INTERNATIONAL
YOUTH
THINK TANK

Widening Participation and Career Guidance

Filling Quotas or Enabling and Empowering?

Erik Toshach

IYTT WORKING PAPER No. 3
SEPTEMBER 2022

in connection with IYTT's
INTERNATIONAL YOUTH CONFERENCE 2021

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The IYTT: INTERNATIONAL YOUTH THINK TANK is a Gothenburg-based initiative mobilizing youth from diverse backgrounds across Europe with the aim of promoting a democracy movement based on open society values. Activities center around annual youth conferences in which participants develop and present policy proposals for strengthening an open and democratic society, while being brought together variously with executives from industry, academia, culture, politics, and civil society. Participants publish their proposals in a conference report and, engaged afterwards as Youth Fellows, develop them further into policy briefs through the "IYTT Bottom-Up Policy Advise Loop", a learning process involving open deliberations with decision-makers, scholars, peers in the IYTT European Youth Panel, and laypersons.

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ABSTRACT

This working paper is informed by a proposal of the IYTT Youth Conference 2022, for a mandatory career guidance throughout secondary education, to increase the participation of disadvantaged groups in higher education. In a critical overview of current policy and research, this paper examines the issue of widening participation and the possibilities that a comprehensive career guidance have to offer. Three questions are explored: 1) What is the current state of supranational European policy on widening participation in higher education and what strategies are being implemented? 2) Which problems can be identified in existing widening participation strategies? 3) How can comprehensive career guidance in upper secondary schools address such problems and what kind of career guidance is required to reach positive results? Answering these questions, the paper concludes that widening participation is hampered by institutional autonomy, the drive for excellence and a resulting stratification of institutions and degrees. Furthermore, disadvantaged students pay a higher price for participation in higher education than other students, and outcomes are more uncertain. Comprehensive career guidance can address some of these issues, aid in trancending inequalities, and democratize education. This requires empowering students to make informed decisions and enabling them to follow through on their aspirations.

KEYWORDS

widening participation, higher education, career guidance, secondary schools, democracy, equity in education, European Higher Education Area, policy of education

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CONTENTS

1. Introduction

The following research overview is commissioned by the International Youth Think Tank (IYTT) as part of its work to strengthen and reinvent democracy. Once per year, the IYTT gathers a group of young innovators in a four-day conference, where the challenges of the open society are explored and outlines for possible solutions are proposed. The ideas brought forth at the conference are further developed by the think tank in "The IYTT Bottom-Up Policy Advise Loop", a process of which this paper is a part (IYTT 2022).

The subject for the working paper is informed by a proposal developed at the International Youth Conference 2021: "Mandatory career service and mentorship programme at all high schools in the EU". The authors of the conference proposal were consulted in the making of this overview and has had an important influence on the process. During the consultations it became clear that the proposal was grounded in the young authors' personal experiences of transitioning from secondary school to higher education. A common theme in these experiences were a perceived absence of useful guidance and a feeling of being left to oneself, and to the help of family and friends, in the process of deciding on, and applying for, higher education. The purpose of this paper is thus grounded in the needs of young people and attempts to address problems that they have encountered personally. It will also serve as background and context for the further development of the original proposal with the aim to influence decision makers towards change. In the sense that this working paper is written with and for people rather than about them, it may thus be considered in line with the traditions of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (See Geib, 2021).

The youth conference proposal is presented in the following way:

> To ensure democracy in our societies, it is essential that students from all backgrounds access higher education. In this case, it is important to recognise the existing barriers, especially for students of marginalized backgrounds, this includes but is not limited to, students of working-class backgrounds, refugees, asylum seekers, migrant students, students from rural areas, and students with disabilities. The proposal of the implementation of a mandatory career service at all high schools in the EU is both urgent and necessary. (Doughr Amajian et al. 2021)

This paper explores three questions, in order to strengthen and provide context to the youth conference proposal: 1) What is the current state of supranational European policy on widening participation in higher education and what strategies are being implemented? 2) Which problems can be identified in these existing widening participation strategies? 3) How can comprehensive career guidance in upper secondary schools address such problems and what kind of career guidance is required to reach positive results?

These questions will be answered by providing an overview of existing research in the field, and, to some extent, through a critical reading of chief policy documents. Being purpose-oriented and pragmatic rather than comprehensive, the paper will review a variety of texts that serves to illuminate the issue at hand. Research will be drawn upon from the U.K., Ireland, Sweden, Australia and the U.S. – countries where the widening participation issue has been under discussion for some time. Though local conditions vary, developed countries have adopted similar strategies and share systemic factors, making such research relevant to European conditions in general (Adnett 2016). In the policy dimension, the supranational European level will be in focus.

The following section, section 2, explores the concept of "widening participation" and the development over the last two decades of this policy area at the European level. Section 3 gives an overview of critique against current strategies for widening participation and identifies a few central problems. Section 4 explores the possibilities and challenges of secondary school career guidance and the ways that a broader and deeper effort in this regard might address widening participation. Section 5, finally, contains some concluding remarks.

2. Widening Participation

The idea that everyone should have a right to education goes back a long way. In modern times, it codified in the 1948 declaration of human rights. Making higher education available to larger parts of the population has been part of policy in many countries since then, intensifying towards the end of the last century (Kamanzi, Goastellec & Pelletier 2021, p 32). The discourse has centred around an increasing number of different concepts: widening access, widening participation, equality, diversity, inclusion and, somewhat nebulously, "the social dimension". These terms are not to be considered interchangeable, there will be reason to discuss their specific meanings over the course of this study. Since the intentions of the proposal of the 2021 International Youth Conference most closely match the concept of "widening participation", this is the term that will be used to define the themes central to the overview.

2.1 Concept and Definition

According to the *International Encyclopedia of Higher Education Systems and Institutions* (2020) "the concept of 'widening participation' is highly contested within and across different national contexts, and there is no one agreed definition." Indeed, the concept of widening participation can be defined in many different and possibly conflicting ways. Also, speaking of widening participation is linked to certain practices of the same, a connection which reveal other tensions and conflicts. This section of the paper aims to give an overview of these discourses and practices.

When assessing widening participation policy Europe will be the centre of attention, especially the multinational organization known as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with its origin in the Bologna Process. This project has had a profound impact on higher education in Europe over the last decades. Any proposal with the aim to promote widening participation in higher education on a European level will, first and foremost, need to relate to EHEA policy.

