saw educational investment, leading to increased economic efficiency in a **virtuous circle** of enlightened market capitalism: what might be termed **marketised welfarism**.

### 3. **Consequences of the Labour Party's ideology in the context of widening participation:**

#### **On the plus side:**

- (i) Initially, it was a transformative agenda – the populist, egalitarian orientation of Blunkett was evident – an **excitement** in the air – in Kennedy on FE, in Fryer on LL (even, I would argue, in Dearing on HE).
- (ii) And there has been increase in WP – largely because of the increase in absolute, though not retentive terms (mention gender).

- (iii) Moreover, I would argue that, via Gordon Brown, there have been moves to **social inclusion**, with some tangible help to the most disadvantaged **and** to all women.
- (iv) There have been significant progressive initiatives: Sure Start, Union Learning Fund, Neighbourhood Renewal. In HE, arguably, OFFA and dedicated WP funding.

**Negative:**

- (i) The proclaimed **diversity** in the sector is a euphemism for all intensification of **hierarchy**. For WP, this has meant that, despite WP being ‘sector wide’, it is the post 1992 HEIs that carry the bulk of WP activity **and** it is very strongly **vocational**, with an increasing emphasis upon Foundation Degrees.

For the pre-1992 HEIs, WP has been largely ‘cherry picking’ able young people from the working class.

This is all fine – maybe – but:

- (a) adult learning has been downgraded (as has the part-time 35 to 40 per cent of total student FTE load);
  - (b) liberal, critical education (Tawney, Adult Education Departments etc.) has been severely undermined;
  - (c) and, not least, the sums of money put into WP (cf. e.g. Research) are tiny (and cross-subsidised anyway from T).
- (ii) The HE hierarchy has been accompanied by emphases upon:
    - (a) research, with accompanying funding through RAE, **culturally** as well as **financially**.
    - (b) science and technology driven criteria and culture.
  - (iii) ‘Marketisation’ of HE has resulted in fee-structure reforms, which discourage non-traditional background students; and **language** has adopted a market culture: stakeholders, customers, etc.

- (iv) Little, if any, attention is now paid to ‘social purpose’ adult education in Higher Education (although there are exceptions: e.g. citizenship agenda, HEFCE’s £2M Research in WP in TLRP etc).

#### 4. Conclusion:

- (i) ‘New Labour’ has adopted an ideology centred on assumptions about the permanence of a market economy and an individualistic frame of reference.

‘Old Labour’s’ language of class and social change has been replaced by categories of inclusion and exclusion, and an emphasis upon individual achievement, rather than **collective** advance.

WP operates in this context.

- (ii) There is a continuity of policy here: Labour in 1945-51, for example, had the same over-riding emphasis upon education and training linked to modernising the economy; and advocated a meritocratic system. The differences in 1997-2005 are two: scale and centrality of education, including especially HE; and the particular ideological context of Third Way New Labourism.
- (iii) WP policy has therefore been ameliorative, not transformative. The Labour Party remains as Ralph Miliband pointed out over thirty years ago, not a reformist party, but a party of modest social reform (explain).
- (iv) These advances are **not** trivial, and are solid gains – and there has been some **redistribution** of wealth (by Gordon Brown).

But it is a long way from the rhetoric of transformation articulated by Blunkett in 1998: and the vision and values of what Swansea’s Community Education programme has proclaimed and delivered over the years finds little echo in New Labour’s policies for 2005 and beyond. Widening Participation does not challenge the existing order.