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Equality in Higher Education in Spain and the UK: Mismatch between Rhetoric and Policy?

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Abstract: *Making use of Grisay's typology of educational equality, the paper analyses rhetoric and policy on equality in higher education in Spain and the UK in the period 1996-2004, making use of electoral manifestos, policy papers, legislation, and academic literature. We find that in both countries, and in spite of similar pressures and levels of access to higher education, the prevailing notions of educational equality vary. We also find evidence of a good match between policy rhetoric and policy practice in terms of areas of intervention, but not to the degree suggested in their manifestos.*

1 Introduction and research questions

In this paper we analyse the rhetoric and policies of the Spanish and UK governments in relation to higher education (HE) in the years 1996-2004. We address two main research questions. Firstly, the paper explores what have been the dominant notions of educational equality in relation to HE in Spain and the UK³ during this period. Secondly, it aims to examine the extent to which we see mismatch between rhetoric and policy in both countries. It has been suggested that a significant degree of consistency between rhetoric and policy is important for governments, and politics more broadly, to maintain high levels of political trust amongst voters (Chanley et al., 2000; Critin and Lucks, 1998; Feldman, 1983). The reasons why an elected government may not keep their electoral promises can be extremely complex and the paper touches only marginally on these. Regardless of the reasons, however, a high degree of mismatch between rhetoric and policy can be expected to reduce voters' trust because it is often not possible for governments to explain to their constituencies the details of their decisions and non-decisions. At the same time, it is easy for these constituencies to check whether or not governments have delivered their promises.

³ In this paper we refer throughout to the UK. Education, however, is a devolved responsibility in the UK, and the description of policies presented in the second part of the paper refers primarily to England.

Micro-trust is based, at least in part, on a simple performance evaluation (Keele, 2004:7).

2 *Methodology*

In its discussion of rhetoric the paper uses the electoral manifestos of the winning political parties in the two countries as manifestos are clear signals of political intent to voters. The discussion of policies uses legislation and policy documents. There are several reasons why Spain and the UK have been selected as case studies. Both countries had elections at roughly the same time (1996-7 and 2000-1), are subject to similar external pressures in HE (like the EU-wide developments related to the Bologna process) and in 1996 had similar rates of entrance into HE (OECD, 2001). Moreover, education has been a key electoral issue in both countries in the periods analysed.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section three presents a modified version of Grisay's notions of educational equality which guides the rest of the analysis. In section four the case of Spain is presented, discussing first rhetoric and then major policies over the period. The UK case follows in section five, with a similar structure, and section six presents conclusions.

3 *Education, equality and social justice*

Grisay (1984) outlines five different principles of educational equality. In the following discussion we review four of these educational principles:

- Natural equality principle

- Equality of access principle
- Equality of treatment principle
- Equality of achievement principle.

This leaves aside the ‘post-modern’ principle, which has had far less influence in policy-making in education than the four other principles he outlines. According to Grisay, the natural equality principle assumes that birth, strength or belonging to a particular group determines the entitlement to social rights and inequalities to be tolerated in a society. Under this principle, interventions from government to change group endowments are contrary to liberty and frowned upon. This principle of equality would be of little relevance for our purposes since both individuals and HE institutions are affected to some degree in their educational decisions by government regulations. More useful is to focus on the advocacy of “no right of access to all” implicit in the principle. This would entail relating “natural equality” to overall levels of access to education, or, as it has also been called “overall volume of educational opportunity” (Kaelbe, 1987).

The equality of access principle is based on the recognition that individuals have different talents, potentials and aptitudes. Unequal results in education are tolerated as long as they are proportionate to the different characteristics of pupils at the start of their courses. Under this principle, a notion of “objective merit” -typically measured through examination scores- guides the progress of individuals through the educational system. Financial help to individuals from less privileged backgrounds is therefore permissible according to this principle of equality. The emphasis of this

principle is on access to courses rather than on the structure or quality of these courses.

The equality of treatment principle argues that all people are able to undertake learning and benefit from education. Equal resources are not necessary as long as students are able to benefit from learning conditions of equivalent quality. In addition, students should also be able to choose the course and university they desire, provided that they meet the necessary academic requirements.

The equality of achievement principle argues that individual's cognitive and affective characteristics can be modified through the educational process and focuses on the outcomes of educational learning. The principle admits differences in the results of learning processes but only after a common core of skills has been acquired by all.

