

Volume 14 Special Issue:

Marketing Participation: student ambassadors' contribution to WP in Engineering and Medicine at two contrasting universities

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Under new Labour administrations, employing student ambassadors for Widening Participation (WP) outreach work became popular with higher education institutions (HEIs). Ambassadors were held to be effective in aspiration and attainment-raising work and cited as role models for diverse groups of pupils by policy-makers and practitioners.

The focus of this paper is student ambassadors' WP work at two universities, one old and one new and their WP outreach work in medicine and engineering. It draws from a larger study deploying in depth ethnography and drawing on approaches from across the social sciences to trace the discourses surrounding these student ambassadors.

Findings reveal student ambassadors' primary contribution is not to widen participation but to promote and market their own institutions and courses. However, through marketing particular courses, ambassadors can contribute to disrupting and challenging pupils' gendered, raced and classed trajectories within STEM subject areas.

Keywords: student ambassadors, marketing, Higher Education, Widening Participation, engineering, medicine

Introduction

This paper draws on a study of the widening participation work of student ambassadors with school pupils at two contrasting universities, specifically in the context of STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics, including medicine).

The explosion of student ambassador and mentoring schemes in UK universities (Colley, 2003) at the start of the 21st Century was part of both UK and international policy to expand HE to upskill the workforce in order to meet the demands of increasingly globalised economies. WP policy aimed to encourage diverse groups defined by their lower socio-economically disadvantaged status, ethnicity and gender to access HE. Student ambassador schemes were part of this drive. Ambassadors were

viewed as effective WP tools and role models for pupils by policy-makers and practitioners (HEFCE, 2005, 2009). There is, however, no educational research exploring the work of student ambassadors and their contribution to WP.

The study on which this paper draws centres on two London universities, one old and one new and their ambassadors' WP outreach work in two STEM subjects, engineering and medicine. Activities were funded by Aimhigher, the universities themselves and by particular projects and initiatives running at these institutions at the time. The study deployed in depth ethnography and drew on approaches from across the social sciences to trace the discourses surrounding student ambassadors and their work. One dominant discourse identified was that of marketing. This discourse and how it positioned ambassadors and school pupils and impacted on the WP aims of activities is the specific focus of this paper.

Background to the study

The expansion of HE is a UK and international phenomenon, often called a global knowledge economy (David, 2009). The UK Labour Administrations' concerns to widen participation reflected economic and social justice and equity issues. There are though critiques of the assumptions this policy made about the nature of the workforce that will be needed in 21st century Britain. Various studies (Steele, 2000; Morley, 2001; Brown, Lauder, and Ashton, 2008; David et al, 2010) warned that that the need for upskilling the UK workforce was not as clear as government discourses suggested. Current economic problems and the much publicised difficulties faced by graduates in attaining graduate jobs appear to support this view, though the reality of the positioning of different graduates in the job market is complex (Chevalier and Conlon, 2003; Dickerson and Jones, 2007; Purcell et al., 2006; Wilton, 2011) and reliability of official statistics relating to graduate employment much contested (Bratti, McKnight, Naylor and Smith, 2004).

However, the importance of STEM subjects to the national economy has been emphasised (Leitch review, 2006; Lambert review, 2003; Sainsbury review 2007; UKCES, 2009; CBI, 2010). The CBI (2010) outlines the urgent need for STEM skills by UK businesses; the UKCES (2009) predicts that 58 percent of all new jobs will be STEM related. In contrast there is no concern over recruitment to careers in medicine

as undergraduate courses are repeatedly oversubscribed. Indeed, the HEFCE advisory group report on Strategically Important and Vulnerable Subjects (SIVS) suggests that the growth in popularity of medicine and related subjects is likely to have contributed to the comparatively lower levels of recruitment in other STEM disciplines including engineering (HEFCE, 2009: p17).

