



## Resource Review

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<b>Name of reviewed item:</b>	Overcoming the Barriers to Higher Education
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## Review

This book is a lively and spirited attempt to present a coherent picture of the disengagement of large sectors of our community with higher education. It is richly referenced and draws on numerous and varied research sources to discuss the complex and often ephemeral holy grail of wider participation.

The book explores a variety of research that outlines reasons for lack of uptake in higher education. It does not restrict itself to discussion about UK based research on the issue and has frequent mention of differing cultural perspectives (e.g. Australian access to ICT-based distance learning programmes). Increasing participation in higher education is a hot topic for educators and decision makers in the UK alike; a fact reinforced by the Higher Education Council for England and Wales' (HEFCE) inclusion amongst its main strategic priorities for the period 2006-11 to :“increase the proportion of students (full-time and part-time, both young and mature) from under-represented groups in higher education.”

Once I got over the fact that the title led me to expect an analysis of initiatives (and suggestions for further initiatives) aimed at overcoming barriers to higher education, I found the book achieved its primary remit. This was “to conduct an independent review of the existing relevant evidence on widening participation in HE, with particular reference to the varied barriers faced by potential and actual students.” I also liked the way the authors structured the book to discuss factors in a chronological way from early education, and personal background through to the experience of higher education and then the resulting post-graduation experience which in turn affects the perceived value of higher education.

The book makes frequent reference to the difficulties of drawing meaningful conclusions from limited data sources. In some ways these observations could equally be applied to a variety of sociological phenomena: e.g. “beware the source of your data” or “it depends upon your paradigm as to which variables you assign greater importance (is an individual’s background more important than their innate ability?)” The section on “some generic problems of research” makes useful reading for any research student.

This part of the book reminded me of the nature vs nurture debate. It made me think that the arguments about what influences an individual’s propensity to engage with higher education are similar to those about how best to educate. This made me think of belief systems and to what extent any of us believe we have the right to expand out minds and fulfil our own potential?

The book has a useful discussion about 23 listed ‘underlying factors’ or inequalities or ‘relative disadvantages’ which can impact a person’s educational life choices (p71). These include: where people were born, social housing, poor health and total absences from school. The authors state that the evidence is that ‘early learners are more often life-long learners’ (p70) thus, successful experiences at the initial stages of education are precursors to continued engagement in later life. This fascinating section contains one of my favourite quotes: “Put more simply, inequalities in initial education could be viewed as simply a manifestation of profound multiple social disadvantage” (p72.)

This book left me with the impression that to attempt to simplify the conditions which result in the decision to engage (or not) in higher education may be to miss the point. Which is, that there is no simple and clear reason why certain individuals choose not to engage with higher education. As the book concludes (in a roundabout way) the reasons are as numerous as there are people who decide not to engage. This is, of course, little comfort for those who have to make decisions about where to focus the budget to help overcome the barriers to higher education, but hopefully underlines the need for multi-faceted approaches.

I would have thought a useful, higher level assignment would be to ask students how they would use this book to decide which research programmes, or interventions may be usefully funded to help address some of the barriers to higher education. What are the priorities and how might these be agreed? This is something that the book does not do - provide any kind of relative viewpoint or judgement on the issues of resolving or overcoming the barriers. Is it more important, for example, for government to provide financial incentives to help participation in higher educations, or create pre-entry programmes that inspire pupils to participate? It would, for example, have been helpful (and I was expecting) to have some kind of summary / chapter of current projects / initiatives which aim to overcome the barriers to participation in higher education with an exploration of the relative pros and cons of such schemes.

One thing the book did do was to help me remember how my philosophy lecturer brought to our group’s attention the important correlation between the choice of language and subsequent perception. Our education system persists with the use of the term “compulsory education”, so is it any wonder that individuals exercise their choice to stop the ‘compulsion’ as soon as it is possible to do so?

The book attempts to boldly take on the multi-layered range of issues relating to participation in higher education. As an example of how elusive some of the terms are, the authors point out that there are 3 different definitions of widening participation currently informing different aspects of government (presumably UK)

policy and interventions. However, the authors still strive valiantly to define all *their* relevant terms including 'higher education' itself (p1) , 'access' and 'widening participation' (p4) 'participation in higher education' (p11.) However, I didn't think the one-page 'minimalist' index did justice to the wide ranging content of the book itself.

This book made me reflect on the question "How important is it for any of us to know the contributing factors to these life decisions?" HEFCE has an obligation via their strategic priorities to attempt to identify the factors involved. HEIs have a business imperative to attempt to entice more students through their hallowed halls. But what about others involved in education? Is it just a question for someone else to answer or does it have meaningful connotations for our work as educators? How can we have an impact on reducing the barriers and how does the current way we approach our work exacerbate or help the situation? That is for us all to answer individually, but the book made me wonder about the level of collaboration between primary, secondary, tertiary (further and higher education) providers to ensure that positive HE messages are reiterated throughout a child's education.

One of the book's main conclusions is that the current evidence base regarding this important topic has many gaps both in terms of quantity and quality. The authors provide a useful research 'wish-list' which provides any education / sociological research student with a host of ideas for widening participation research projects. For example, these include: "What is the situation regarding part-time students, finance and motivation?" And, "What is the true higher education engagement experience for disabled graduates?" (p123.)The authors also point out that there also seems to be a lack of longitudinal research and/or an archive that could form the backbone of data in this field. It is hoped that decision makers will use these observations to commission further research.

This book provides a thought-provoking overview of the research and issues relating to the reasons why more people don't pursue higher education routes and represents an excellent introductory text for any student needing to grasp the multifaceted and inter-related nature of a field of research. There are numerous discussion questions which came to mind as I read the book, for example: "How is it possible to accumulate present thinking on any topic when such cultural issues are, by their very nature, dynamic and ever-changing?"

In summary, this book will add a balanced overview of the research to help plan ways to tackle the ongoing phenomenon of a lack of engagement with HE.

#### *References:*

*HEFCE Strategic Priorities:* <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/priorities/>