In the following sections we explore, first, which of these principles of educational equality have been defended rhetorically by the Labour party in the UK and the People's Party in Spain during the period 1996-2004 in which both parties were in power. Second, we look at which policies these parties have adopted rhetorically and, third, whether these are consistent with the principles they had previously set out.

When looking at HE policies in each country section we focus first on reforms in relation to selection in HE, second student choice, and third on quality. We relate selection to the need for possession of adequate credentials or experience to participate in HE and to the financing requirements to access HE. Both issues are related to Grisay's principles of natural equality and equality of access. The second

key theme analysed in this section is student choice of the institution and course of study. Student choice can be seen to relate back to the principle of equality of treatment. The third theme relates to the quality of HE provision. This is linked to the ability of institutions to provide HE of equivalent quality to each other and the notions of equality of educational treatment and achievement.

4 *Spanish HE: Rhetoric and policies*

4.1 *Spanish Rhetoric 1996-2004*

In 1996 the conservative Spanish People's Party (PP) was trying to win a national election for the first time since its foundation, under the name "Alianza Popular", shortly after Franco's death in the mid-1970s. The PP's electoral manifesto criticised previous PSOE's (Partido Socialista Obrero Español) government policy, proclaimed education a priority for the PP and established the principles of quality and liberty, understood as freedom of choice, as its two overriding principles in this area.

There is almost only one point in which the 1996 PP's manifesto does not criticize the record of the PSOE, and that is with regards to access to education. Indeed, the PP's 1996 and 2000 manifestos refer, on repeated occasions, to the "evident quantitative growth of the Spanish University" (PP, 1996:108). The manifestos do not argue for further expansion of the Spanish University system, which is considered to be overcrowded. They argue instead that there is scope for diversification within HE, and a need for stronger Further Education (FE) to alleviate the current bias towards "classical" five year HE degrees. The 1996 manifesto argues that three year short-cycle studies will be stimulated, as opposed to the traditionally more prestigious five

year degrees, and at the same time that their quality will be ensured so that they are not seen as a secondary tier of provision.

In doing so the manifestos show the commitment of the PP to the principles of equality of access⁴ and merit. This is discussed mainly with reference to the steering of the existing means-tested grants system and the development of a system of loans with subsidised interest rates (PP, 1996:109). The main concern of the PP in 1996 however was quality. Expansion of the university system had occurred, they argued, in a disorganised fashion in the last twenty years and growth had “unluckily or unnecessarily, been achieved in detriment of quality, which hampers Spanish university from achieving the levels of excellence that should be demanded” (PP,1996:108). Rather than further expansion, the PP advocates a policy focusing on improving quality and moves public expenditure in education closer to EU averages.

In particular, from 2000 the manifestos discuss the relationship between student finance, student choice and quality. An increment of grants is deemed necessary to increase student mobility which, alongside other measures, is expected to push-up quality. In the 2000 manifesto the PP argued that if elected it would establish new facilities and funding for academic and student mobility, establish a new funding regime for research projects, and create a plan for the evaluation of quality and accreditation of universities.

In addition, PP would establish an ‘open district’ to favour student mobility within Spain. This would be complemented by an expanded policy of grants and loans with

⁴ This is referred to as equality of opportunity in the PP’s manifestos.

subsidised interest rates to realise the principle of equality of access. This principle is understood as providing students with the opportunity to choose the degree and university they want to attend, limiting their choice only by academic requirements, and abolishing the geographic barriers to choice that previously existed in the system. A second access issue which would be reformed from 1996 would be the Spanish exam to access HE, the 'selectividad', to make it a fairer system which would place greater emphasis on the vocation, aptitude and preparation of students, although details of how this would be achieved are not spelled out.

In the two PP manifestos there are clear references to equality of access and there are specific references to a set of measures that will, according to the PP, ensure equality of educational opportunities as outlined above. There is, however, also a positive assessment of the status-quo and, perhaps because of this, the measures announced are far from radical.

4.2 Spanish HE Policy 1996-2004

This section presents developments in Spanish HE policy from 1996 to 2004. We first review reforms in relation to selection in HE, second student choice, and third quality.

4.2.1 Selection into HE

Academic selection

During its 1996 and 2000 electoral campaigns the PP made clear claims about making the 'selectividad' fairer and more responsive to the differences in vocation, aptitude

and preparation of students. The PP did indeed heavily regulate this exam in its period in office. Between 1999 and 2000 alone it approved three Royal Decrees⁵ changing several aspects of the exam, in particular allowing students to re-sit as many times as they wanted. In spite of recommendations from the Council of Spanish Universities and the Spanish Senate, however, the exam was not abolished during this period.

