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Supporting Widening Participation Students Without Creating Dependency or Leaving Them Unprepared for Work in the Neoliberal Era: A Discussion Paper

Ian Fellows

Birmingham Newman University

 ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6754-3160>

Abstract

In a rapidly changing employment context, research holds that the desirable attributes of grit, resilience and context adaptation will become fundamental to the ongoing employability of current students. The employment landscape has become atomised and volatile under neoliberalism, exemplified by the broken psychological contract between employer and employee. Graduates from widening participation backgrounds entering the labour market will see their existing barriers to career success exacerbated by these changes in the world of work. For students from widening participation backgrounds, the neoliberal policies that underpin these changes are congruent with other policies that exacerbate their socioeconomic and educational disadvantages. Consequently, universities must play an increasingly important role in supporting students within and outside of the taught curriculum. This paper explores ways universities can continue to provide students with the necessary support without building dependencies or expectations of support that would inhibit the development of grit, resilience, and context adaptation. As a starting point for further discussion, this paper proposes guiding principles for universities to inform institutional Teaching and Learning strategies.

Keywords/key phrases: employability, widening participation, grit, resilience, lifewide learning

1. Introduction

“As much as qualifications and skill are important in finding work, so is luck, particularly whether you’re born at a time of plentiful jobs, or at a time, like now when the spectre of job losses and the growing dominance of the gig economy loom large.”

– Amelia Horgan, *Lost in Work: Escaping Capitalism*. 2021.

This discussion paper considers the specific challenges that widening participation students face as they prepare to enter the neoliberal work environment.

The global labour market is rapidly evolving, requiring employees to have specific attributes to function effectively.

The tumultuousness inherent in the rapidly changing workplace is often characterised by the acronym VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous), with each element suggesting related but distinct challenges for employers and employees alike (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). In recognition of this, desirable characteristics notably grit (Ismail et al., 2023), resilience to career shocks (Khanna et al., 2022) and context adaptation (Coetzee & Engelbrecht, 2019) now appear in the academic literature alongside more traditionally recognised employability skills such as problem-solving, communication, and teamwork (Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023). In a VUCA labour market in which the psychological contract between employer and employee has irreversibly changed (Baruch, 2022) and the responsibility for developing an employee's capabilities has been renounced by employers (Grabarski & Shwartz-Asher, 2022), the requirement for graduates to have the capacity for lifelong – and, indeed, lifewide – learning has never been more pressing (Cole & Donald, 2022).

The higher education sector has undergone a similar rapid evolution in the neoliberal era (understood to begin with the Reagan administration in the USA) with massification, marketisation, and the increasing influence of business on policy, process and programme design. The programme of massification has necessitated the recruitment of students from underrepresented groups (Reddy & Moores, 2008), referred to as widening participation students. By definition, these students are demographically significantly different to students who traditionally attended university before massification. Widening participation and educational opportunities differentiated by class are often viewed through a Eurocentric or Western lens, however, Ni Chorcora et al. (2023, p.2) show that “International studies highlight how access to higher education is not evenly distributed across all groups in society, with social class continuing to influence student pathways from secondary school”. In a marketised higher education sector, there are increasing existential threats for institutions whose graduates do not meet expected employment or income levels (Bradley & Quigley, 2023). When a university caters predominantly to widening participation students and/or offers courses which are socially valuable but poorly paid (for example, social work, nursing, and humanities), then the threat is exacerbated by deeply entrenched structural inequalities (Byrne, 2022).

This article will highlight the compounding negative impacts of neoliberal policy and suggest guiding principles for universities in supporting students during their studies to prepare them for the VUCA labour market that they will graduate into where that support will no longer exist.

2. The multiple impacts of neoliberal policy on the higher education sector

Massification, or the rapid growth of university students, is a deliberate consequence of government policy worldwide (Burke, 2020). There are many positive aspects to the opening up of higher education to participants who would previously have been excluded (Adnett, 2016). However, massification has also created issues and inequalities that remain unaddressed. Examples of these issues include:

1. Recruiting widening participation students into an education system designed for traditional students creates inequalities in experience and a stratified student demographic (Cunningham & Samson, 2021).
2. Widening participation students require different and more resource-intensive support to navigate and derive maximum benefit from the university experience (Thomas, 2020).
3. Massification has not led to enhanced meritocracy in the labour market. In most cases, social class and family background are stronger influences on post-graduate

employment and income than either degree classification or awarding institution (Friedman & Laurison, 2020).

4. Widening participation students' continuation and attainment levels are markedly lower (Richardson et al., 2020). In response, governments have instituted targets for student retention and attainment, holding universities responsible for the consequences of issues created by socioeconomic inequalities resulting from government policy (Byrne, 2022).

