

Summary

Churchill Fellowship Report Summary

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Colleagues have encouraged me to share some of the experiences of my Churchill Fellowship undertaken in 2011. The following summary is constituted by extracts of my Final Report, of which the full version can be found on the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust website, along with information about the Fellowships:

<http://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellows/detail/3466/jayne+clapton>

Project

To investigate sustainable outcomes for students of low socio-economic backgrounds in Australian Higher Education - Netherlands, UK, Ireland, Finland.

Background

Before reporting on my Project, it is useful to consider the context in which this Fellowship has been undertaken.

Since the election of the Labor Government in 2007, Social Inclusion became an overarching social policy focus in Australia. Within this commitment, the Australian Government has determined that by 2020, at least 20% of undergraduate students in Higher Education must come from low socio-economic (LSES) backgrounds. Hence, the Australian Social Inclusion agenda for Higher Education aims to widen participation, decrease social inequality and increase employability and productivity of graduates.

This is not the first time there has been a government commitment to an inclusive Higher Education agenda. Initiatives in recent decades have led to marked improvements in the access and participation of previously under-represented groups, eg females, people with disability and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. However, it seems that for a variety of reasons (such as a change of government, fees and the economic climate, and / or a change in ideology¹), previous advances in the participation of students from low LSES backgrounds have not been sustained; and the participation rate has remained somewhat stagnant at around 17%, with many institutions even falling well short of this figure. It is timely to broaden our understanding, enhance our knowledge and plan strategies that will contribute to

ongoing, sustainable outcomes for these students. Examining intersections between factors such as culture, class, 1st in family, gender, age, career choices, flexibility, resources and access to lifelong learning will result in an enhanced perspective of Australia's Social Inclusion agenda in Higher Education

Study Tour

I chose the sites for my visits on the basis of Higher Education inclusion research and practices being undertaken at the institutions. Some choices were also informed by the reputation of the institution in regard to specific work. Sites and geographical location in regard to LSES populations were also considerations, as were cultural structures of different higher education systems.

The institutions I visited over a 6 week period were:

- Vrije Universiteit (VU), 'Free University', Amsterdam, the Netherlands
- University of East London (UEL), London, United Kingdom
- Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), Sheffield, United Kingdom
- Higher Education Academy (HEA), York, United Kingdom
- Lancaster University (LU), Lancaster, United Kingdom
- Trinity College (TCD), Dublin, Ireland
- University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

Across the institutions, I met with a range of personnel which included:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Outreach and access practitioners• Support staff• Strategic leaders• Academics• Institutional data analyst• Pro Vice Chancellor Student Experience | <u>Researchers of:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inclusion and transformation• Sociology of Higher Education• Widening Participation• Higher Education Policy• <i>Programme Evaluations</i> |
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By visiting these four European countries, I undertook visits and consultations to examine specific points of interest which included:

- investigating the nature and impact of social inequality and social transformation (eg Netherlands),
- exploring strategies of outreach, accessibility, space, support and research (eg UK);

- discussing programmes that enhance and support student diversity (eg Ireland);) and
- understanding the interplay between political support, cultural context and educational success (eg Finland).

From these visits, I was able to ascertain how the Social Inclusion in Higher Education agenda was operationalized across the various institutions; explore a wide diversity of practices and programmes; identify the importance of context, messages, accessibility, position and support; and consider types of research and scholarship in terms of effectiveness, implications and limitations.

Finally, I highlight 5 significant aspects that I consider important and which I believe are necessary to contribute to sustainable outcomes for students of low socio-economic backgrounds in Australia. These aspects, along with 10 recommendations that I offer, require ongoing deliberation for the scholarship and practices about Social Inclusion in Higher Education

Discussion

Operationalising the Agenda

All countries are members of the European Union (EU); and hence are committed to the principles of Social Inclusion in Higher Education through Widening Participation, working with Diversity and Lifelong Learning. However, how each country manifests such commitment is subject to the cultural and political ideologies in place. The Netherlands, Ireland and Finland run binary, non-hierarchical systems whereby educational choices are equally valued. In the UK, as in Australia, there is significant difference in educational status between Further and Higher Education institutions; and therefore, how pathways between sectors are negotiated to provide educational opportunities is a key contemporary focus.