The Spanish Council of Universities noted during these years a “concealed double philosophy” in PP’s maintenance and regulation of the exam. On the one hand, it said the exam was kept as an instrument to fight against mass attendance to university; on the other hand, it was used as an instrument to prevent an inflation of marks in the secondary education system. The Council argued that the first issue was already being solved by demographic trends in Spain –particularly decreasing birth rates (Bricall et. al., 2000)- which were reducing the numbers of students going into the university system. The second issue, the Council argued, was easily resolvable with a more dynamic education administration and monitoring system.

Increasingly under pressure from universities during its second term in office, the PP finally included the abolition of the ‘selectividad’ as part of the Ley Organica de Universidades (Universities Organic Act -LOU, of 2001), although beginning only from the academic year 2006/07, and established a new system for selection into HE studies. Under the new system, some universities could choose to have an entrance examination exam or other methods to select their students, “whilst respecting the principles of equality, merit and capacity” (article 42 of the LOU).

⁵ Royal Decrees 1640/1999; 990/2000 and 69/2000.

From the point of view of equality it is important to highlight that the system outlined in the LOU gave more autonomy to universities, in particular in the selection of students, but it did not envisage enhanced accountability systems for their recruitment policies. Although universities must respect the principles of merit and capacity, they are not required or encouraged to provide any plans for the attraction of students from less privileged backgrounds as, for instance, British universities are, and no concrete mechanisms have been set out to ensure that these principles are respected.

Access from the Vocational Education track

The PP changed the regulation of access to HE with the publication of the Royal Decrees 777/98 and 704/99, which made it possible for upper-secondary vocational education (VE) graduates to enroll in 5 year-long degrees and not only three-year long 'First Cycle' Degrees, up to a percentage of places to be fixed by the different Spanish Regional Autonomies. This option of access into all courses of HE was a novelty within the Spanish system, and VE graduates are indeed filling a growing number of university places.

However, although PP increased the number of degrees VE graduates could apply for, increasing the range of possibilities for access to HE for this group. It also reviewed the number of university places that should be reserved for applicants coming from different educational tracks, and underpinned the prevalence of the general upper secondary education route of entry into HE by increasing the quota (set before at 54%) reserved for 'Bachillerato' holders.

Financial selection

A key point in the distinction between the notions of natural equality and equality of access is that the first notion does not require the provision of financial means for students to access HE, whereas the second may require it, as long as students had fulfilled the necessary academic requirements and it is considered that students need that help to undertake their studies. The 2004 PP's electoral manifesto argues that the system of grants and financial help for students had been substantially strengthened during its previous eight years of government. Indeed, there was a heavy increase in financial help to students during the period 1995-2000, in comparison to the stable situation (around €480 million) in 1995-1996 in the last stages of the PSOE government. The budget for grants and other help increased from €474 million in 1995 to €616 million in 2000 (PP, 2000). Not all grant increments went to undergraduate students however. During the PP's term in office between 1996-2000, grants for researchers and professors increased by 12%, above the average increase shown on the graph (PP, 2000). New grants for purchasing books, the extension of help for families with three or more children and the extension of grants for studying foreign languages were also created (PP, 2004).

In 2000, the State budget for grants and other assistance for the first time surpassed 100,000 million Pesetas (€600 million) and benefited over 1,100,000 students –about 300,000 students more than in 1992. This, however, put the average help per scholarship student at around €600, hardly sufficient to claim without reserve that

economic factors are no longer at play for young people when deciding whether or not to participate in HE, as the PP did in 1996 and 2000 (PP, 1996; 2000).

Moreover, the loans system was still weak and designed to provide financial support to those students in the last year of their degree only, for a value up to approximately €3,800, to be returned within four years. The interest of these credits is financed mostly by the Ministry of Education and Culture, and students pay an interest rate of around 1% (PP, 2004).

4.2.2 Student Choice

Choice was one of the main principles of the PP's policy in relation to HE in its eight year period in office. The PP aimed at increasing student choice and competition for students amongst universities. This, in turn, would help to increase quality (Ley Organica de Calidad de Educacion⁶ (LOCE), 2002, Preamble). For the PP, this entailed the abolition of the old system of allocation of students into universities, where students could only apply for programmes in the university where they sat the 'selectividad', and the creation of a national 'distrito unico' whereby students could apply to any university in Spain.

