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STEM strategies: student ambassadors and equality in higher education

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BOOK REVIEW

STEM strategies: student ambassadors and equality in higher education, by C. Gartland, London, IOE Press, 2014, 200 pp., £25.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-85856-617-7

During the New Labour administration in England (1997–2010) various widening participation initiatives were introduced to encourage ‘non-traditional’ learners (young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and mature or part-time students) to enter post-compulsory education. These initiatives included the development of outreach programmes aimed at raising awareness and understanding of higher education opportunities. Jointly funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for Education (HEFCE) and the then Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was set-up in 2001 (later renamed Aimhigher in 2004) to oversee the embedding of widening participation initiatives within higher education institutions. A whopping £239.5 million was ring-fenced for Aimhigher during the period 2008–2011 – a testament to the commitment of the then New Labour government to widening access to higher education for the most disadvantaged students.

However, widening participation initiatives have achieved mixed results. In 2010, the Sutton Trust (2010) reported that only 2% of students enrolled at the 25 most academically selective universities during the period 2005–2008 were previously on Free School Meals. On the other hand, HEFCE revealed in 2010 that the participation rates for young people from the ‘lowest participation areas’ entering post-compulsory education had increased by 30% during the period 2005–2010. On this account, there appears to be greater *mass participation* across the university sector as a whole, but few signs of improvement to *fair access* (greater access to the most elite universities for the poorest students). There have also been concerns raised about some of the core assumptions and perspectives underpinning widening participation discourse and practice. How are young people engaged and positioned through widening participation? What do these forms of engagement and positioning tell us about the ways in which widening participation is mediated by wider discourses of marketization, commercialization and competition? It is these and other important questions that Clare Gartland turns to in her book – *STEM Strategies*.

A central focus of Gartland’s book concerns an area of widening participation that has hitherto received little attention – the role of ‘student ambassadors’. As Gartland observes, ‘While there is mention of ambassador and similar schemes in the WP [widening participation] literature exploring the effectiveness of different strategies, few studies have ambassadors as their central focus’ (28). Student ambassadors refer to existing students recruited by their universities for the purpose of conducting outreach work with schools through targeting pupils from Key Stages 4 and 5 (specifically pupils aged 16–18 from economically deprived backgrounds) and

raising awareness and understanding of the advantages of obtaining a university degree. But student ambassadors do and become more than this, much more.

Gartland draws on extensive interview and observation data collected across two case studies (a ‘Russell Group’ university and a ‘post-1992’ university) to explore how student ambassadors perform their role, and to examine the perspectives of those pupils targeted for engagement. Among other important and original insights, Gartland observes the market-oriented and customer-focused activities of student ambassadors, in particular their use of ‘selling’ techniques to promote the university to pupils as ‘consumers’. This raises some issues around the role of student ambassadors – are they required to promote progression to university generally or recruit pupils to particular universities? Gartland goes on to show the shifting position of widening participation within universities, where it appears to sit somewhere between administration and marketing. This has further implications for the role of student ambassadors – what Gartland calls ‘the professionalization of ambassador recruitment’ (77). For my money these are some of the most carefully crafted and well evidenced insights generated through the book. They capture the multiple, often conflicting discourses at the heart of widening participation (social equity and profit generation, for example) and the difficulties surrounding efforts to define the role of student ambassadors. As Gartland observes, student ambassadors go by many descriptions, partly to the blurred boundaries framing widening participation discourse. They are often regarded as ‘friends’, ‘family members’, ‘role models’, ‘supervisors’, ‘learners’, ‘students’, ‘marketing tools’, ‘professionals’ and even ‘experts’.

Gartland also discusses the impact of social class, gender, ethnicity and ‘race’ on widening participation, albeit in ways that appear to detract from the core (or most persuasive) arguments of the book. Gartland’s use of Foucauldian discourse analysis and Butlerian notion of performativity is relevant to the scope of the study (a post-structuralist, social constructivist investigation of widening participation). However, I was disappointed with the lack of application and rigour of theory in certain sections, particularly Chapter 8 ‘Social Relationships and Identities’. Despite these minor quibbles, the book makes a distinctive and original contribution to the widening participation literature and is key reading material for any students, academics and practitioners interested in furthering their understanding of current trends framing widening participation discourse and practice.

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