In medicine, women now outnumber men on undergraduate courses (Boursicot and Roberts, 2009). However, lower socio-economic groups and some ethnic minority groups remain significantly underrepresented (Boursicot and Roberts, 2009; Greenhalgh et al, 2004; Conner et al, 2004; Grant et al, 2002). While medicine is oversubscribed, engineering has been identified as a strategically important and vulnerable subject (SIV). Unlike medicine, undergraduate engineering courses in the UK still attract predominantly male students though, like medicine, these students tend to be middle class. Only 13 percent were female in 2009 (RAEng: 2009). Representation of minority ethnic groups is again patchy (Conner et al, 2004; HESA, 2009). A problem for engineering is that there is little general understanding of what engineers do. In a recent national survey of perceptions of engineers (Engineering UK, 2011) 20-40 percent of 20+ year-olds were said to know “nothing” about ‘specific types of engineering, or of the day-to-day realities of what various roles involve’. There was also confusion about educational pathways into the profession and a perception that engineers earn less than other professionals. School pupils often describe engineers as being people – and particularly men – who fix things, such as car mechanics or electricians (Canavan, Magill and Love, 2002).

Method

The study on which this paper draws was conducted over a two year period 2008 - 2009 and centres on two London universities, Bankside, a ‘new’ university and Royal, an ‘old’, ‘elite’ institution, and their ambassadors’ WP outreach work in engineering, medicine and related STEM subjects. Activities were funded by the universities themselves, related charities, Aimhigher and the Accessing Engineering Project (AEP) - a HEFCE funded project based at Bankside at the time of the study.

A problem for researching student ambassadors’ work with school pupils is that in many contexts encounters are extremely brief, lasting for only a day or even a few

hours. It is clearly difficult to make any claims for the impact of ambassador work when exchanges are so fleeting.

The aims of the study were to explore discourses that surround student ambassadors and to consider how these position both ambassadors and pupils. Ambassador/ pupil interactions and the interplay of learning contexts were considered as part of this process. Given the fleeting nature of exchanges between school pupils and ambassadors, identifying a strategy for analysing these encounters provided many challenges.

Ball (1994) stresses the need, when analyzing policy, for a range of approaches: ‘a toolbox of diverse concepts and theories – an applied sociology rather than a pure one’ (ibid: p14). Likewise, I have drawn on ‘diverse concepts and theories’ including Foucauldian discourse analysis (Hollway, 1984; Parker and Sholter, 1990; Parker 1992; Willig, 2001; Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Wetherell, 1998, 2001) and the theories of post-structuralists, especially Butler (1988, 1990, 1997a; 1997b). I have used a ‘toolbox’ that specifically draws from practices in social psychology, ethnography and grounded theory. The two approaches followed most explicitly have been a constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003) and, from social psychology, the six steps to analysis suggested by Willig (2001). Ethnography has been central as it has allowed me to observe a wide range of ambassador/ pupil interactions. Combining these approaches enabled me to provide a systematic comparative analysis of discourses across different learning contexts.

By tracing the discourses relating to student ambassadors during each activity I was able to trace patterns in how these discourses were the same and different and how they positioned ambassadors and school pupils. These approaches have given me the tools to provide a rigorous analysis of student ambassador work, despite the fleeting nature of their contact with pupils.

The activities

I have observed and held informal group conversations/ focus groups across various STEM widening participation activities. Those discussed in this paper, (outlined in Table 1 and 2) were organized by the central WP unit at Bankside and Royal, the AEP, the MAS (Medical Access Scheme) at Royal.

As well as observing the activities themselves, I observed the ambassador recruitment process, attended meetings, interviewed key members of staff about their work and talked to organizers and teachers during events and activities. All focus group/ interview conversations were transcribed in full.

Table 1 Bankside: activities observed and participation in research by pupils and student ambassadors