Although all are members of the EU, changes in government can have a significant effect on practices; and this was evident in the UK where, during my visits, the new conservative government was implementing changes from a Social Inclusion focus in education to a Social Mobility focus. Funding models were also being changed to include increased student fees and to be market driven. The impact of these changes was being seen by some as somewhat catastrophic for Widening Participation for non-traditional students. Perceivably successful programmes such as Aimhigher were being dismantled. It was stated that the opportunities that the Programme had presented, the resources developed and the skilled workforce were all being made redundant. However, others were keen to see the changes as presenting new opportunities and access imperatives that had not yet been experienced. Whatever the actuality, it is accurate to say that the UK Higher Education sector was in considerable upheaval during the period of my visits, and during that time, staff of the universities all expressed significant uncertainty as to what the future would hold in regard to Social Inclusion and Widening Participation.

At institutional levels, practices to widen access and participation were operationalised differently. Practices were therefore contingent upon other factors such as geography and demography, culture, funding sources and institutional values. For instance, in Finland, education is so highly valued culturally, that its commitment to diversity is intrinsic in all of its practices. Approximately 80% of school leavers in Finland pursue higher education.

At Trinity College Dublin (TCD) in Ireland and the Vrije Universiteit (VU) in the Netherlands, their Social Inclusion commitments were based on a fundamental engagement with Widening Participation and creating opportunities to include and support a diverse range of students.

Within the UK, how institutions undertook their commitment to Social Inclusion differed. The University of East London (UEL) and Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) are geographically located within low socio-economic areas that historically have been hubs of thriving waterfront and manufacturing industries respectively. With significant downturns in these industries, regeneration and renewal funding had been directed to major infrastructure developments and a commitment to change the demographic make-up of the areas towards attaining Higher Education qualifications. For UEL, this has resulted in the building of the new Docklands Campus, and has seen entrepreneurial opportunities develop as a result, eg the establishment of the Knowledge Dock, partnerships with businesses at Canary Wharf, the opening of the Thurrock Shop and the strategic relationship with the Olympic Games and fostering Widening Participation through sport. At Lancaster University (LU), a top 10 UK university and structured on a collegiate system, the Social Inclusion agenda could be described more as a 'bolt on' activity. There are not necessarily social, financial, nor demand imperatives for LU to extend its access; however LU is committed to providing an inclusive experience for all its students.

A diversity of practices and programmes

Widening Participation requires good outreach programmes. Until July 2011, Aimhigher had been a successful programme which had run for quite a few years in the UK. It had become increasingly streamlined, and although operated locally, was nationally coordinated. It had a large funding base with millions of dollars allocated to programmes scattered around the UK. An important characteristic of Aimhigher was that the operational aspect of the Programme was not attached to individual institutions. Although the Programme may have been 'housed' in a particular institution such as a university, it was run by a collaborative team between schools, communities, further and higher education institutions who undertook a 'joined up' approach to outreach. The model was similar to a Local Area Coordination model. Aimhigher had a coordinated message and evaluation processes; however some activities may have varied at local levels depending on the particular needs and demographics of where the Programme was situated. For example, Programmes may have targeted specific groups such as young gifted and talented students, students who live or previously lived in alternate

care, families, first in family students, students of different cultural backgrounds, refugees, students with disability and adult learners. Also the media of the activities varied, with a wide use of exposure to different educational experiences, publications and posters, well developed websites, DVDs and the use of drama and creative activities. Preparatory and support Programmes and summer schools were also available.

Aimhigher was a nationally coordinated outreach programme. Similar institutionally based outreach and transition activities operated in Ireland and the Netherlands through TCD and VU respectively. At TCD, the Tertiary Access Programmes and the National Institute for Intellectual Disability are nationally and internationally significant for the widening participation of non-traditional students. Similarly, at VU, a summer Programme for mature age / adult learners was significantly successful.

Context, messages, accessibility, position and support matter

It was apparent that context matters. For example, place and the use of space were important aspects. How learning spaces were designed for the diverse needs of students was critical to successful student experiences. At Lancaster University, a supported, new state of the art student learning centre had recently opened which provided enclaves for individual and group learning, a range of performance and preparation spaces, as well as conversation spaces. How students could gather on campuses to meet, and have social and reflective spaces reflected intentional, institutional planning and design of spaces. With an emphasis on sport, the Dockland Campus of UEL was, at the time, finishing the construction of an outdoor exercise space to supplement fitness training.

Another important contextual feature was the discourses presented in institutional literature, publications and posters. At UEL, for example, wall posters were welcoming and promoted affirming messages for students about capacity to be successful and affirming student strengths. At LU, posters showed trust of students in terms of access and eating etc in certain spaces. These discourses are important messages to promote a sense of belonging in an institution for all students, regardless of background and identity.

Somewhat paradoxical though, was the need for tight security and approved access to get to support parts of a couple of institutions.