The PP responded to its promises for increasing student choice at the end of its first period in office, although less strongly than anticipated in the manifestos. In January 2000, Royal Decree 69/2000 set up a 'distrito universitario unico' (national district) whereby students could apply for admission to any university in the country, a

⁶ Organic Act on Quality of Education.

development from the ‘distrito autonómico’ (regional district) and the ‘distrito interautonómico’ (inter-regional district) formerly created by the PP. The Royal Decree detailed the criteria to be applied in the allocation of places at universities. Priority in this allocation was made dependent on the academic credentials of students and not on the university where students had sat the selectividad exam which had been the most important criterion in the past. An Order of 26th of July 2000 (BOE 28.7.2000) developed the Decree and required that the proportion of places offered to students from other university districts could not be below 20% of the total, still a relatively low figure.

The single district was proclaimed an important step forward in the Spanish educational system by the PP. The single district could help to address geographical imbalances, at least in theory, and compensate the excess of demand for some degrees in some regions with oversupply in others (Bricall et. al., 2000). In addition, this would, in theory, enable students to choose the degree they want as long as they are willing to move geographically, thus enhancing equality of treatment. It would help to drive up standards through competition and would benefit students whose marks in the ‘Bachillerato’ would previously have been insufficient to gain a place on their preferred degree course as they were restricted to the university at which they sat the ‘selectividad’.

However, according to the Bricall report (Bricall et. al., 2000) and universities themselves, addressing these territorial imbalances by means of the single district also requires a policy of coordination at national level and more facilities for students to

move within Spain, especially through a strong system of mobility grants. Under the previous 'distrito compartido' in 1998 universities reserved 5% of their places to students who wanted to study in a university district different of their own. In 1998 there were 14,793 places for students who wished to study outside their home university district. Only 43% of them, just over 6,000, were filled, which reflects the low interest and incentives of students to move in Spain (Perez de Pablos, 1999).

The PP created for the first time in Spain a system of mobility grants to facilitate students to read for a first degree in Autonomous Communities outside of the location of their upper secondary school. The 2001 LOU recognized that such system of grants was necessary to enable student choice and drive up quality, and foresaw the establishment of a grant policy according to the needs of the single district (BOE, 2001). The grants system established, however, fell short of these expectations and student mobility has not been significantly increased (Michavilla, 2005). The former General Secretary of the Spanish Council of Universities, Professor Francisco Michavilla, has gone further to argue that the establishment of the single district without a corresponding increase in the level of mobility grants will accentuate the problem of limited student choice (Michavilla, 2005). Without a new grants system the single district, he has argued, benefits only those who can self-fund their studies in a different Autonomous Community, occupying the place of those who live in the community of destination.

The PP's single district therefore has enhanced student's choice nominally, but without the necessary investment in mobility grants it has not done so in practice. It is also questionable whether the single district has had any relevance in terms of

equality of access, since individuals who did not get their first choice subject under the previous system did not usually drop the idea of undertaking university studies, but rather enrolled in their second or third choice programme. The measure has probably more to offer in terms of equality of treatment. The single district could improve equality of treatment directly, as it enables mobility and enhances choice. In addition it may also improve equality of treatment indirectly if universities are forced to improve the quality of their programmes to compete for students in the future.

4.2.3 *Quality*

A final area in which PP's electoral manifestos anchored its HE policies was quality. The PP passed two Organic Acts during its period in office which addressed quality in HE: the Organic Act 6/2001 on Universities (*LOU*), and the Organic Act 10/2002 on Quality of Education (*LOCE*). The *LOCE* was mainly concerned with establishing a results-orientated education system where evaluation and monitoring were intensified, but focused on other levels of education than HE. This section therefore focuses on the *LOU*.

The main organizational reform of the *LOU* in terms of quality improvement in HE was the creation of a National Agency for Evaluation of Quality and Accreditation aimed at improving the quality of both teaching and research in Spanish universities. This agency would manage a new system of recruitment of academic staff and was put in charge of evaluating the improvements in quality of the Spanish university system and reinforcing its transparency and competitiveness. It would provide the information necessary for students to choose between degrees and universities and

would enable professors, academic departments and the public administration to produce appropriate educational policies.