Activity and venue	Length of activity	Yr group	Nos. of school pupils and ambassadors present	Nos. of school pupils/ ambassadors in focus groups (recorded and transcribed)	Conversations held informally with participants during activities
STEM day: Bankside	1 day	8	30 pupils 4 Student Ambassadors (SAs)	n/a	3 ambassadors during lunch break group of 4 pupils during practical session
Careers afternoon (CA): university campus	½ day	9	80 pupils 4 SAs	n/a	2 ambassadors at the end of the session 10 pupils during the afternoon
Train Tracks (TT): Canary Wharf	1 day	7-10	30 pupils 6 SAs	1 brief group conversation/ focus group with 4 Yr 10 girls during practical activity	1 ambassador at the end of the day 10 pupils throughout the day
Engineering Camp (EC)	4 (2 days attended)	9	80 pupils 8 SAs	1 paired interview with ambassadors	2 ambassadors during the evening disco 15 pupils
Maths workshop (MW): south London school classroom	4 sessions attended	11	10-20 pupils 4-5 SAs	1 to 1 interview with 1 ambassador focus group with 4 pupils	conversations held with 3 ambassadors 8 pupils during the sessions
Summer school (SS)	5 days (3 days attended)	10	25 pupils 7 SAs (present on engineering course)	1 paired interview with ambassadors during afternoon of final day focus group with 6 pupils during lunch break of final day	10 pupils during activities

Table 2 Royal: activities observed and participation in research by pupils, student ambassadors

Activity observed and venue	Length of activity	Yr group	Nos. of school pupils and ambassadors present	Nos. of students in focus groups (recorded and transcribed)	Conversations held with participants during activities
Medical skills day: Royal (MD)	1 day	8	40 pupils 15 SAs	5 ambassadors at the end of the day group of 5 pupils during morning break group of 6 pupils during lunch break	n/a
Medical skills afternoon: Royal (MA)	½ day	10	24 pupils 8 SAs		5 ambassadors at the end of the session 10 pupils during the afternoon
Maths workshops (MW)	4 sessions attended	11	10-20 pupils (no Royal ambassadors attended)	focus group with 4 pupils	Royal ambassadors were not present during sessions attended
G&T Summer school (G&T SS)	3 days (1 day attended)	11	53 pupils (whole group on summer school) 10 SAs	focus group with 6 ambassadors at the end of final day focus group with 6 pupils during lunch break of final day	10 pupils during activities

The participants: gender, class and ethnicity

I made sure that I consulted similar numbers of male and female ambassadors at events though more female than male students volunteered to participate in focus groups. With the exception of the Summer School (SS) at Royal which was open to pupils from state schools across London, all activities were held with pupils from

south east London state schools from 'deprived' boroughs, according to the 2004 Multiple Deprivation Index (IMD) with extremely low participation rates in HE. These indicators together with those gathered during conversations suggest that pupils are predominantly from working class and lower middle class (Brooks, 2003a) backgrounds. The overwhelming majority of the student ambassadors were the first generation in their family to progress to HE and many were from south east London themselves with some having attended the same schools as pupils. Again this gives an indication of their too being from working and lower middle class backgrounds. Pupils and ambassadors were ethnically diverse with the largest group represented being Black African.

Marketing HE in a stratified system

Marketing discourses were evident at every level of ambassador work from government policy through to the practices of organizers and the ambassadors themselves. Discursive constructions of ambassadors as marketing their universities featured in the accounts of all those involved. This dominant marketing discourse is unsurprising given how HEIs now operate as corporate enterprises in a neo-liberal culture. The ideology of the marketplace operates as a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980) dominant in the contemporary UK HE system. Pupils in turn are positioned as consumers within this HE marketplace. Ambassadors were enacting these discourses, marketing university generally and their own institutions and subjects in particular. Outreach work at both universities is situated in central administration and ambassadors are used within this framework in marketing their institutions.

The detail of how the ambassadors were used within their individual institutions reflects the stratified nature of the HE system. The practices of employing ambassadors at each institution related closely to their individual existing patterns of recruitment. There were, however, inherent tensions within these marketing discourses as Aimhigher funding, which facilitated a number of activities, was provided to promote progression to HE generally rather than to individual universities.