The Communique of the 2007 London ministerial conference provides a useful definition of widening participation: "We share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations" (EHEA 2007 p5). This definition carries a paradox: the population studying at university, could hardly reflect the population at large, since the first entity are all university students while the majority of the second are not. Entering the world of higher education is a transition, changing whoever does so, to something distinct from their origins. Even more so if these origins are far from academic. Setting aside this point of criticism, and reflecting upon the text with sympathy, a few distinctly dynamic qualities can be identified.

Firstly, widening participation is defined as a "societal aspiration" i.e., something that society should strive towards as a whole, rather than something which concerns just certain parties or stakeholders. Secondly, there is a universalism in the statement: higher education is for everyone, which is of course at the heart of the matter. Finally, the definition opens for criticism through the demand that higher education "should reflect" society at large. If, by whatever measure, it can be shown that higher education fails in this regard, one may consider widening participation policy lacking or at least insufficient. Considering this, the statement displays courage and a utopian possibility.

This paper will examine the different ideological aspects of the widening participation discourse at some length. It should be noted right away that there is a tension between two conflicting ideas (Burke 2020a, Fleming, Loxley & Finnegan 2017a). On the one hand, there is the "transformative" idea that widening participation in higher education may serve to make society more diverse, just, and equal. This considers education as a means rather than an end, the quest for knowledge being something that makes us human and therefore by rights belong to everyone – but also, as a prerequisite for a functioning democracy, the implication being, that a better educated population will be more inclined to participate in politics and contribute to the development of a society beneficial for all. On the other hand, there is the more utilitarian, albeit in a simplistic sense, idea that widening participation may serve to provide sorely needed qualified labour to a growing and increasingly demanding market economy. Widening participation is here regarded as an investment, giving returns in human capital. As such it is liable to the scrutiny of economic logic, meaning, that there is a breaking point at which perceived returns no longer match expectations, and where further investment is indefensible. These two ideas sometimes work side by side towards a common goal, but often they will pull the cart of widening participation in different directions.

2.2 The European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

Initiated by the Sorbonne declaration of 1998 and the Bologna declaration of 1999, the Bologna process has had as its focus the mobility of students in higher education and the harmonization of higher education throughout Europe. This process evolved 2010 into the European Higher Education Area, an organisation of 49 European nations, including many non-EU countries. Even though administration and coordination are the most immediate functions of the EHEA, the organisation has cultural foundations, requiring members to be signatories to the European Cultural Convention (Council of Europe 1954).

The question of widening participation in higher education, is not present in the inaugural texts of the Bologna process. The first mention of "the social dimension" is found in the 2001 Prague Communique (EHEA 2001) – there only mentioned as an issue to be explored further. In the already mentioned 2007 London Communique (EHEA 2007), the social dimension is

described as an explicit goal of the EHEA. Significantly, this is motivated by a dual purpose, both the transformative motive of building a stronger and more just society "fostering social cohesion [and] reducing inequalities" and the utilitarian one of "raising the level of knowledge, skills and competences".

Since then, the question of widening participation has become increasingly important in the policy documents of the EHEA. In 2007, the social dimension was listed as item "2.18", well below concerns such as "degree structure", "qualification frameworks" and "quality assurance" – in 2015 it was the third out of four overarching goals. In the most recent communiqué, that of Rome 2020, the social dimension has been given the prime spot, the first out of three watchwords. The ministerial conference commits to building an EHEA that is "inclusive, innovative and interconnected" (EHEA 2020a). The communique is also given an annex, wholly dedicated to the social dimension (EHEA 2020b).

Indeed, it seems that the EHEA is undergoing a transformation. Whereas the initial purpose was to facilitate student and staff mobility and increase employability and the competitiveness of European higher education – a task that is, if not completed, at least well under way – the future of the organisation remains somewhat unclear. It has been suggested that an increasingly important purpose of the EHEA is to promote the so-called third mission of the universities (beyond research and education), that of "restating the importance of the free and informed exchange of ideas and knowledge that lie at the heart of democratic culture and society" (Gallagher 2018). As a common project of society-building, the EHEA seems to be shifting slightly away from its essentially neo-liberal roots towards something new (Evans 2018). The Rome Communique and its annex (EHEA 2020a & 2020b) comes across as an attempt to formulate such a new direction. A closer scrutiny of the ambitions outlined in the text will give an idea of where the ideological compass of EHEA is pointing and how that relates specifically to the question of widening participation.

2.3 Current Widening Participation Policy of the EHEA

The goal of the EHEA is to be inclusive, in that "every learner will have equitable access to higher education and will be fully supported in completing their studies and training" (EHEA 2020a). This ambition is tied to the transformative potential of higher education:

> Higher education institutions have the potential to drive major change – improving the knowledge, skills and competences of students and society to contribute to sustainability, environmental protection and other crucial objectives. They must prepare learners to **become active, critical and responsible citizens** and offer lifelong learning opportunities to support them in their societal role (ibid.).

Only well-informed citizens can build a sustainable and democratic society, in this the responsibility of higher education institutions is clear and so is the importance of giving all members of society equitable access to those institutions.

These ideas are further developed in an annex to the communique, starting by reiterating the 2007 definition "that the composition of the student body entering, participating in, and completing higher education at all levels should correspond to the heterogeneous social profile of society at large" (EHEA 2020b). From this, the document declares that "accessibility, equity, diversity and inclusion" should be a paramount to "all laws, policies and practices concerning higher education" (EHEA 2020b, p3). It also outlines the benefits of increased participation, to the individual, to society and democracy, as well as to economic development. Though the text advances both transformative and utilitarian motives, emphasis seems to rest with the former.

How then, are these lofty goals to be achieved? Specifically, who is responsible for making them come true? The EHEA sets down ten principles for implementation on a national level. Within these principles there is an interesting tension in the matter of responsibility and accountability.

The first principle states that strengthening the social dimension is the responsibility of the higher education system. Principle number 2 declares that laws and policy "should allow and enable higher education institutions to develop their own strategies to fulfil their public responsibility towards widening access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies" (ibid. p 4). The primary task of authorities and lawmakers lies in enabling higher education institutions to fulfil their responsibility, a formula that is repeated throughout principles 5, 6 and 7.[1] Principle 9 deals with community engagement, though once again, it is the higher education institutions that is expected to engage with the wider community, rather than the other way around. At all times, are the higher education institutions given agency, responsibility, and initiative. Principle number 3 is the only exception, outlining the importance of the education system as a whole. On the one hand, does the entire education system (Principle 3) and all of society (Principles 9 and 10), need to be involved in developing higher education towards "diversity, equity and inclusion" (EHEA 2020b, p 8). On the other hand, the immediate responsibility for widening participation is that of the higher education institutions.