This central agency to collate information about quality is of particular relevance in a context, like the Spanish, where there has traditionally been minimal attention to the availability and distribution of information to raise the awareness of potential students to the benefits of university education or the quality of particular courses and universities. Since mobility before 2000 was not possible, information on quality was to a large extent redundant.

There has been, however, an assumption by government that because information about the quality of universities and the returns of HE will be available through the National Agency, it will be used by students from all backgrounds, an assumption which may not be accurate. It is also still unclear what use the public administration will make of the information collected by the new Agency. To date this information has not been used to increase equality of treatment, although there are several ways in which it could do so through performance monitoring linked to funding decisions. Information could be used to identify and provide additional resources to poorly performing institutions so that they can catch up with the best performing institutions⁷ or be given to best performing institutions in exchange for additional student places.

PP administration has been more successful in providing information to users and stakeholders on different educational pathways and in improving the credibility of the vocational parts of the secondary educational system amongst students and

employers. This has enhanced educational diversity, something which was called for in the LOCE, and to some extent in the LOU. Vocational upper secondary education is, however, still considered a more direct route into employment than a route into HE, whereas the HE system remains fairly uniform in terms of its institutional composition and has a clear bias towards five year-long university degrees. By contrast, the more vocationally oriented 3-year HE degrees still have a low take-up. Whereas Spain is 10% above the OECD average in enrolments⁸ in the generally more academically orientated five-year degrees, it is about 10% below OECD average in the enrolment in vocational degrees (OECD, 2004).

5 UK

5.1 UK Rhetoric 1997-2004

The Labour government's 1997 manifesto plays an important role in the party's broad aim of making the party electorally competitive after 18 years of Conservative government. There is, consequently, an emphasis on broader macroeconomic issues- jobs, growth and inflation in particular- on which it was felt Labour must convince the electorate. Labour came to power, however, with the number one priority for government summarised in the mantra of 'education, education, education'. The 1997 manifesto states that Labour are a "broad-based movement for progress and justice" (Labour, 1997:3), by which is meant a belief that "merit comes before privilege" (Labour, 1997:1) and that "life-chances should be for all the people" (Labour,

⁷ Of course, if this option is chosen, the right conditions through sanctions and incentives would have to be established to avoid "rewarding failure".

⁸ As a percentage of the age cohort

1997:3). There is no explicit mention of widening participation to HE, however, or of targets in HE participation. There is also, significantly, discussion of the ‘justice’ in reforms to pass more of the cost of HE from the general taxpayer to the individual student “from the career success to which HE has contributed” (Labour, 1997:10).

In the 2001 manifesto the government set out its target to increase participation in HE to 50% of those aged under thirty and this was tied to Labour’s view of social justice so that “all our children, wherever they live, whatever their background, have an equal chance to benefit from the opportunities our country has to offer an share in its wealth” (Labour, 2001:1). Although the 50% target relates to natural equality the concern with the persistence of class inequalities in the educational system refers back also to the principle of equality of access. Fuelled by fears stemming from the introduction of tuition fees in the first term, there was a commitment that top-up fees would not be introduced in a second Labour term, again in order to protect access. The manifesto explicitly states that “we will not introduce ‘top-up’ fees and have legislated to prevent them... [W]e will ensure that the funding system continues to promote access and excellence’ (Labour, 2001:5). Indeed the manifesto also suggests that continuing differences in HE participation by ‘non-traditional’ groups⁹ may be driven by problems of information and aspiration as much as financial concerns, and stresses the economic benefits to HE for individuals as well as suggesting outreach projects to attract more students from non-traditional backgrounds (Labour, 2001:5). The manifesto mentions the increased funds for the expansion of Foundation Degrees

⁹ By ‘non-traditional’ the government refers to student populations with disproportionately low participation in HE, notably students from lower social classes, disabled students and students from specific ethnic groups

(FDs) to “offer students the option of a vocationally relevant, high quality qualification” (Labour, 2001:5). In addition to the focus on natural equality and equality of access, this highlights the focus on issues relating to equality of treatment. First, there is a desire to expand the offer to students so that they are better able to choose a course which suits them. Second, there is an emphasis on ensuring that the quality of this vocational offer is of high quality.

5.2 UK Policy 1997-2004

5.2.1 Selection into HE

The Conservative government commissioned the Dearing Report into the financing options for HE in 1996 (Dearing, 1997). The aim was to assess the best way forward in overcoming the twin issues of insufficient funding and widening participation and concluded that given an analysis of the private returns of HE there was a strong case for students themselves to bear a greater proportion of the costs of HE.