At Bankside, a 'new' university with a local intake, the Aimhigher target group coincided relatively closely with the target group for student recruitment. However, at

Royal, an elite ‘Russell Group’ institution, students are recruited nationally and require higher levels of academic attainment for entry. Royal’s target group for Aimhigher hardly overlapped at all with their target group for recruitment. Royal and other Russell Group universities are known as 'selector' institutions and are in a position within the HEI marketplace to select ideal candidates. By contrast Bankside and other new universities, known as 'recruiter' institutions, concentrate on filling available places. The focus of ambassador work with local students funded by Royal was therefore limited to a small number of activities with G&T pupils. Activities funded by Aimhigher at Royal were seen by the marketing teams as ‘charity work’ and a distraction from the main aim of recruiting appropriately qualified candidates. The WP team at Royal then were under pressure to focus directly on recruitment:

Slowly over time the internal pressures mount – there is a benchmark and you are asked what you are doing to meet it? You get – it’s lovely you’re doing charity work but... (WP manager, Royal)

The difficulty of ensuring that during events funded by Aimhigher student ambassadors ‘market’ progression routes into university generally rather than individual institutions was clearly illustrated through the accounts of organisers and ambassadors themselves. Many ambassadors worked not only on WP activities but also on recruitment activities for their universities. The only tool available to WP teams and Aimhigher staff, to ensure that student ambassadors differentiate between marketing university generally and marketing specific institutions, was a different coloured T-shirt:

... in the training, what ambassadors are often told is, which T-shirt are you wearing; if it’s an Aimhigher one, you’re talking about progression; if it’s a Bankside one you’re at a Bankside open day and you’re talking about courses at Bankside and you need to know about courses at Bankside ... Aimhigher is different ... because it’s offering knowledge of a pathway (Aimhigher coordinator)

However, it was clear from ambassadors’ accounts that they were often unaware of this distinction:

I don't know the difference between them 'cause all I do is, I get e-mails from Widening Participation, Royal – I just say, yes, no; they say training days, I say, can I do it – if I can do it I do it – if I don'tso I wouldn't really know what was what to be honest (Royal: G&T SS)

Selling Royal

Observation during activities suggested that ambassadors were, often, very specifically promoting their own institutions. One lighthearted exchange at Royal focused on the benefits of having a Burger King on campus, how good the university is and the 'good experience' of being there:

Candice: It's the only uni in the UK with a Burger King on campus

...

Abiola: I want to go to this university – there's a Burger King here

Candice: Yeah this uni is top! University is a lot of work but I think it's a really good experience and I'd encourage as many people as I can to have that experience (MD)

Conversations with pupils during the G&T summer school revealed that ambassadors were explicitly promoting Royal and encouraging pupils to apply:

Clare: They don't make recommendations about where you should go?

Martin: Yeah

Imogen: They gave us a talk okay and the campus – sort of showed us round the places, gave us tips

...

Imogen: We talked about Queens as well. Quite a lot of rivalry between Queens and Royal and they were talking about how Royal is more relaxed and there's more of a social life and Queens they all tend to be social outcasts and throw themselves off the building so that's quite funny

Clare: Queens is square and Royal's is cool?

Imogen: Yeah that was the general impression I got

Martin: Pretty much (laughter) (G&T SS)

This direct approach by the ambassadors, in the short term, appeared to have been very effective. One pupil explained that the ambassadors had 'sold' Royal to her:

Clare: And do you know where you want to do it, by the way?

Vanessa: I don't know, I didn't really know about any universities until I came to this one. I like this one; it is really good

Lola: Yeah it is

Vanessa: They've sold it to us ... (G&T SS)

The pupils also described specifically how the ambassadors had marketed the university to them, referring to how the ambassadors 'talked it up quite well':

Kate: And the ambassadors they talked it up quite well – the social life as well as getting the good grades.

Martin: Everyone seems to smile here except the librarian (G&T SS)

The pupils' awareness of the way ambassadors were marketing the university was directly referred to a number of times. Pupils were amused by ambassadors' protestations that they are not 'selling' Royal and were aware and open to these marketing advances from ambassadors:

Clare: And when you said, they sold it to you – how?

Vanessa: Well, the things they said about Queens and they just made it seem really good here

Lola: And they kept saying, we're not trying to sell it to you

Vanessa: Yeah, but they made a pretty good job of selling it (laughs) Yeah just emphasising how they can still get the grades and still become what they want while also having a social life and all the clubs we can join

Gabrielle: Clubs – we heard a lot about clubs – talked a lot about clubs

Clare: So what clubs are they doing?

Imogen: They showed us loads of clubs, yeah

Gabrielle: All the sports ones and environment ones.

