

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Room at the top? How the Third Sector Do (and Don't) get Involved in Widening Participation Policy

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**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

**Abstract:** The past 20 years has seen an increase of not-for-profit and commercial organisations taking an interest in widening participation as part of their business models or social missions. Several take an interest in widening participation policy and have formed coalitions, produced research and lobbied ministers on issues including HE funding and admissions. Drawing on interviews with those working in third sector organisations and with policy experts, this paper outlines an environment in which access to limited policy influence is dominated by a select few third sector organisations who focus on “shaping the narrative”. It explores how these organisations have build up credibility through tightly connected and often exclusive networks and through participating in a ‘politics of expertise’ that has positioned them as “useful” to government. As some organisations struggle to maintain or challenge this position, this paper also examines what this context may mean for widening participation policy in future.

**Paper:** There are currently over 40 registered charities in England with a mission focused on widening participation and/or social mobility through higher education. Several, such as the Sutton Trust or TASO (Transforming Actions and Student Outcomes in Higher Education), play significant roles within the sector as brokers, evaluators and funders. Others, although with a smaller reach, have been a core part of university outreach delivery and the coordination and delivery of the UniConnect programme (Squire, 2020). The past 20 years particularly has seen the growth of organisations focused solely on widening participation outreach, many specialising in access to selective institutions. These organisations have become an acknowledged part of how widening participation is ‘done’, including within policy, where their activities and research are often referenced as evidence or as good practice. Despite their growth and reach within widening participation, little is known about these organisations as policy actors or the extent of their influence within widening participation.

In recent years, researchers have examined the presence and positions of non-state actors in education policy. The development of quasi-markets has created opportunities for non-state actors, including private businesses, philanthropists and not-for-profit organisations, to participate in defining and addressing education policy ‘problems’ (Reckhow, 2016; Ball & Junemann, 2011). Many of these ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ travel through and are validated within policy networks, which act as ‘new sites of influence, decision making and policy action’ (Ball, 2008: 761). Although researchers have not looked specifically at policy networks involving non-state actors within widening participation, there is some overlap between organisations and individuals active in public

discussions about higher education and social mobility and those involved in broader, sometimes international, education policy networks. The conditions within widening participation and higher education policymaking, which have historically involved multiple sources in and outside government (Shattock, 2012), also suggest that there may be potential for third sector actors to be playing a role in widening participation policy formation and enactment. Through mapping the third sector organisations (TSOs) working in widening participation and their policy activity, my research explores this potential and the significance of the roles that they take on.

The findings presented here are drawn from 19 interviews with those working within TSOs and a wider group of 'policy experts'. Interviewees reflect a range of third sector organisations in terms of size and mission focus, and a range of positions of authority, including civil servants, CEOs, Trustees and operational staff. This research is based in an interpretive approach to policy analysis, combining 'expert' interviews (Bogner, Littig & Menz, 2009) with documentary analysis to explore the 'words and reasonings of communities or networks of policy actors' (Gale, 2007: 153).

Interviewees describe TSOs working in widening participation developing a range of strategies to gain access to and influence within widening participation policy. Most of these have involved using networks to position themselves as experts. They have tended to focus their efforts, not on public lobbying or consultations, but on gaining access to influential figures and developing an expert public profile. Several feel successful in doing so, feeling themselves "heard" by policy makers and confident in their reputation as "dynamic" and "useful" to government. In this context, success is not defined as specific policy change but an opportunity to be "shaping the narrative".

The policymaking environment described by interviewees is one of closely linked networks, frequently based on prior personal and professional relationships. Success within this environment is based on developing credibility as 'a practical achievement rooted in the ability to coordinate specific social ties and relations' (Medvetz, 2012:139). In this achievement, one organisation stands out, often spoken of by interviewees as the model of policy influence – the Sutton Trust. The Trust and the example it has set, both in how it has developed its influence and the narratives it has promoted around fair access and 'evidence' for policymaking, dominate the field. Even individuals and organisations who hold reservations around these narratives are reluctant to criticise or challenge the Trust's position, arguing that it is necessary to "play to the premise" to participate in policymaking. Some TSOs have begun to concentrate their policy efforts more on enactment, aiming to change attitudes or behaviours at an organisational level, rather than attempting to influence national policy. For organisations who are aiming to create more 'room at the top', challenging the hierarchies in their own policy work appears a distant prospect, raising questions about who can or should be "shaping the narrative" when it comes to the future of widening participation.

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