Start From the Outside and Work In; Non-traditional Students, Networking and the Accumulation of Social Capital

Introduction

Widening participation is an accepted strategic priority for the UK higher education sector although there remain questions about its value base (Watts & Bridges, 2006). This paper presents a case study of a project in a Russell Group University run jointly by a voluntary organisation and the Business School to develop the social capital of students from groups under-represented in higher education (hereafter referred to as non-traditional students) through networking.

The Concept of Social Capital

Bourdieu distinguishes between economic, cultural and social capital. Social capital is defined by Bordieu as the resource or potential for resource accruing from the network of relationships possessed by an individual. Hence the value of an individual's social capital is related to the quality and quantity of her relationships with others and the value of social capital possessed by members of her network. It is this network which provides access to life opportunities and also affirmation of her own sense of identity and of others' recognition of her belonging. Universities can help students who join higher education with very low accumulations of social capital to build this by providing access to professional networks. As with the cutlery at a middle class dinner party, they start on the outside and work their way in.

Case Study

The key priorities of the University's widening participation strategy to date have been twofold: firstly, a commitment to raise aspirations of those from groups underrepresented in higher education to continue their studies to bachelors level., secondly, to increase the proportion of its own students coming from lower socio economic groups. These strategic goals have been operationalized through a programme of aspiration raising activities, mainly with local schools, and through an access scheme through which eligible applicants are made lower grade offers.

Post-admissions, institutional level support is provided for non-traditional students' economic capital only, although this is, of course, critical. Support for the development of cultural capital (for example, through booster classes for quantitative skills) and social capital (for example, as in this case, through mentoring schemes) is normally at the discretion and the cost of individual

departments. Where such support is funded centrally this is normally through the allocation of grants for projects that are developed, managed and evaluated at departmental level. The case described in this paper is such a project.

In 2011 the Business School was awarded funding to develop networking opportunities for students who had joined its programmes via the access scheme. The funding was used to employ a project officer to manage a Pathways to the Professions scheme which includes a range of opportunities for these students to develop connections with professionals in the city and region, particularly mentoring and internships.

These opportunities are channelled through a third sector organization which aims to unlock economic and social potential by bringing together private, public and community sectors and facilitating joint working across the sectors.

Students reported that they found the opportunities increased their self-confidence and provided them with contacts that they thought would be valuable to them in the future. Feedback on the mentoring element of the scheme, however, was mixed and this will be redesigned for the next cohort .

Companies valued the potential that the mentoring scheme offered as development for their own staff and as an element of their own corporate responsibility. Working through a third sector organization had reputational advantages to the Business School and enabled it to locate the project within its own corporate citizenship programme as well as the University's Widening Participation agenda.

Findings and Recommendations for Future Research

Universities do have a role to play in supporting non-traditional students to overcome a social capital gap that may inhibit their employability. Further research is required, however, on the differences in social capital across the whole student population within a mass education system and the impact of those differences on career prospects.   There is a danger that by focusing on non-traditional students we ignore the needs of a squeezed middle who do not have the access to professional networks enjoyed by a small minority possessing very high levels of social capital.

The initial aim of the project was to work with students over the three years of their programmes. In fact it proved impossible to recruit first years to the mentoring scheme whilst second year students were very keen to take part. Although no explanations were sought from decliners this non-response is typical of findings in earlier studies that identified non-traditional students as tending to place more importance on the academic relative to co-curricula activities that might develop their social capital (Keane, 2012). The declining background effect (Wakeling, 2010)

offers a possible explanation of why, in contrast, second year students did engage. Whilst it is important to structure support so that it addresses the priorities of students at a particular point in their career we do need to find ways to engage students earlier. This is not just because the development of social capital is cumulative but also because of developments in graduate recruitment which place increasing emphasis on students' first year experiences.

Finally, creating social capital development schemes in partnership with third sector organisations can help align them to an institution's social responsibility agenda. This may result in greater institutional support for such programmes than when they are seen solely as part of widening participation activities. Such partnerships might be most powerful at institutional level and this would also reduce the danger of discipline imbalance.

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