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**Abstract**

This paper examines the evolution of government policy in England on widening participation. It traces government policy on widening participation in relation to social class from Robbins (1963) through Dearing (1997) to 'The Future of Higher Education' (2003) and the passing of the Higher Education Act (2004). The paper concludes that there is a lack of participation in policy formulation by certain key groups, particularly those directly affected by widening participation policy. In addition, although the government's widening participation policy has generally progressed, it has done so within an overly bureaucratic system of control that fails to give higher education institutions the autonomy they need. There are also occasions when aspects of policy seem to be taking backward steps. Moreover, while the government adopts a rhetoric of strategic rationality, policy on widening participation often appears to be ad hoc, piecemeal and lacking a cohesive, evidence-based rationale. Finally, there are times when New Labour appears to lack the political will to implement radical policies. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)