The policy of the EHEA on widening participation is very much informed by the ideals of equality, diversity, democracy, and the ambition to build a sustainable society: "We are determined to enable our higher education institutions to engage with our societies to

[1] Principle number 5 is especially important for the purpose of this paper, since it deals with the function of guidance and counselling. We will have cause to revisit this in section 4, but for now we can just take note of the fact that this area too, is defined as the responsibility of higher education institutions.

address the multiple threats to global peace, democratic values, freedom of information, health and well-being." (EHEA 2020a). However, as the above quote makes clear, the autonomy of higher education institutions remain salient; the protagonist of the story of widening participation is always The University. In a way, this may seem intuitive. After all, who should be responsible for the diversity at university, if not the university itself? Also, it might be politically convenient; academics cherish their integrity and decision-makers are sometimes happy to delegate responsibility. However, there are problems inherent in this order of business.

3. Critiques of Widening Participation Strategies

During the last 25 years, widening participation in higher education has become an increasingly important area of policy. This was first articulated in a national context, especially in countries like Sweden and the U.K. Over the last 15 years, initiative has gradually shifted to the supranational level of the EHEA and EU. Common to widening participation strategies are, on the one hand, a tension between transformative and utilitarian motives, and on the other, a conflict between a desire to formulate tangible goals and the respect for higher education institution autonomy. Resulting policy have often taken the form of soft governance, as is the case with the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) employed by the EHEA (Weedon & Ridell, 2016). Though progress has been made in terms of attainment numbers, it's often uneven – between nations, as well as between institutions. In Europe, student populations lack in diversity and national policy fails to prioritize widening participation or lack effective strategies (Wulz, Gasteiger & Ruland 2018). This section will provide a review of critical perspectives on widening participation strategies, with the purpose to identify common issues and problems.

3.1 Autonomy of Institutions

With the advent of New Public Management, many higher education institutions (in Europe and elsewhere) gained increasing autonomy through a succession of reforms (Sursock 2020). Although there is some agreement among stakeholders about the importance of autonomy, there are always questions to be raised about extent, scope, and form. Also, according to the tenets of new public management, with autonomy should follow accountability. This becomes a problem in the field of widening participation, since political demands often are vague and open to interpretation by higher education institutions and the individuals representing them (Stevenson, Clegg, & Lefever 2010, Mergner, Leišytė, & Bosse 2019). Without diving too deep into the autonomy debate in general, some points of interest bearing on the issue at hand can be identified.

One problem related to the autonomy of higher education institutions in widening participation, is the difficulty in acquiring reliable and comprehensive knowledge regarding what efforts are made, what strategies are used and what outcomes are achieved. This is a problem of accountability, but also a methodological problem when researching the correspondence between policy and practice. As recently noted by the European Commission, "it is impossible for us to determine what individual institutions do in terms of equity policy development and promotion" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2022). However, though this means that there is little comprehensive research on the matter, local studies can be found.

A country where widening participation in higher education entered the political agenda at a comparatively early stage is Sweden. Here, the responsibility of higher education institutions for widening participation is enshrined in law since 2001 (SFS 2001:1263). Even so, a survey made by the Swedish Council for Higher Education in 2016, showed substantial variation in how seriously universities take their responsibility. Universities in general showed commitment to the idea of widening participation, but in practice often lacked structured efforts, clear definitions of widening participation and measurable goals (Swedish Council for Higher Education 2016). Symptomatically, they differed greatly as to what degree their homepages were perceived as inclusive or not. Images were often dominated by 20–25-year-olds, functional diversity being notable for its absence, some institutions displaying a less inclusive focus on "excellence". This tendency is mirrored in the UK, where older universities often portray themselves as "elite", making only vague statements regarding widening participation and diversity, even if, over time, there seems to have been some improvement in this regard. (Alexander & Cleland 2018).

A multiple case study of three German universities (Mergner, Leišytė, & Bosse 2019), analyses how institutions translate political demands to their local contexts and identifies the strategies they use to legitimize specific efforts, or lack thereof. Through the strategy of "rationalization", widening participation is framed as an already existing condition to which universities need to adapt. A heterogeneous student body is described as a rising challenge, requiring measures "to improve the study success and reduce the drop-out rates of students with respective needs." The strategy of "moralization" focuses on a "culture of diversity" as a goal towards which the institution should strive. Under-represented social groups are not so much described as a problem, but rather as victims of potential discrimination. Finally, the strategy of "profilization" defines the problem of widening participation in relation to the specific university's profile. This is sometimes done in glorifying terms, describing the institution as historically aligned with the ideals of widening participation, constructing a narrative where the institution is, and always have been, diverse at it its very foundation. Profilization strategies can also articulate a conflict, where widening participation is defined in opposition to other institutional imperatives or watchwords like reputation, pursuit of excellence and a strong research orientation.

The variation in widening participation initiatives under institutional autonomy can be evidenced not only in qualitative and ideological terms, but also in statistics. One aspect of widening participation that has been given special attention in research and policy all over the world, is that of medical schools (Curtis 2018). Reasons for this, are the need to attract the students most suitable for a task that is considered demanding in terms of studies and professional life, but also the idea that diversity is especially important to medical education and the medical profession, making health care both more democratic and improving

performance (Curtis 2018, Alexander & Cleland 2018, Garrud & Owen 2018). Thus, the duality of transformative and utilitarian motives appears starkly in the discourse. However, widening participation at these institutions remains very much a challenge. Indeed, so called elite programmes, medicine especially, lags noticeably behind (Garrud & Owen 2018). A 2016 survey conducted by the United Kingdom Medical Schools Council revealed that outreach activities, the main tool for widening participation, only reached about 50% of secondary schools, showing a number of "cold spots" regionally (Garrud & Owen 2018). This unfair distribution of efforts is serious indeed, since it corresponds to great differences between geographical areas in terms of number of applicants, the most represented quintile having more than ten times as many applicants as the most under-represented one (Medical Schools Council 2019).

The above overview may give an idea of the problems related to the autonomy of higher education institutions in the field of widening participation. This is most likely not down to lack of good will, but efforts are nevertheless unevenly distributed and often more grounded in the ideals of the institution, than in the will of policy makers, or in the needs of prospective students. Perhaps, some aspects of inequality are not really feasible for individual institutions to address, since they are themselves bound to the imperatives of an essentially competitive sector. The two following sections expands on such aspects, the sociological phenomenon of vertical stratification and the ideological discourse of excellence and equity.