How students and staff could access institutions via transport options was also significant, as this is a critical factor for LSES students. All institutions were accessible through well-established public transport systems with buses and / or trains. The light rail system that runs through the Docklands Campus of UEL was particularly impressive and is part of the wider infrastructure renewal and regeneration commitments to the East London area. This also incorporates developments for the London 2012 Olympic Games.

Where a Social Inclusion agenda is operated from within an institution is critical. Particularly impressive was UEL's commitment that this should be situated within the External and Strategic Development Services. The closer the planning and operations of the agenda were to the Chancellery and Secretariat of a university was seen as important and useful for higher levels of integration within the institutional activities.

All of these contextual issues are important retention strategies. Another impressive retention strategy is worthy of highlighting. At UEL, all first year students who successfully complete their first semester at university (at a full time rate) receive a £500 bursary. This money can be utilised for accommodation, travel, fees and books and assists students in stabilising their enrolment at university. Behind such an allocation are also learning and teaching strategies developed by academic staff to encourage student success.

Research and Scholarship

The need for different types of research and scholarship to support a Social Inclusion in Higher Education agenda was discussed at every university.

There is a wide body of evaluation reports and research about programmes, policies and practices of learning and teaching strategies. However, the range of research and scholarship in regard to the macro issues impacted by Social Inclusion and Widening Participation were not so prevalent (ie such as sociological impacts, intergenerational changes and changed productivity).

I asked of all the Aimhigher and associated academic staff, what could have been done differently in order to have provided a safety net for the ongoing operations of the Programme? I was consistently told that there was a sense that people were too busy 'doing' the Programme, plus providing the necessary reports and evaluations, at the expense of undertaking deep, rigorous research about socio-political impact.

However, it was a privilege to discuss various forms of research at all of the universities and to understand how the evidence of the research informed practices and underpin resource development. In the UK, that these could happen at a national level through different agencies, including the Higher Education Academy, was particularly impressive.

Conclusions

As stated, the aim of this project was *To investigate sustainable outcomes for students of low socio-economic backgrounds in Australian Higher Education - Netherlands, UK, Ireland, Finland.*

In conclusion, I highlight 5 significant aspects that I consider as important findings necessary to contribute to sustainable outcomes; and which will require ongoing deliberation. These are:

1. Beliefs and embeddedness
2. Collaboration
3. Engagement, Support and Incentives
4. Outcomes and Feedback Loops - questions
5. Evidence and Research

1. Beliefs and embeddedness

First and foremost, a successful Social Inclusion in Higher Education agenda is dependent upon *how* the agenda is embedded in cultural, ideological and socio-political understandings of education. These understandings are book-ended at one end by Finland's commitment to promoting education as the nation's best resource; and striving to provide opportunities by which to realise the potential of its people. For Finland, investment in education is an investment in the well-being of the nation.

The other book-end relates to the position that Higher Education is only for an elite group of people; and that policies, practices and structures support this belief. In this context, excellence in performance and reputation are paramount. Furthermore, the impact of this emphasis places Social Inclusion and Widening Participation as threats to institutions achieving this goal. Whilst it is unusual for contemporary institutions to hold onto such an exclusive ideology, there are modified versions still apparent. These modifications include how participation in Social Inclusion and Widening Participation fulfils roles as 'good corporate citizens' and to be in a position to offer a charitable or philanthropic response to diversity and / or non-traditional learners. This approach represents a financial investment.

In between these book-ends, are a range of beliefs that support the agenda in a variety of ways through moral investments to improved opportunities. These can include social justice approaches to ensure fair and equitable access to Higher Education; making opportunities through offering a range of programmes; and being committed to Lifelong Learning with emancipatory and transformative goals.

However, it is fair to say that all of these approaches make commitments to improved productivity and the social well-being of communities. A commitment to aspiring to the values of the Finnish end of the spectrum is what would be required for the best outcomes.

2. Collaboration

Collaboration between many stakeholders is significant for sustainable outcomes. These collaborations can be attached to specific institutions, be between the Higher Education and corporate sectors, be inter-sectorial or independent of specific institutions (eg Aimhigher). They can also have a local, national and international focus and involve a variety of personnel.

Collaborations are important for:

- Raising aspirations, outreach, widening participation, pathways of non-traditional students

- Supporting for success
- Recording outcomes
- Sharing knowledge and building resources.
- Undertaking research, being innovative and creating enterprise

3. Engagement, Support and Incentives

Sustainability will be enhanced when there is consolidated engagement and support for the Social Inclusion in Higher Education agenda by politicians and policy makers; project workers; support staff, academic staff, and university and sectorial leaders. How families and communities support the agenda; and how peers (eg mature age, cultural, pathways, disciplinary students) support each other are critical aspects.