Clara: Envision there was like charity kind of...

Kate: Yeah, the charity ones (G&T SS)

The ambassadors were consciously marketing their university to this group of pupils and were doing so effectively. However, the G&T summer school was funded by Royal and pupils were drawn from state schools across London, not from deprived boroughs. The pupils who contributed to the focus group were predominantly white, and appeared to come from relatively established middle class backgrounds, discussing how one or both parents had been to university themselves. This group then, was well matched in ethnic and class terms, to Royal's traditional student body.

Promoting Bankside

At Bankside student ambassadors were both promoting university generally and Bankside in particular. During the EC one student ambassador explained that she used 'any opportunity to tell them (school pupils) about university'. Her use of the phrase 'we're selling that' draws explicitly from discourses of sales and marketing:

Gill: Any opportunity we tell them about uni – in a subtle way like 'you need a degree for everything!' – we're selling that (EC)

At the SS the ambassadors also frequently referred to their responsibility to promote university and it was not just the ambassadors who were aware of their responsibility to 'market' university; the pupils shared this awareness. One pupil explained, uncritically, that the ambassadors were there to 'try to make' university 'seem ok':

Dina: ...they tell you about their experiences like during their time in university- like the boys – like they're trying to make university seem okay – like it's not that bad – it's not as scary as it seems (SS)

Again, this reflects an understanding on the part of the pupils that ambassadors are there as marketing tools to encourage progression. Being positioned as consumers in this way, however, seems so familiar to the pupils that they view it as hardly noteworthy. That the HE system is a marketplace and that they are consumers within it is a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980) that makes this a seemingly natural positioning for them.

My own observations made during fieldwork, and comments made by both ambassadors and pupils, revealed pupils' interest in finding out about university from the ambassadors. Their interest in listening to ambassadors, also positions them as willing participants in this marketing process:

Qadira: They do ask questions about like – what do you do? (SS)

The ambassadors described providing pupils with some detailed information about how they work at university. Other exchanges described included information about where students live. One ambassador described pupils as wanting to 'get comfortable around uni'. Another described pupils repeatedly asking her questions, regardless of the activity they were engaged in, about what she studies and how university is different to school:

Qadira: For me it's the same actually. They always ask the same type of questions whether we're in the afternoon activity – it's even more funny because in the afternoon activities we've got students from different strands and they're always – oh what strand are you on – like what do you do – and I'll start explaining again and they'll be asking – do you like this uni, how's the uni like, is it like school, do you have to do this, so you have to do that? It's the same questions

Adam: Pretty much the same. It's usually the same questions – its like – what do you do? (SS)

As well as general questions about university life, ambassadors described being asked specific questions about Bankside – 'do you like this university?' and 'how's this university?'

Student ambassadors were positioned as promoters of university generally and of Bankside in particular by providing pupils with specific information about Bankside. Unlike Royal however, the school pupils did not talk about wanting to go to Bankside despite their interest in finding out about it. School pupils may be aware of the relative perceived value of different universities and the degrees that they offer. However, the data indicate that these school pupils' interest in Bankside and their experience of being there may well contribute to their viewing it as a 'comfortable' (Reay et al, 2005) option. It may be that this experience of being at Bankside encourages them to apply. These pupils all discussed plans to progress to HE that were established before embarking on the SS. They were already on a trajectory to HE. Their experience of being at Bankside then may just serve to reinforce existing patterns of HE participation.

The marketing focus of their work and the reality that ambassadors were predominantly working with cohorts of school pupils who match their university's established intake indicate that the outcome of ambassador work is likely to be the maintenance of existing status differentials between institutions and the perpetuation of existing patterns of recruitment to individual universities. While there are now more working class and ethnic minority students going to university overall they are going to 'different universities to their middle class counterparts' (Reay, David and Ball, 2005: p9). As Leathwood (2004) suggests 'the hierarchy of universities both reflects and perpetuates social inequalities' (p31). The work of ambassadors then reinforces rather than disrupts these patterns. It is also questionable whether simply encouraging pupils to progress to university in general terms is in their best interests given the level of debt they will now accumulate, the gloomy economic outlook and uncertain job prospects for graduates. Various research (Morley,2001; Lauder, Brown and Ashton, 2008) has raised concern for some time about the likelihood of their being enough professional work for graduates to progress to.