3.2 Vertical Stratification

Tertiary (higher) education attainment in Europe is steadily increasing, over 40% of 25–34-year-olds now holding a degree (Eurostat 2022). While differences in education length are decreasing, inequalities are maintained, and in some instances accentuated, within the higher education system, by way of a greater differentiation of the social status of institutions, programmes, and degrees (Bryntesson & Börjesson 2021, Adnett 2016). The persisting problem of inequitable recruitment to medical schools have already been mentioned. A critical overview by Southgate, Grimes & Cox (2018) summarizes the problem of vertical stratification:

> The global massification of higher education is underway (Altbach 2013). In Western contexts, this phenomenon has seen an increase in students who have been traditionally under-represented in universities (Schuetze and Slowey 2002; Shah et al. 2015). However, certain bastions of inequity still persist: students from specific equity groups, particularly those from low socioeconomic status (LSES), first-in-family (FiF), rural, mature-aged, Indigenous and certain ethnic and cultural backgrounds, remain under-represented in elite universities and in high status degrees (Gale and Parker 2013; Reay et al. 2009).

Some university degrees bring not only status and financial security but also provide access to political and economic power (Southgate, Grimes & Cox 2018). In the UK, these are (in)famously represented by Oxford and Cambridge, alumni of which occupy significant parts of parliament and an even greater share of cabinet (Adnett 2016). In Sweden, the school of the financial elite is the Stockholm School of Economics, drawing most of their students from the affluent neighbourhoods of the capital, serving as a nursery for the reproduction of power (Holmqvist 2018).

In contrast, there is a higher education of the masses, where degrees are simply prerequisites for securing any kind of employment beyond manual labour. Competences that a few decades ago only required secondary education, are now the subject of university courses (Kamanzi, Goastellec & Pelletier 2021). Though such a degree is a requirement for qualified employment, it provides no guarantees, the way that a degree might have done for previous generations, and the way that an "elite" degree still does today (Reay 2021).

This raises the question of whether increased participation in higher education is emancipatory at all. If not, the utilitarian motive of widening participation seems to have prevailed, and the increasingly larger cohorts of graduates may turn out to be simply qualified labour rather than the "active, critical and responsible citizens" idealized in the Rome Communiqué (EHEA 2020a). Instead, "[w]hat is offered to non-traditional students as that to which they gain access is rarely the learning as such, but always an increased social capital and economic progress in the knowledge economy – and an increasingly stratified set of qualifications and other options." (Fleming, Loxley & Finnegan 2017b)

However, this development must not be understood as a given necessity. Instead, it should be acknowledged that public policy has an impact on inequalities in education. Policy that favours the autonomy of institutions increases a tendency towards social disparities. Supervision and support from authorities, on the other hand, breeds harmonization and social cohesion. (Kamanzi, Goastellec & Pelletier 2021).

3.3 Excellence, Equity, Standards & Deficiencies

A concept very much at play in the vertical stratification of higher education institutions is that of "Excellence". The new public management paradigm defines institutions as competitors on an open market (Burke 2020a) In financial terms, this means a competition for government funding, to the degree in which it is distributed in accordance with so-called "excellence schemes" (Biscaia 2020). In the realm of human capital, there is a competition to attract the most talented students. The quest for excellence and becoming a "world-class" institution have a risk of overshadowing concerns for equity and widened participation.

In popular debate as well as in politics, the idea that massification of higher education entails "dumbing down" and a lowering of standards has been a recurring one (McKay & Devlin 2016). This perception has little or no basis in research, and though persistent, may be discarded as a primitive reaction to the threat posed by democratization against traditional privilege. More insidious, is the focus in the widening participation discourse on "non-traditional students". The term has an obvious function, since these are the students that widening participation policy aims to attract to, and retain in, higher education. However, what the idea of the non-traditional student implies, is that of a deficit, something that is lacking, in the individual or at a collective level (Fleming, Loxley & Finnegan 2017a, Southgate & Bennett 2016). A non-traditional student is someone that does not fit into university as they are. The concept relies on a dichotomy, in which all non-traditional students are considered as collective, rather than as individuals with different lived experiences (Adnett 2016). By extension, the same becomes true of "traditional" students, framing them as a homogenous group that without friction readily can be assimilated into the world of academia.

This is not to say that one should not use the term "non-traditional" student or be aware that certain groups require a different kind of support than others. However, one should take care that, for instance, the old and much retold tale of the working class's troubled relation to education does not become too one-sided and self-fulfilling, and instead take note of the fact that working-class students can be very passionate about higher education (Finnegan 2017, p 156). Though there are great inequities of access to higher education, studies claim that "there is little evidence that students from most equity backgrounds are significantly disadvantaged once at university" (Naylor & James 2016). Indeed, such students may be as ambitious and academically successful as other students, expecting and wanting high academic standards (McKay & Devlin 2016). Perhaps the perceived conflict between equity and excellence is indeed a conflict between equity and privilege. Instead of focusing on the capabilities and needs of non-traditional students, mechanisms of exclusion and gatekeeping needs to be revealed (Reay 2021). While, for example, first-in-family students may achieve academically, they often "fail" socially; participation in extra-curricular activities being as important for future career opportunities as academic distinction.

Bryntesson & Börjesson (2021) notes that there are different brands of exclusionary culture for different prestige educations: "The art students' avant-garde interests, ascetic life-style and the reading of culture pages, are contrasted against the economics students' investments in legitimate culture, expensive habits of clothing and body care and the reading of economy pages" (2021, author's translation). These cultures are by no means specific to higher education but lies at the very foundations of society. However, their

reproduction within the educational system has dire consequences. As summarized by Reay (2021):

> [C]ultural preferences such as rowing, rather than academic performance and skills, become the signs upon which elite firms select employees. As concluded by Ashley et al. (2015) and Moore et al., (2016) elite firms are systematically excluding talented students from working-class backgrounds, and the basis for those exclusions is often explained in terms of spurious notions of merit which they argue has far more to do with upper-class identity than any objective measures of talent. Reinforcing their findings Macmillan et al. (2015) provide evidence that the IQ of new employees in the professions has fallen over the last three decades at the same time as their socio-economic status has been rising (p 61).

If these claims are true, then exclusionary cultures cannot be ignored, even should one disregard social justice and adopt a strictly utilitarian view. Having less abled doctors and lawyers (if good rowers) can hardly be in the interest of society, whatever ideological perspective you adopt. To this might be added the now established wisdom that diversity is, in itself, an asset in problem-solving (Hong & Page 2004). In other words, a well-informed understanding of excellence should embrace diversity and equity – and consider non-traditional students as inadequately explored resource rather than as problem.