On the basis of this report shortly after coming to power Labour made radical changes to the way HE in the UK is financed. The student maintenance grant was abolished and replaced with a system of student loans, tied only to inflation, which students would have to pay back once in employment and earning more than £10,000 per year. The most controversial element of the reforms was the introduction of a £1,000 up-front tuition fee to students at the start of each academic year, despite means-tested exemptions from the fees. These tuition fees were the subject of lengthy protests by students across the country as fears spread of unmanageable student debt and of the

tuition fees escalating in the future. The introduction of tuition fees took place in a context where the government also discussed the target to increase participation in HE to 50% of the under thirty cohort. The key tension in the UK between participation and financing of HE is evident in these policy shifts, and reappears once again in Labour's second term.

Labour's second term in office was dominated by the 2003 White Paper *The Future Of HE* and its subsequent implementation as the 2004 HE Act (HEA) (DfES, 2003a; HMSO, 2004). The central plank of the legislation is the introduction of variable top-up fees, despite the claim in the 2001 manifesto that this would not occur. From 2006 universities will be able to charge students variable fees up to a maximum of £3000 per year. The government argues that requiring a greater contribution from the student alongside that of the general taxpayer is a socially just policy shift (Blair, 2004) because graduates on average earn 50% more again than non-graduates and graduate unemployment levels are around half the level of that in the workforce as a whole (DfES, 2003b:18).

Whilst seeking to enhance financial contributions from students, however, the system has been carefully designed to minimise the impact on access. The up-front tuition fee is to be abolished and instead students will take out loans to meet the fees. These loans will be tied only to inflation and repayments of the variable top-up fee will be deferred until the graduate is in employment and repayments will occur at a standard rate of 9% of income above a £15 000 threshold from April 2005, increased from the previous £10 000 earnings threshold. Additional grants, exemptions from fees and maintenance allowances have been introduced. Whilst most attention has been placed

on the degree to which fees and loans may impact upon access, some commentators argue that the amount of loans ought to be increased so as to more realistically reflect costs of living and to help avoid student poverty (Barr, 2003). This view in part reflects the higher average earnings of graduates and their ability to take on higher flows of student debt in employment, but also stems from concern that students may otherwise take on debt on more punitive terms. There is also, significantly, concern that student poverty may lead to inequalities of achievement through impacting drop out rates or through participation in paid work.

While it is the case that the financing arrangements are designed to minimise impacts on participation in HE, the reforms contain a more explicit second strand to achieve this end. An independent Access Regulator is to be appointed to oversee the creation and delivery of Access Agreements which all universities wishing to charge variable fees will have to sign up to. The content of each university's Access Agreement is to be created in conjunction with the Access Regulator and is intended to be "robust and challenging" (DfES, 2003a:75). The university will be expected to design pro-active policies to recruit students from non-traditional backgrounds and the Access Regulator will have the powers to punish universities failing in this respect, either through fines or through the withdrawal of the right to charge variable fees. To boost incentives to seek out, recruit and maintain talented students from non-traditional backgrounds, the HE Funding Council for England (HEFCE) have also been asked to review the 'access premium' which universities receive for such students. In doing so, however, this measure may also benefit equality of achievement, measured for example by drop-out rates or duration of study. There is a desire to base this access premium on criteria relating to household income, parental education and school

performance, rather than on the student's postcode as has hitherto been the case. The government claims that from 2003-4 the premium will increase from around 5% additional funding for each student from a disadvantaged background to around 20% (DfES, 2003a: 74).

Some concerns about the nature of Access Agreements, however, can be raised. Whilst it is claimed that the agreements will be 'robust and challenging' (DfES, 2003a: 75), the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) have made it clear that universities will themselves select the indicators against which their measures to attract non-traditional students are to be measured (DfES, 2003b:3). The DfES stated, however, that "[W]e expect the overwhelming majority of universities to implement this framework positively and imaginatively" (DfES, 2003b:4), and also "expect most agreements to work satisfactorily" (DfES, 2003b:22). In addition, university admissions policies remain outside the remit of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) who will, for instance, be required only to "receive and, *where necessary*, comment on the *brief annual report* which universities will submit" (DfES, 2003b:4, our emphasis). It is therefore unclear to what extent infrequent and minimal intervention of admissions procedures combined with voluntary self-regulation of Access Agreements by universities will generate effective mechanisms to widen participation.