Alongside the massification of the sector, many countries introduced competitive marketisation of Higher Education, including league tables and value measurements based on how well each institution achieves the objectives outlined for it by its government. In the era of neoliberalism, these measurements are inevitably predicated upon contributions to economic growth, measured by graduate earnings, and 'value for money' for the consumer-student (see, for example, Office for Students, 2022). Consequently, universities have adopted curriculum modifications and additional support to help ensure that graduates gain employment that demonstrates success according to these metrics (Bui et al., 2019). Academics have heavily criticised the employability agenda, but it remains an immutable reality that universities must navigate (Fellows, 2023).

The cost of higher education in the era of massification has been increasingly passed from the state to the individual in the form of student debt (Goodnight et al., 2015). Again, this has been the topic of significant criticism (Williams, 2006), and the damaging impacts of student debt accumulation on the continuation of study and graduate success have been well-documented (Preest, 2021). Such is the controversy around student debt that many governments have subsequently capped or frozen the amounts charged by universities, which amount to real-terms income reductions that require cost-cutting in other areas, including among teaching and student support staff (Cox, 2021). In response, competing universities have been increasingly aggressive in recruiting students (McNay, 2021) and are incentivised to retain students on their roll for whom university might not be the best option at the time.

3. The broader social impacts of neoliberalism

Neoliberalism emerged as the predominant ideological driver of government policy in the United States during the Reagan administration (1981-9) and extended to most developed governments in the following years (Ross & Gibson, 2007). Core to the neoliberal ideology is a drastic reduction in state spending to allow for lower levels of taxation for the individual. However, commentators have identified that those tax cuts have disproportionately favoured corporations and wealthy individuals (Hope & Limberg, 2022) and that state expenditures benefitting corporations and the rich have been relatively unaffected by the reductions (Stubbs et al., 2022).

For the majority of people, the impact of neoliberalism has been a general and consistent degradation of state amenities (schools, hospitals, infrastructure) and support structures (welfare payments, mental health services, community programmes). Specific examples of these cuts that are pertinent to this discussion would include the withdrawal of community-based wellbeing interventions, significant delays in access to non-emergency healthcare, including diagnoses and/or treatment for mental health or neurodiverse conditions, legal support for the low/un-waged, and in-school support for struggling pupils (Hargreaves, 2021).

This situation has been accelerated by events such as the global financial crisis of 2007-8 and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, both of which were followed by significant transfers of money from governments to the wealthy and further drastic cuts in public expenditure under the misleading rhetoric of 'balancing the books' (Hope & Limberg, 2022). Inequality in

countries governed following neoliberal priorities dramatically increased throughout this period, particularly in the years since the COVID-19 pandemic (Irving, 2021).

In line with the broken psychological contract between employer and employee mentioned above, there has been a general degradation of the terms of employment and long-term stagnation or reduction of wages offered by employers during the neoliberal era, exemplified by the rise in the proportion of gig economy work, which places employees in the position of accepting whatever hours are offered or risking not being asked again, thus losing their income (Horgan, 2021). The proportion of gig economy work is projected to grow significantly in the years ahead and predominantly impact younger workers (Heing, 2021).

4. The impact on widening participation students

Universities catering to widening participation students are now experiencing the implications of neoliberalism and must tailor their support accordingly. Given the increasing inequality experienced by widening participation students, it could be legitimately argued that they are less similar to students from more privileged backgrounds than any cohort before them. This manifests itself in the increasing necessity to take on full-time work alongside their studies (Cunningham & Samson, 2021), which leaves students unable to plan work and study effectively and vulnerable to missing teaching to attend work at short notice (Sloan et al., 2020). Universities may interpret this behaviour as disengagement rather than as a consequence of systemic issues beyond the student's control, exacerbating feelings of not belonging, which are significant barriers to learning for widening participation students (Thomas, 2020).

Compounding these issues are the still-evolving longer-term impacts of the lockdowns and other disruptions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, which impacted the school and social learning of current and future students and, as a further consequence of structural inequalities in the neoliberal era, disproportionately affected the demographic from which widening participation students are drawn (Blundell et al., 2022).

Among these widening participation students will be returners to education or students who did not achieve the necessary grades (and do not have the necessary social capital) to gain a place in more prestigious institutions, both of whom are likely to have had unsatisfactory experiences in compulsory education (Jones, 2021). In many cases, there will likely be students with late or undiagnosed learning difficulties or health issues and disabilities, which may have impacted their school experiences often as a result of waiting lists caused by reduced public spending (Ryan, 2019). Among the returners to education will be students with parental or caring responsibilities and households to maintain (Clifford, 2019). For universities, these students will require additional and supplementary accommodations, including timetable or submission flexibility, writing or study mentors, lecture capture (with captioning, in some cases), and additional tutorial support.