3.4 Individual Outcomes

Even if society would benefit from having the right person in the right place, the question should be asked: What's in it for the individual student? If a degree is no longer a guarantee for getting a qualified job, is it worth the effort?

In 2015, 58,8% of higher education graduates in the UK were in jobs deemed non-graduate work (Reay 2021). In a vertically stratified higher education, as outlined in section 3.2, widened access often means an access to specialized and vocational programmes rather than broadly academical ones, providing skills rather than learning. Such degrees are limited, both in terms of the knowledge offered and range of career choices (Fleming, Loxley, & Finnegan 2017a). Moreover, as mentioned, high-status institutions and programmes provide unique access to social networks that are not available in the higher education of the masses (Bryntesson & Börjesson 2021). The comparatively few students from working-class backgrounds that do study at prestigious universities are often excluded from these social networks, which is also mirrored in their employability after graduation (Reay 2021).

The net effect of a variety of factors, is that the economic benefits of a higher education degree is comparatively slim for a non-traditional student as compared to a traditional student. A research overview by Adnett (2016) concludes that while higher education

graduates from under-represented groups are likely to increase their lifetime earnings compared to non-graduates, “these returns are uncertain and are likely to be, on average, significantly lower than those received by overrepresented student groups” (p 229). This tendency is recognizable on a systemic scale. In Finland, for instance, the “upgrading” of female dominated vocations to higher education graduate status, has failed to deliver commensurate increases in income (Bryntesson & Börjesson 2021).

The returns on a university education are more uncertain for a non-traditional student – but not only that – the costs involved are higher. There is no doubt, for instance, that studying at a prestigious university will likely prove to be especially challenging to first in family university students (Reay 2021). Speaking with the terminology of Bourdieu, the lack of symmetry between a working-class habitus and an elite academic field may cause “discomfort, intimidation, withdrawal, lack of confidence, even terror, pain and isolation” (ibid. p 61).

There is an often taken for granted assumption that widened participation requires the “raising of aspirations” of under-represented groups (Burke 2020b). The working class especially has been described as having a deep rooted and irrational suspicion towards education in general and higher education especially. However, considering the investments required and the expected returns, a fair amount of caution is, on the contrary, quite prudent.

> ... “Rational” working class choice differs from “rational” middle class choice in that the middle classes are playing an education “game” they are expecting to win. ... There are greater risks for working class parents and their children in pursuing prestigious educational choices and ... there is a “rational” logic in avoiding such choices. ... Some young people do weigh up the risks and costs of going to university and see the option as not really “worth it” in terms of the financial risk, the possibility of failure, threat to class or ethnic identities, and the emotional discomfit of not fitting in ... (Southgate & Bennett 2016, p. 234)

The ambition of the EHEA, that university students as a collective should reflect the population at large, may legitimize a policy that simply strives to entice greater numbers of non-traditional students to enter higher education. If these students pay a higher price for a lesser reward, such an agenda becomes problematic. Once again, how inequalities play out, depend on specific policies. An egalitarian vision for widened participation must include reducing the cost and increase the return for non-traditional students. Equally important, is to allow all prospective students to make informed choices rather than steering them towards certain careers in the interest of filling quotas.

4. Career Guidance and Widening participation

Since its inception in the early 20th century, career guidance has had as its focus to help people "in the selection of a vocation, the preparation for it, and the transition from school to work" (Parsons, 1909, p. 4, in Cohen-Scali, Rossier & Nota 2018, p. 2). Still today, career guidance is more about guiding the individual than shaping society. Furthermore, the end goal of career guidance is often considered employment, making education primarily a means towards that end. Consequently, the issue of widening participation is not really at the centre of attention in career guidance. Searching the University of Gothenburg library catalogue, the subject word "career education" scores 8173 hits, while "widening participation" renders 739. Combining the two, we get 4 items in total (Göteborgs Universitetsbibliotek 2022). This is not to say that researchers in the field lack interest in, or knowledge of, questions of social mobility, diversity, and equity. Yet the very specific questions and considerations of the widening participation discourse are not at the forefront of debate and research on career guidance.[2] In the widening participation debate, on the other hand, there are frequent mentions of career guidance – but this often in general terms – appreciating the importance of career guidance for widening participation but not going into specifics on exactly how career guidance is supposed to contribute, what methods should to be used and what policies need to be in place to make this contribution effective. There are exceptions of course, in research, and debate. Some of these thoughts and arguments are reviewed in the following section. First, we return to European supranational policy, scrutinizing its provisions for career guidance.

4.1 European Policy on Career Guidance

The annex to the Rome Communiqué discusses guidance and counselling in its fifth principle. This is of the highest relevance for the matter at hand:

> Public authorities should have policies that enable higher education institutions to ensure effective counselling and guidance for potential and enrolled students in order to widen their access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies. These services should be coherent across the entire education system, with special regard to transitions between different educational levels, educational institutions and into the labour market (EHEA 2020b).

Once again, it is stated that the responsibility for counselling students in higher education lies with the institutions. When the EHEA asks for services that are "coherent across the

[2] See for example a broad work like *New Perspectives on Career Counselling and Guidance in Europe: Building Careers in Changing and Diverse Societies*, edited by Cohen-Scali, Rossier & Nota (2018) in which the concept of widening participation is not mentioned at all, nor is any of its immediately related concepts like widening access, equity in higher education or the social dimension.

entire education system", one therefore must assume that what is inferred is the entire *higher* education system. Since the responsibility includes not only enrolled but also potential students, one must ask: when does the responsibility begin; at the webpage of the university, at secondary school, primary school, or preschool? When does the journey towards higher education start? Another critical question is: How is this "coherence" to be achieved? As outlined in section 3.1, the autonomy of higher education institutions implies they have great freedom in designing the form and scope of their outreach and recruitment activities. This is totally reasonable – it would surely be too much to ask that each institution perform equally towards every single partner, school, or potential student (which is every citizen within the EHEA). But then again, who will guarantee coherence? Indeed, it seems that higher education institutions are made responsible for a task which they will invariably remain inadequate of fulfilling.

Admittedly, the purpose of the European Higher Education Area lies specifically with higher education. Secondary schooling, for instance, is not really within its purview. The Council of the European Union, on the other hand, has no such limitations. It has committed to the establishment of a European Education Area by 2025, encompassing all matters of education (The Council of the European Union 2021). Like the EHEA, the Council is very much committed to the issue of increasing and widening participation in higher education, setting a target of 45% tertiary education attainment among 25–34-year-olds for 2030. In this endeavour, as is the case with the EHEA, the dedication to democratic ideals comes out strongly, defining the first strategic priority: "Improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training" (ibid. p. 4). Career guidance, however, is not part of the priority of equity, nor of the one concerning higher education (p. 7). Instead, career guidance belongs under the priority of "lifelong learning and mobility" (p. 5, p.18). This priority is very much defined within the paradigm of utilitarianism: "Societal, technological, digital, environmental and economic challenges are increasingly affecting the way we live and work, including the distribution of jobs and the demand for skills and competences" p. 5) Democratic and egalitarian watchwords are absent when the matter of life-long learning is in focus.