Marketing subjects and discourses of individualism

Positioning student ambassadors as marketers of particular subjects and courses may, however, at times, be effective in promoting these subject areas amongst a wider and more diverse audience of young people, a valuable mission if we are to accept the

identified need for more graduates in STEM subjects (Leitch review, 2006; Lambert review, 2003; Sainsbury review 2007; UKCES, 2009; CBI, 2010). The ambassadors in this study were very consciously and, in some contexts, effectively, promoting engineering and medicine.

The engineering ambassadors at Bankside were given extra subject specific training delivered by the AEP; this was additional to the training organised by the WP unit at the university. During this training ambassadors were told to ‘promote engineering messages, challenge the stereotype of engineer as mechanic and make university seem accessible’ (AEP fieldworker). These foci were evident in engineering ambassadors’ work with school pupils; ambassadors discussed in some detail how they were promoting engineering messages and challenging stereotypes. The pupils’ responses to these ‘messages’ varied between learning contexts (Gartland, 2012), however, in some contexts ambassadors were viewed as useful ‘hot sources’ of information (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Ball et al 2000; Archer et al, 2003). In these contexts school pupils reiterated messages in their accounts of what they had learnt during interactions with ambassadors, discussing, for example, the range of jobs available and possible incomes in engineering:

Isima: I didn’t know you got paid that – it’s quite a lot for that

Amber: I’ve learnt about engineering jobs – there’s lots of different types
(CA)

The experience of working alongside ambassadors on practical projects (Gartland 2012) also contributed to some more thoughtful, detailed and informed accounts of what engineering entails:

Sarah: (engineering) there are some difficult things to consider ...I wouldn’t say it’s an easy subject – it’s something where you’d need to use your initiative – you need to put other people into what would go wrong and what would go right

Ayisha: you need to plan it all out exactly ...it’s about team work ...although it’s complicated you are able to work it out in small stages so you will eventually get there...

Sarah: engineering before – I probably thought it was to do with mechanics and how things work but now I have a broader view of it – except I can't say it in words.

Meena: You know chemical engineering involves science and DT? ...I'm just interested (TT)

Indeed, the combination of the ambassador's input and pupils' engagement with them in practical activities during the day was successful in promoting positive orientations to engineering careers amongst this group of girls:

Sarah: engineering is another word for making things

Ayisha: I want to become an engineer now

Meena: only if it involves science

Aiysha: yes for the rest of my life (TT)

However, as Archer et al, 2010 identify, levels of interest in particular subjects are formed early. This, and other groups of pupils who appeared to be positively influenced towards engineering by ambassadors were already interested in STEM subject areas and had established positive learner identities; various studies have suggested the importance of biography and established learning identity to young people's engagement with learning opportunities (Ball, Maguire and Macrea, 2000; Brooks, 2003a; Crozier, Reay and Clayton, 2010; Evans, Hodgkinson, Rainbird and Unwin, 2006). Nevertheless, student ambassadors did effectively reinforce, reaffirm and inform pupils' subject interests and orientation to study at university.

However in positioning ambassadors as marketers of institutions and particular subjects, school pupils are correspondingly positioned as 'individualized, self-directed consumers of learning' (Malcolm, 2000: p20). It is unclear, while it may be influential, whether in this 'marketplace' the information that student ambassadors provide is always accurate or valuable in terms of facilitating informed 'choices' of subject to study.

At Royal, there was an entirely separate group of student ambassadors from those employed by the WP unit, studying medicine on the Medical Access Scheme (MAS),

an extended six year degree programme. This course was designed to enable students from some inner London boroughs, who achieve lower grades than their peers on the five year programme, to progress into careers in medicine. Students were recruited to the programme from boroughs from schools with ‘poor academic records and poor progression rates into HE’ (outreach manager). The student ambassadors were employed to work with school pupils on activities to raise awareness about the programme and to encourage pupils to ‘aspire’ to study medicine. The ‘role’ of the student ambassadors in these contexts appeared to be direct recruitment to the MAS programme.