Support can also be provided via operational strategies like accessing and utilising alternative funding (such as through corporate collaborations; renewal and regeneration funding); preparatory / access programmes / foundation degrees; pathways and dual sector relationships; offering bursaries and scholarships or awards pre and post enrolment; being cognisant of the significance of space and place, including physical and learning environments; being an institutional / sectorial priority (strategic intent); and understanding the student experience by appreciating their complexity and particularity in regard to lifelong learning; and within demand driven models.

4. Outcomes and Feedback Loops

It is important to note that in considering sustainability issues, we need to be aware of impact and how feedback loops may be affecting practices, eg. inter-generational impacts, changing demographics within a community, changing skills and growth of new industries and innovation.

We are also faced with ongoing questions that command continual attention. Questions identified from this Project include:

- What constitutes success? (Do personal and institutional perceptions align?)
- Who do people become? (In terms of practitioners, citizens, family members)?
- What impact do students' experiences have on individuals, families, communities and policies?
- How are communities / societies improved?
- How are programmes and activities 'linked up'; and when should new collaborations be sought and formed?

5. Evidence and Research

This Project highlights the importance of evaluation and evidence to develop and / or improve practices; contribute to resource development (in local, institutional, sector contexts); provide good data sets; and inform policy development.

However there is also a need for rigorous macro, sophisticated research to critically evaluate existing practices and structures, and to create new approaches and innovations for sustainability. Such research may focus on topics such as relationships between gender issues and structures, cultural imperialism and structures; normative constructions and diversity. It also provides evidence that transcends political ties and ideologies, and that can create opportunities for innovation, collaborative enterprise, partnerships and alternative funding.

Finally, it is important to state that whilst this Project provided a wonderful experience to explore European examples of practices within the Social Inclusion in Higher Education agenda, it also gave me an insight into how well Australian practices compared. In many respects, the comparison was positive. However, the most significant issues that were revealed from the comparisons included that:

- Lots of good works are being undertaken in Australia, but in a rather ad hoc manner.
- There is a lack of nationally co-ordinated policy and practice imperatives to achieve deep social results.
- There is a paucity of research-led practices from a range of conceptual perspectives.

A final comment

I believe one other point needs highlighting. Because of their histories and current demographics, it is noteworthy that none of the European countries currently grapple with extensive issues in regard to their own Indigenous people to the degree that we do. As Australian universities continue to address experiences of social exclusion in regard to *our* First Peoples, our Higher Education sector stands to also gain valuable insights and make significant changes in the broad ways that are not currently discussed in Europe.

Recommendations

I therefore offer the following recommendations for consideration in the Australian context.

1. That there be a deeper commitment to the Social Inclusion in Higher Education agenda in Australia that can result in long term, sustainable outcomes for people of low socio-economic backgrounds who seek and pursue a university education.
2. That there be a range of nationally convened programmes that are research-led; communicated through national, regional and local publications; and locally implemented and operated.

3. That there be a national research and development agenda established; and that transparent and competitive allocations of research funding be allocated as an ongoing learning and teaching priority; and that publications be encouraged.
4. That a national academy and resource clearing house be established for research and statistical data; and that accessible and affordable professional development programmes are offered.
5. That an annual student-led national conference about Social Inclusion in Higher Education be supported so that student voices are central to policies and practices.
6. That incentives be available for corporate partners to provide alternative funding for the Agenda.
7. That bursary schemes attached to 1st year academic success be considered by institutions as a key retention strategy; and funded to do so.
8. That targeted infrastructure funding be available to enhance experiences of place and space.
9. That community collaborations and communities of practice be encouraged to be established.
10. That students' and institutional stories be developed and promoted through web interfaces and social media to raise aspirations; celebrate success and share innovations.

Note

¹ This claim is also potentially relevant if there is a change of government in the near future. See, for example, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/libs-to-exclude-social-inclusion-portfolio/story-e6frgcjx-1226236848356> (date accessed 25/4/2012)

Biographical Note

Jayne Clapton is a Professor in the School of Human Services and Social Work at Logan Campus, Griffith University. Jayne is a Disability Studies scholar who, for many years, has researched the relationship between ethics, inclusion and disability, particularly intellectual disability. In 2009, her book of this work *A Transformatory Ethic of*

Inclusion was published by Sense Publishers. In more recent years, she has extended her research about ethics and inclusion to issues of impaired decision making capacity in regard to Indigenous people; and also for people who experience chronic homelessness. As a Logan staff member and given the student demographics of the campus and her discipline, Jayne also has a strong learning and teaching interest about Social Inclusion, lifelong learning and non-traditional students.