In summary, there seems to be a disconnect between career guidance as a policy field and the widening participation agenda. The "guidance and counselling" of the EHEA is very much a matter for higher education institutions, in effect the kind of "outreach" activities traditionally employed to widen participation. The "career guidance" of the EU on the other hand, lacks transformative ambition. It is mostly a matter of meeting market needs for qualified labour and, at best, aiding the individual through the difficulties of an evolving economy.

The proposal of the International Youth Conference 2021 for a mandatory and comprehensive career guidance throughout upper secondary school has the potential to connect the agenda of widening participation to career guidance, outside the limited and sometimes uneven scope of higher education institutions. The following sections will consider the arguments for a broadened and deepened career guidance in secondary schools, outlining how such a guidance might address some of the problems of widening participation specifically, and how it might work towards democratization of education in general.

4.2 The Case for Guidance

Though the focus of this paper is the relationship between secondary education career guidance and widening participation in higher education specifically, it would be amiss to not also mention the societal and economic importance of career advice in a broader sense. There are significant costs associated with people making suboptimal career decisions, and thus gains to be made from efficient career guidance. In a 2019 Swedish government committee report on career guidance, economists perform the thought experiment, that if a career counsellor spent 10 hours each with 240 students, it would only require that one of them was guided to the right career path and saved from long term unemployment for the investment to pay off (SOU 2019:4). The particulars of costs and returns of career guidance are complex matters far beyond the scope of this paper; suffice to say, career guidance have relevance far beyond the specifics of widening participation.

However, the time has come to try to answer the question most central: Does career counselling in secondary school widen participation in higher education? Though limited, the research available seems to suggest so. A statistical analysis of Australian data shows that:

> young people were more likely to have enrolled at University if they had ever received career guidance in the form of a talk by a TAFE/University representative ($p < 0.001$), a talk by the school's career advisor ($p < 0.001$), an individual conversation with the school's career advisor ($p < 0.05$), a group discussion about careers ($p < 0.05$), or hand-outs/written material about careers ($p < 0.001$) (Tomaszewski, Perales, & Ning 2017).

Career guidance increase the chance for university enrolment, lending support to the idea that a broadened, deepened and more consistent effort in career guidance would increase higher education entries by way of sheer numbers. This, in itself, is an important goal both for the EHEA and the EU. However, following the definition by EHEA, widening participation is not about getting the largest number of young people into higher education, but rather about increasing the relative participation of under-represented groups. In this regard, the

most important result reached in the study mentioned is that the positive effect of career advising seems to be larger for young people from a low socio-economic background than for young people from a higher socio-economic background. Career guidance thus have an equalizing effect, increasing the ratio of under-represented groups towards over-represented ones (ibid.). Other research support these finds. In an American context, Pham & Keenan (2011) focused on "mismatching"; defined as highly qualified students failing to enrol in four-year college programs. They found that, while such mismatching is common among first generation college students, career counselling is an important factor in reducing it.

This data matches the expectations of sociological theory in the tradition of Bourdieu. While students from overrepresented backgrounds have the social capital necessary for an easy transition to higher education, young people from under-represented groups often do not. Career counselling may serve as "replacement" or "proxy" for that which background does not provide (Wulz, Gasteiger & Ruland 2018, Pham & Keenan 2011, Andres 2016, Bryntesson & Börjesson 2021). Conversely, an advantaged social background may moderate the negative effects of insufficient career guidance (Tomaszewski, Perales, & Ning 2017). Described at the most practical level – career counsellors can help students from disadvantaged backgrounds to find information on institutions, programmes and career paths, fill in applications, and seek out and apply for funding – all things that a young person from a more advantaged background might get help with from parents, siblings, and friends.

Career guidance does not only have the potential of helping under-represented groups to reach higher education, but it can also improve their chances to stay in higher education and to complete their studies. In an interview study on how to facilitate the success of students from lower socio-economic and regional backgrounds in Australia, most respondents (university students and staff) saw the importance of student expectations as critical (Devlin & McKay 2018). A New Zeeland survey (Zepke et al. 2005) shows that "about one-third of students enrol in the wrong course", drawing the conclusion that sometimes "students should be counselled out of taking a particular course". Here, of course, career guidance has an essential role. Wulz, Gasteiger & Ruland (2018) gives a succinct overview of the issue:

> Guidance of students, also when deciding their study programme is considered an effective tool to reduce dropouts. [...] Better-informed students have more realistic expectations for their studies and are more satisfied with their choice because their expectations correspond to their experiences (Blüthmann 2012). This is why counselling plays such an important role in the decision-making process—not only for under-represented groups but for them even more. Higher satisfaction means a higher chance to conclude the studies and therefore a lower rate of dropping out... (Wulz, Gasteiger & Ruland 2018, p. 207)

Effective career guidance before entering higher education may have a lasting influence on performance even during the studies. It may also have a more immediate effect on the students' school experience at the time when they receive the guidance in secondary school. A well-informed idea of what the future might bring, can serve to motivate high-school students in their studies and help them focus on what is relevant to them, given their aspirations.

4.3 Career Guidance vs Widening Participation Strategies

Beyond the benefits discussed above, career guidance in secondary schools also have the potential of addressing some of the problems of widening participation in higher education that was identified in section 3. The first issue is a matter of policy implementation. Section 3.1 discussed how higher education institution are made primarily responsible for widening participation, and that their autonomy in this regard results in an uneven and unfair distribution of efforts. Though secondary schools, in Europe and elsewhere, too have gained a degree of autonomy – by way of new public management – they are typically subject to a much larger degree of scrutiny, supervision and direction by policy makers (European Commission/Eurydice 2007). Comprehensive career education and guidance efforts in secondary schools should thus be readily implementable in most European contexts. Indeed, the mentioned Swedish government committee report proposed precisely such a policy, though aimed primarily at lower secondary school (SOU 2019:4).