In addition to outreach activity from universities the government has launched its own campaign to attract students from non-traditional backgrounds. The national AimHigher campaign was established in late 2003. Within the campaign a website has been launched to provide information to help students decide whether to participate in HE and there are also targeted roadshows, workshops and mentoring

programmes. This reflects the government's view that lower participation rates from these groups is significantly related to their own aspirations and lack of information as well as the cost of HE. The DfES states simply that "[I]f we succeed in raising aspirations amongst non-traditional students, many more of them will apply" (DfES, 2003a:73). The rapid escalation of funding for the AimHigher campaign, which has increased from £39m in 2002/3 to £83m in 2005/6 (DfES, 2003a: 75), shows the political commitment behind the belief that lack of information and low expectations are a significant cause of low participation from non-traditional groups. In terms of equality of access, this rationale passes greater responsibility for inequalities of participation in HE onto students themselves, and may detract attention from remaining structural and financial barriers to participation.

One final area of debate concerns the role of endowments within the future of HE financing in the UK, with the 2003 White Paper for instance saying that "[T]he way forward is through endowment" (DfES, 2003a:80). The government is keen to promote 'giving' by graduates back to the university, and presents endowments and a costless source of income for the educational system with which the universities could then finance bursaries and scholarships to students (DfES, 2003a:80). Two caveats for educational equality should be added to the government's presentation of endowments. First, government presents endowments as a unidirectional relationship in which an individual donates with no desire, or claim, to receive. It must be questioned whether this would indeed be the reality or whether charitable giving to universities may be used to seek favours. Second, and related, there is likely to be an imbalance in the amounts of money able to be collected by different universities. Both activities generate problems for principles of educational equality, the former in terms

of equality of access primarily- as places may be 'reserved' for certain individuals- and the latter in terms of equality of treatment- as universities receive differential resources for provision. That the government wishes to thrust universities down the path of endowments without due consideration of such issues raises questions as to the extent to which educational equality is being risked to tackle lack of resources within the HE system.

5.2.2 *Student Choice*

The government has been keen to promote non-traditional HE both in terms of the content and the delivery of courses, and ideas in the 2003 White Paper include credit-based courses, distance and e-learning, and, especially, vocational degrees (DfES, 2003a:64). Foundation Degrees, introduced in September 2001, are seen as particularly important in simultaneously improving the vocational offer and expanding access. Indeed, the 2003 White Paper outlines that the government will skew funding to increase the number of students on Foundation Degrees and maintain those on Honours Degrees to reach the 50% target (DfES 2003a:61-2). The legislation also promotes a more fluid relationship between learning institutions, likely to further blur the boundary between Further Education (FE) and HE. For instance, FE colleges can apply for degree-awarding powers if they display a good record of running degree courses validated by other universities and from 2004-5 it will no longer be necessary to have research degree awarding powers to be a university (Theisens, 2003).

Following on from this point, a key issue historically with vocational learning in the UK has been a credibility problem amongst both employers and students. A difficult

set of potential tensions for educational equality arise from this. Although there is no necessary contradiction between difference and equality (Lister, 2003), in practical terms this equality is likely to be determined by the 'educational currency' given by students and employers to non-traditional qualifications. Government has approached this problem of credibility by engaging employers themselves in the design of courses and qualifications (DfES, 2003a) and by enabling FE colleges and institutions not having powers to award research degrees to apply for university status (Bekhradnia, 2003). It is unclear how successful these moves have been and some critics are cautious that additional places on Foundation Degrees will be matched by student demand (Bekhradnia, 2003). In addition, involving employers to create vocational qualifications may help in adding credibility to the vocational offer and in better aligning the offer to the skill needs of the local economy. In doing so, however, it may restrict the breadth of the local offer to the local skills gaps and therefore impact on equality of treatment around the country.

Finally, some universities have said that they plan to cut the number of places to domestic undergraduates and to expand undergraduate places for international students. The government, whilst stating that it wishes to see UK universities attracting more non-EU undergraduates (DfES, 2003a:65), is yet to respond to such changes. International students pay fees several times larger than home students and are therefore an attractive population group for UK universities. Two considerations stem from shifting in this direction. First, this is likely to make it more difficult for UK students to gain places on their preferred course of study. Second, better-known universities may be better placed to attract international undergraduates and therefore gain additional resources.

