

New study urges new thinking over UK government widening participation policy

May 14 2009

Widening participation efforts in UK universities should do more than simply create a 'wow moment' for young people, according to a new study led by the University of Leicester.

It found that there was a risk of overstating the value of higher education and universities at the expense of other ambitions [young people](#) might have.

The findings from the University of Leicester Department of Geography comes just ahead of the Government's publication of performance indicators for participation of people from socially disadvantaged communities in higher education.

Dr Gavin Brown, a lecturer in human geography, carried out the study funded by the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers).

He has now urged new thinking about young people's aspirations for adult life.

A key finding of the study was that young people who can appreciate life beyond the neighbourhoods where they live, and can envisage the possibility of living elsewhere, often have the highest ambitions for their adult lives because they are aware of the possibility of living different kinds of lives or doing a wider range of jobs. Dr Brown said: "This suggests that rather than talking about 'raising' young people's

aspirations, those concerned with widening participation should think more in terms of 'broadening their horizons.'

Dr Brown's findings are the result of a year-long project examining the government's widening participation policy to increase the number of young people from socially disadvantaged communities going on to university.

He examined how widening participation policy discusses young people's aspirations and ambitions for adult life. The research paid particular attention to the way in which politicians and policy makers discuss young people's ambitions in relation to the places where they come from and through the use of spatial metaphors.

The research was particularly interested in examining the emotional impact of these policies on the young people they are meant to assist.

Dr Brown said: "Experiencing a sense of 'ambition' (or 'aspiration') is an emotional sensation, but it can't easily be separated from all of the other emotions that young people experience or the everyday spaces in which they live, socialize and learn." He notes that young people's ambitions (and the barriers they experience to their realization) are often closely linked to these places (although, for some, their ambitions are expressed as a desire to escape and leave behind certain places).

Dr Brown said: "Very often the activities carried out in the name of widening participation seek to provoke particular emotional experiences for young people - whether that is through attempting to increase their confidence, self-esteem and resilience, or creating 'wow!' moments during visits to universities. But, it is important that widening participation practitioners and teachers consider this emotional work in the broader context of young people's lives, and their relationships with family, friends and their home communities. Without this awareness, we risk over-stating the importance of higher education and careers at the

expense of all the other ambitions for their adult lives that young people have emotional investments in."

Dr Brown found that Government ministers were most up-beat and 'aspirational' in the way they talked about young people's ambitions when they were talking about the potential for harnessing them to aid the global competitiveness of the British economy. In contrast, they tend to strike a more authoritarian tone when talking about the need to 'raise' the aspirations of young people from the country's most socially deprived neighbourhoods.

Source: University of Leicester ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: New study urges new thinking over UK government widening participation policy (2009, May 14) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-05-urges-uk-widening-policy.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.