5. Employability skills in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution

Perhaps more than at any other time in modern history, the employment landscape is volatile, atomised and characterised by career-shock events (Donald et al., 2023). The growth of gig economy employment and portfolio careers have profound implications for the skills required to prosper. While long-standing labour market expectations of graduates persist (Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023), additional attributes are entering the literature in response to the shifting employment landscape, with three significant examples offered below.

5.1. Grit

Ismail et al. (2023, p.3) define grit as “perseverance of effort and consistency of interest” and highlight how this personal characteristic enables students to meet prospective employers’ competency expectations.

5.2. Resilience to Career Shocks

Khanna et al. (2022, p.7583) argue that particularly for Generation Z, the development of attributes that will allow students to remain resilient in the face of significant, unforeseeable disruptions, particularly in the VUCA world in which they will be employed is crucial.

5.3. Context adaptation

Coetzee and Engelbrecht (2019, p.1006) state that “organizations demand of knowledge workers to be highly adaptable to changing business conditions and to stay relevant by proactively managing their employability”, highlighting the importance of context adaptation, not only to navigate shifting contexts between roles as part of a portfolio career and in response to career shocks but also with a relatively stable role as employing organisations and technologies rapidly evolve.

6. Guiding principles for universities

The requirement for graduates to possess and develop attributes that respond to the detached and precarious nature of the labour market presents a significant challenge for universities: how to nurture and support students, for example, with submission flexibility and additional tutorial support, without leaving those students unprepared for a labour market wherein nurturing and support barely exist? In higher education, where a student has a recognised barrier to participation in a task, accommodations will be made, but in the world of work, the employee is at risk of being found incapable of performance and dismissal as accommodations are considered unreasonable by the employer (Cornelius, 2023). The challenge for universities is providing support for students without leaving them unprepared for a labour market where similar support is likely unavailable.

6.1. Support and accommodations

Notwithstanding the practical imperative of regulator expectations, universities have a moral obligation to support all students equitably to fulfil their potential. Support services and other accommodations are necessary and welcome and should be continued or extended.

6.2. Curricular learning

Universities should address the development (and recognition) of grit, resilience to career shocks and context adaptation exclusively within the curriculum without diluting its provision of supplementary support. Higher education should allow students to grow, learn, and ‘find themselves’. When a university focuses on supporting the development of character attributes rather than narrowly focusing on measurable skills (Cole & Donald, 2022), educators can positively impact their students' character development and identity formation (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021).

The psychologist Carl Rogers once said, “I have come to feel that the only learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning” (1961, pp.276-277), and these sentiments significantly inform this guiding principle. Widening participation students rely upon grit and resilience not despite the barriers they face but because they face those barriers. Widening participation students are consistently required to adapt to

context in an environment which depends upon threshold knowledge they may not have learned in school, refers to prior teaching that they have not yet caught up on, and challenges them with immutable timetables and a precarious work-life-study balance.

The task for educators is to facilitate self-appropriated learning, to surface and develop students' belief in the value of these attributes and their effectiveness in utilising them. To explicitly articulate, for example, what *grit* is and why it is so highly prized in the modern employment landscape and then support students in developing or recognising this attribute within themselves and relating this to their professional identity (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021).

6.3. Recognition and reward

Supporting students in recognising and developing the capability to draw upon skills such as grit, resilience, and adaptation begins with work that explicitly identifies the value of life-wide learning (Cole & Donald, 2022). Recognition does not necessarily need to be formalised in the form of achievement awards or certification, but recognising and rewarding these attributes in a formal context should sufficiently legitimise these attributes for a cohort who may not yet have the self-confidence or self-efficacy to do so for themselves. Educators can support students in developing self-belief by explicitly demonstrating belief in their students.

6.4. Peers and alumni

The value of peer support and role modelling in developing student attributes and a sense of belonging is well-established in the literature (Cameron & Rideout, 2022; Thomas, 2012). For students who are facing significant barriers in the employment market (Byrne, 2020) and often lack both self-belief and the capital that can enable an easier postgraduate transition (Clarke, 2018), the prospect of hearing from people who *look like them*, reinforcing these messages and offering experience of navigating the workplace may be invaluable. In addition to enabling students to construct personal networks and support structures, facilitating structured interactions with peers and alums could effectively underpin curricular learning and recognition and reward initiatives.

7. Conclusion

This paper discussed the sociopolitical context in which widening participation students are educated, the requirements for extra-curricular support that are required of educators and the potential implications of building reliance on that support when similar support is unlikely to be unavailable in postgraduate life. As an initial contribution to a broader discussion, guiding principles were suggested for universities to consider when supporting students in developing desirable attributes of grit, resilience, and adaptability. Universities looking to develop future-facing programmes that appropriately prepare students for postgraduate life should strongly consider embedding these and similar related principles in the curriculum as part of their broader employability-focused strategy.

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Corresponding Author

The corresponding author for this manuscript is Ian Fellows who can be contacted by email via getintouchwithianfellows@gmail.com.