There was a girl from my school and I spoke to her and she was like, so you do medicine and I was like, yeah so I started explaining to her the programme that we’re on ... In the end she applied and I think she got in; she’s waiting for her grades but it’s showing that by us doing this we are able to go back to our schools, speak to them about the programme (MD)

The benefits to this scheme are clear; pupils from ‘deprived areas’ and low achieving schools who are traditionally excluded from elite universities and elite courses such as medicine are given an opportunity to progress to these traditionally elite areas of HE.

However, there were extremely limited numbers of places on the MAS and the focus amongst ambassadors on ‘aspiration raising’ amongst these school pupils appeared problematic. Ambassadors were keen to impress on pupils that studying medicine at Royal was an option that was open to them; that the only ‘boundaries’ are ‘expectations in your head’:

Yes, you don’t have to come from an upper class background or a grammar school to get to university. You can come from where they are coming from; there’s no real boundaries apart from your actual expectations in your head, I think. It’s like, if you think you won’t be able to make it then that’s going to limit you in where you’re going. If you think I can do this, I can achieve what I want to achieve then that will give you inspiration to go and if there is someone telling you, you know I came from where you come from; I came from a lower privileged background and I’m here; it inspires them (MD)

This view was reiterated many times by ambassadors on the MAS programme and at Royal more generally. One ambassador explained how she had 'set' herself 'a target – Royal' even though she 'comes from an underprivileged area' (ambassador training at Royal). The power of the individual to overcome their disadvantaged positioning espoused by these ambassadors obscures the reality that pupils' futures are heavily constrained by social structures and their positioning within them. Encouraging working class and ethnic minority pupils from low achieving schools to aspire to study medicine ignores structural obstacles that makes this career unattainable for many (Delgado, 1991). This discourse also has the negative consequence of creating a corresponding discourse of individualised blame with young people themselves being held and seeing themselves as responsible for their own failure (Ball, Maguire & Macrea, 2000; Evans, 2007).

Conclusions

The ideology of the marketplace operates as a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980) in the UK HE system; pupils in turn are positioned as consumers within this marketplace. The ambassadors were enacting these marketing discourses, promoting university generally and their own institutions in particular; pupils were generally accepting of and open to these marketing strategies. However the stratified positioning of the HE institutions within the HE marketplace and their targeting of different cohorts of pupils mean that the outcome of ambassador work is more likely to be the maintenance of existing stratification within HE rather than the challenging of it.

The dominance of marketing and related discourses reflects another dominant neo-liberal discourse, that of individualism. HE is represented through this as being for the benefit of the individual. The implication is that it is up to individual school pupils to raise their aspirations and aspire to university and particularly to elite universities and subject areas. This discourse obscures the reality of structural obstacles facing pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. These individualised discourses (Beck, 1992; Ball et al, 2000) reflect post Thatcher neo-liberal discourses that have gradually overwhelmed and subsumed post war discourses relating to the social value of HE. These wider neo-liberal discourses of individualism and marketing have impacted widely on the learning outcomes of WP activities.

The marketisation of the HE system has been a relentless and powerful process and this neo-liberal discourse is now becoming further entrenched under current UK administration. The report from BIS on Higher Education pronounces that ‘putting financial power into the hands of learners makes student choice meaningful’ (BIS, 2011: p5). Accruing vast debts for their study, pupils are set to become fully fledged consumers in the HE marketplace. However, with the withdrawal of funds for the Connexions services and for Aimhigher schemes, the opacity of this marketplace is only set to increase. Without Aimhigher or other government funded WP projects, the foci of student ambassadors’ work will be set entirely by their institutions and marketing discourses will increasingly operate without restraint.

However, the study from which this paper draws indicates that carefully developed activity within STEM subject areas can effectively develop and reaffirm pupils’ interest in STEM and encourage progression amongst young people currently heavily underrepresented in these subject areas. Student ambassadors, in these contexts, can contribute to disrupting and challenging pupils’ gendered, raced and classed trajectories. This subject specific approach could be an effective way forward in supporting more pupils to access HE courses in STEM subject areas.

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