The second issue relating to widening participation strategies is a matter of ideology. Section 3.3 discussed the problems inherent in the dichotomy of non-traditional and traditional students. Efforts of widening participation that are directed at specific groups may carry the weight of victimization. Also, they may be considered unfair by those not embraced by such efforts. More radical forms of positive discrimination are ideologically controversial and difficult to mobilize broad political support for. Comprehensive career guidance, on the other hand, might prove the biggest benefit to those most needing it, but would still be equally available to all. It can thus be seen to resonate with the ideal of individual freedom of classic liberalism, as well as with the need for information necessary for the rational market actor logic of neo-liberalism. Nonetheless, this paper would argue that career guidance carries transformative potential to the individual and to society, possibilities expanded upon in sections 4.5 and 4.6.

4.4 Challenges of Career Counselling

Though career guidance in secondary education have benefits in terms of higher education enrolment, retention, and success, though it may improve the diversity of higher education students and provide motivation during the final years of secondary education, such

outcomes by no means are given. On the contrary, any positive effect that comprehensive career education might have in widening participation is dependent on how it is implemented. This section will consider some of the finer points and challenges of career guidance in relation to the widening participation agenda and outline a few ideas that may be relevant to consider for its future development. Such development needs to be dedicated to the transformative ideals of education, recognizing the purpose of widening participation as laid down by the Rome communiqué, namely "[sustaining] cohesive, democratic societies where social justice, public good, public responsibility and social mobility prevail".

This is not to say that utilitarian aspects on career guidance are irrelevant. As discussed in section 4.2, reinforced career guidance can prove economically sound and in line with quantitative policy goals. As previously mentioned, the EU has committed to reaching a higher education attainment rate of 45% among 25–34-year-olds by 2030 (Council of the European Union 2021). However, as important as it is to increase the general level of education in the population, the focus on reaching certain target numbers may prove a hindrance to the transformative potential of career education and in the extreme case, even self-defeating.

In the U.S., as in Europe, there is a strong drive towards widening access to higher education, encouraged by policy reforms such as *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) implemented by the Obama administration in 2015 (Baird 2020). Getting high-school students to apply to college has become a prime priority for career advisors; a high degree of college applicants is often considered proof of the quality of the school. This has reached the point where some schools even have made the submittal of a college application a requirement for graduation (Ilic et al. 2020).

> In schools all over the U.S., college banners line the hallways, teachers use chants such as 'college-ready' to get students' attention, and some schools even adopt names such as, 'University Prep' or 'College View' to keep college salient for students and demonstrate that college is valued there. (Baird 2020, p. 2)

This effort to raise the aspirations of all students is problematic in the way that it imposes white middle-class values on a culturally and socially diverse student body (ibid.). As discussed in section 3.4, not everyone gets the same opportunities, nor pays the same price. In the U.S., for instance, racial minorities carry increasingly larger student loan debts than white people (ibid.). Moreover, the perceived payoff of education is not the same: "minority groups perceive a job ceiling in which they will not receive rewards commensurate to their qualifications" (ibid. p. 5). Even from a utilitarian perspective, a career guidance that focuses on numbers but fail to help young people making well informed decisions will induce a waste of resources: As Zepke et al. puts it "the drive for 'bums on seats' does not lead to

good retention" (2005, p. 21). Conversely, the long-standing tendency to underestimate students from disadvantaged backgrounds and direct them towards 'less demanding' vocational programmes rather than academic ones, is still a common malpractice in career guidance, wasting talent both for the individual and for society (Andres 2016, Ilic et al. 2020, Baird 2020, Alexander, Nicholson & Cleland 2020). When the focus of career guidance is 'raising aspirations' and getting as many students as possible to enter post-secondary education, it becomes an exercise of power with little regard for the needs of the individual and missing its transformative potential. In Bordieuan terms, this "symbolic violence" hits hardest against those most dependent on aid and guidance – students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

4.5 Enablement & Empowerment

What then, should career guidance be focusing on instead? In the light of the reviewed research, this paper would argue that the task of the career advisor should be to empower young individuals to make informed choices about their future, but also to enable them to follow through on their aspirations. The second part of the task, enabling, requires no small amount of knowledge and resources. Considering higher education only, and within an integrated community like the EHEA, the selection of institutions and programmes are next to endless. Add to these, concerns regarding qualifications, funding, scholarships, living arrangements and occupational prospects; career advising emerges as no easy feat. Even so, support as this is essential to many students, for example, first generation ones. It needs to be timely, specific, and personalised (Ilic et al. 2020). However, as argued by Baird (2020), "rather than encouraging college as a blanket goal for all students, schools have a responsibility to support students as they transition from high school to post-secondary life, whatever that may be" (p. 30). Career advisors also must be prepared to enable other aspirations than those of higher education, and consequently have a generalist understanding of all fields of human endeavour.

This last aspect of enablement could also be considered the first requirement for empowerment: all aspirations should be recognized as equally valid. Students should receive ample support whether they aspire towards agriculture or architecture. The second requirement for empowerment would be that students are given the opportunity to freely explore opportunities over an extended period, long before entering the difficult process of making a decision. In secondary school, it would be reasonable to provide extensive career guidance for at least three years before graduation. The third, and final, requirement for empowerment is a critical understanding of one's own circumstances and how those relate to society at large. To know what I want to be, I must first know what I am. This point will require some elaboration.

4.6 Choice & Critical Understanding

As discussed in section 3.4, the variety of circumstances from which young people enter higher education, or any other career path, means that each of them are facing a different struggle and different outcomes, even when they choose what appears to be the exact same path. Studying at an elite university, for example, may for some be a matter of doing what they always felt they were meant to do, while for some it means "discomfort, intimidation, withdrawal, lack of confidence, even terror, pain and isolation" (Reay 2021, p. 61). Walking a different route than the one expected from a working-class background might not only prove a practical challenge, but may shake the very foundations of one's identity. Class, ethnicity, gender, and functional variation are all accompanied by different opportunities and barriers. As part of career exploration, students need to be engaged in a discussion of and reflection on such differences.

> Considering the evidence, that the knowledge of the educational system and its hierarchies is unevenly distributed between different groups of society, a potentially equalizing effect may be reached by making these differences explicit. Educational guidance and similar efforts that fail to talk about differences and hierarchies in the educational system could be considered to favour those groups that already possess knowledge about them (Bryntesson & Börjesson 2021, p. 39, author's translation).