5.2.3 *Quality*

The HE agenda in the UK has been dominated by the dual concerns of participation and financing. There is, however, an increased emphasis placed on issues relating to the quality of HE provision. First, the emphasis on expanding the vocational offer as an alternative of equal value to more traditional degrees has generated a political commitment that Foundation Degrees will be equally well resourced. Second, there is a tightening of the way in which resources will flow to universities on the basis of the research in which they are engaged. There is a stress on having fewer research institutions but these should be of ‘world class’ quality (DfES, 2003a:26).

The 2003 White Paper, however, also addresses teaching quality and sets out its ideas on how teaching universities are to represent an equivalent offer to top rated research universities (DfES, 2003a:50). The best teaching departments will be made Centres of excellence and given £1/2 million each year for five years to spread their pedagogical practices to ensure that teaching institutions are not deemed a second tier of provision behind research institutions (DfES, 2003a: 47). The clearer separation of universities into teaching and research centres, and the subsequent flows of money to the respective institutions, may be more of an issue for equality of treatment than the government presents in the White Paper. This may occur both in terms of differential resources flowing into different universities and in relation to the value attached to the institution attended.

6 *Conclusions*

The paper has analysed rhetoric and policy in educational equality in HE in Spain and the UK during the period 1996-2004. The paper adds to existing literature in two ways. First, it has conceptually developed and operationalised four principles of educational equality, building on work by Grisay (1984) and has analysed variations in relation to these principles. Second, whereas most literature on educational equality focuses on the analysis of only one principle of educational equality, usually equality of access, this paper has used a composite of principles of educational equality to analyse rhetoric and policy, providing a more nuanced view of developments in this area.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings of the paper. The paper firstly explored how the Spanish People's Party and the UK Labour party had defined their policies in relation to HE and educational equality in the period 1996-2004. We have seen that both parties gave prominence to HE issues in this period, although in different ways. The British Labour Party made education the most important policy area in its 1997 electoral campaign and also put education debates at the core of its 2001 campaign. The PP gave a similarly high profile to HE in its 1996 and 2000 campaigns. Whilst both parties argued that they championed equality in relation to HE, they gave different weights to the different principles of educational equality reviewed in this paper. Whereas Labour was much more concerned with expanding and widening the HE system (natural equality and equality of access), the PP focussed

on equality of access and equality of treatment instead, putting quality and choice at the centre of its HE policy. Neither of the parties referred explicitly to the most radical conception of educational equality, equality of achievement.

A second question of the paper concerned the extent to which there was mismatch between rhetoric and policy. The commitment of the two parties to these different notions of equality has been broadly translated to the nature of their policies. However, it can also be argued that the reforms in the HE systems have been less radical than anticipated from the manifestos. Both parties have done ‘something’ in the areas of equality that they highlighted as important in their manifestos but neither has put forward reforms that can be expected to radically transform equality in HE. Indeed, on occasions reforms have been introduced against the principles set out in manifestos and other policies set out to achieve these principles.

In the UK, Labour has articulated a series of policy measures- including AimHigher, Foundation Degrees and Access Agreements- to expand and widen participation in HE, but it has also introduced complex student loans and variable top-up fees, the latter contrary to its electoral promises. Although these changes have been designed to minimise effects on natural equality and equality of access and have been defended by the government as ‘socially just’ because they shift the burden of contributions towards the direct beneficiaries of HE, the reforms have met with strong opposition from students and the general public. Whether these changes will enhance access to HE of less traditional groups remains to be seen, and will depend crucially on the performance of other policy measures. Most important perhaps is to review the nature of Access Agreements, to more effectively engage non-traditional groups with

accurate information on the benefits of HE, to successfully convey the ways in which student loans are structured to reduce the financial risk to students, and perhaps most radically, to tackle the inequalities earlier in the educational system.

In Spain, the PP introduced reforms to the ways students are selected into HE, nominally expanded student's ability to travel to choose their preferred course, and has tried to improve existing quality monitoring systems. Most of these reforms aimed, as anticipated in the party's electoral manifestos, to improve quality and choice, and to a lesser extent overall levels of access. The PP's reform of the students' selection system, providing universities with more discretionary powers to recruit students without establishing sufficiently sound accountability systems, raises doubts about the effects of this reform on natural equality and equality of access. A second major reform was the establishment of the 'distrito unico' to specifically increase equality of treatment. However, it is also unclear that the financing of these measure has been sufficient for it to be effective, once again suggesting that the policy adopted may not match the strength of the rhetoric that preceded it.

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