The purpose of making differences, expectations, and barriers explicit, is not to dissuade disadvantaged students from higher education. On the contrary, such an awareness would go a long way towards transcending these obstacles. Research stresses the importance of realistic expectations when entering higher education (See above section 4.3). Taking on a challenge in full awareness of the scope of it, is easier than doing so blindfolded. Career guidance that encourages open discussion of these matters will benefit not only the so-called disadvantaged. What is seldom considered when talking about equity in education, is the pressure put on young people from higher education family backgrounds to pursue such a path themselves (Bryntesson & Börjesson 2021). Rather, the preferences of the middle-class are taken for granted as inherently desirable. However, it would be absurd to assume, that everyone coming from an academic background are suited to, and best served by, pursuing careers like their parents'. Also, if dedicated to the ideal of a corps of higher education students that corresponds to the population at large, it goes without saying that social mobility must go both ways; not everyone can become a doctor or a lawyer.

The purpose of a truly critical and emancipatory career guidance is therefore more than just helping students to decide on a path of education and subsequent employment. Rather, it "is to help students focus less on what politicians and business leaders want, or what their parents and others around them want, and focus more on the existential question of what kind of human being they want to be in life" (Winham 2020). These are times of rapid change

and linear ideas about career planning may prove untenable (Southgate & Bennett 2016). Not knowing what skills and professions will be required in twenty years, then maybe choosing an education based on personal interests is more rational than using education as an investment towards future employability. Exploring what to do with one's life is an essential part of an education that is not only about the "how" but also about the "what" and the "why". A career guidance that allows for critical reflection and free exploration connects both to the "active, critical and responsible citizen" cherished by the EHEA (Section 2.3).

4.7 Provisions for Comprehensive Career Guidance

The combined requirements of enabling and empowerment – providing information and assistance on all career paths conceivable, allowing for exploration and promoting critical thinking – places great demands on career guidance and those who perform it, both in terms of knowledge and resources. For career counsellors to be able to contribute towards widening participation, and to counter the traditional tendency to divert disadvantaged students towards lower status programmes, they need a working knowledge both of post-secondary education and the sociology of education (Andres 2016). Without calling into question the current state of training for career guides, it is clear that an expanded, effective, and emancipatory career guidance in secondary schools requires a professional corps that is both dedicated and knowledgeable.[3]

As for resources, it is not hard to find testimony that these currently often are strained. Career advisors may have ten minutes per year dedicated to one-on-one talks with students and advising is often done by regular teachers on top of their other tasks (Alexander, Nicholson & Cleland 2020). For secondary schools students, access to high-quality guidance is "at best … patchy" (Foskett & Johnston 2010 p. 236) or even "something of a post-code lottery" (Houghton, Armstrong & Okeke 2021). Similar conclusions are drawn in Swedish government surveys (SOU2019:4).

Though career guidance in secondary schools have great social, democratic, and transformative potential, this can only be realised through decisive effort. This paper would argue with Tomaszewski, Perales, & Ning (2017) that issue of career guidance is "ripe for policy intervention" (p. 13) Further, it is hard not to agree with Bryntesson & Börjesson (2021) that, at the very least, the uneven access to information that exacerbates social inequalities, should be "relatively easy to address" (p. 39). As argued by Foskett & Johnston (2010) career guidance and education should be embedded in the curriculum for all students in upper secondary school.

[3] SOU2019:4 found that in Sweden, one in three career counsellors in upper secondary education lacked formal training in the field, in privately run schools this ratio was almost one in two.

5. Conclusions

The democratic potential of bringing the full diversity of populations into higher education is undeniable. Intuitively, this might seem unproblematic. There is a wealth of ambitious and talented young people out there from a great variety of circumstances. The benefits of higher education for the individual should be self-evident: Who would not want to go to university, given the opportunity? The benefits for society should be equally apparent: Democracy and prosperity could nothing but gain from a well-educated populace. Things are not that simple, however. Powerful forces are working against a democratization of knowledge that otherwise would seem inevitable. Social status in all its complexities permeate modern society and power relations define every moment of life, especially that of working life, of which the education system is an extension. The problem of unequal access to and participation in higher education is a problem rooted at the very foundations of society. As such it is impossible to solve without changing society itself.

Though full equity in higher education might not be achievable within the bounds of present society, things can surely be improved. How structural inequalities play out for individuals and groups is very dependent on specific policies. Both the EHEA and the EU are committed to the ideals of equity in higher education, but strategies are deficient. Delegating the responsibility of widening participation to autonomous institutions leads to an irregularity of implementation to the point where inequities are reinforced rather than addressed. Such reinforcement of inequity is represented on the structural level by the vertical stratification of the higher education system and on the ideological level in perceived conflicts between excellence and equity, as between standards and deficiency. This is not to say that the work done by universities towards widening participation is pointless, but if significant progress is to be made, the issue needs to be tackled from more than one direction.

Shifting the focus in widening participation policy from higher education institutions to secondary schools, from the supply side to the demand side, means precisely such a two-pronged approach. Instead of having high-school students and teachers passively waiting for the “paternalistic” (Austin 2021) out-reach efforts of universities, they should be given a greater degree of agency and responsibility.

Simply shifting the focus of policy, however, is not enough to make widening participation meaningful in terms of democratization. Pressing under-represented groups into higher education to fill quotas is simply yet another form of inequity. A career guidance that can help deliver the scientists, philosophers, leaders, and citizens that future society needs, must support students towards a critical understanding of their place in the world, empowering them to make decisions about their life and enabling them to follow through on their dreams.

In conclusion, two central questions beg for answers. Firstly, this overview shows that there is a want of comprehensive research on the importance of career guidance for widening participation. Though some local studies have been made, large territories remain uncharted. The question future research needs to tackle is: how does the specific organisation and pedagogy of career guidance reproduce or subvert inequities? Secondly, widening participation is increasingly prioritized by intergovernmental organisations but so far little progress has been made. One could therefore hope that decision-makers would welcome new perspectives and innovative proposals. The question for those interested in influencing the political agenda is: How could policy proposals be designed to be, at the same time, efficient, readily implementable, and politically acceptable?

About the Author

Erik Toshach is M. A. in History of Ideas, with an interest in political concepts and education. He is co-author (with Urban Strandberg) to the report *Vad är det vi vill ska hända med den som går igenom en universitetsutbildning?* (2014), examining the experiences of students in writing their graduate theses and the ways this process has informed their understanding of themselves. He is employed at the International Youth Think Tank as Assistant Fellow, and was acting moderator at the IYTT International Youth Conferences 2019, 2020 and 2021.

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Widening participation in higher education has become an increasingly important policy area over the last 15 years, nationally and at the European level. So far, little progress have been made. Autonomy of institutions, the drive for excellence and the resulting stratification of education, hampers democratization of knowledge. Shifting focus from universities to secondary schools, this overview examines how comprehensive career guidance may enable and empower students to transcend inequalities.

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