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Who Widens Participation?

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Abstract: The enactment of widening participation policy in the UK takes place across a diverse range of institutions, involving a multitude of different people. As practitioners, they are involved in translating policy into practice, drawing on their personal and employment experiences to inform how they navigate tensions within and between national and organisational level policies. In this paper we present data from a national survey of WP practitioners, working for a range of HE providers, third sector organisations and collaborative outreach partnerships. This survey addresses the under-researched area of widening participation practitioners' positions and subjectivities, which are key to policy enactment (Ball, Braun & Maguire, 2012). It shows the range of organisations, roles and backgrounds of practitioners within the sector and, through examining how practitioners describe their roles and how they interpret their personal and organisational motivations, this paper will provide a unique analysis of the relationships between policy and practice.

Paper: English widening participation (WP) policy requires all higher education providers to have policies to address access and success. Additionally, it has involved large scale nationally funded interventions such as the current Uni Connect programme (OFS, 2019). Policies to support access and success are also present in secondary schools, such as the adoption of the 'Gatsby benchmarks' for careers education. Furthermore, employers are increasingly actively considering diversity in their workforce. The success of these policies is often assessed in reference to national and institutional targets but organisations have a degree of freedom in determining local targets and in translating policy objectives into contextualised practices that serve their own recruitment needs. This involves the complex and 'creative processes of interpretation and recontextualisation' (Ball, Braun & Maguire, 2012: 3) conceptualised as policy 'enactment' which, rather than the more linear conceptualisation of 'implementation', allows examination of the different ways in which organisations and the individuals within them attempt to realise policy. Research examining enactment in schools articulates that enactment involves 'multiple subjectivities and positions that will shape how policies are understood' (Maguire, Braun & Ball, 2015: 487), highlighting the importance of the positions of those enacting policies.

The enactment of widening participation presents many tensions. At a national level, policies attempt to navigate a tension between the needs of individuals and the economy, trying to satisfy sometimes competing economic and social justice goals. At an organisational level, there are tensions between organisational survival and mission, particularly in a marketised environment. For higher education providers and their partner organisations, there can be a tension between widening participation for their institution and the most suitable outcome for an individual young person. How practitioners interpret and navigate these tensions, in the context of complex and shifting power relations, shapes how policy is enacted. This is particularly relevant considering the rapid changes in outreach practices in the context of Covid-19.

Within widening participation policy, enactment and those enacting policy have rarely been a focus for research. Where research exists, it has tended to focus on senior leaders (e.g. Harrison, Waller & Last, 2015), though there has been a recent move towards examining the roles, experiences and subjectivities of practitioners. This has highlighted that how practitioners orient themselves in relation to the interests of their institutions and the individuals they work with has implications for practice and for those targeted by widening participation activity (Rainford, 2021a). Existing research has largely focused on individuals within higher education providers and not the varied other contexts in which widening participation work is done. Schools and Further Education Colleges, beyond focusing on attainment, develop and deliver interventions to support education progression. Private and third sector organisations design and deliver outreach activity, often in collaboration with education providers and the state, and offer services in the form of technological platforms and evaluation and strategy consultancy. There are also many practitioners working in 'partnership' roles, employed by one institution but working towards objectives shared across several organisations.

Method

The findings presented here are based on survey responses of widening participation practitioners from a range of higher education providers, FE colleges, Uni Connect consortia, third sector organisations, local authorities and private companies. Participants were invited to complete the survey if part of their role involved supporting people to access higher education. The survey was distributed in summer 2021 via professional networks, sector mailing lists and through the personal and professional networks of the researchers. Whilst not a fully representative sample, this is the most comprehensive data on who works in the sector to date.

Summary findings

Respondents were asked about their current roles, previous professional experience and qualifications. Initial examination of responses reveals the diversity of roles and tasks that are involved in widening participation and the diversity of practitioners' professional and educational experiences. There were frequent references to collaboration as a core part of how widening participation is done, indicating some of the complexity of the power relations and multiple priorities that practitioners are working with. Respondents were also asked about their own motivations and the motivations of their institution in undertaking widening participation work. Their responses, citing national policy and institutional and individual imperatives, highlight some of the tensions in widening participation work and even some cynicism about institutional motivations. 'Raising aspirations' also came up frequently as a response to both motivations and in describing widening

participation work, indicating how pervasive this term is despite long-standing critiques about its conceptual simplicity and deficit approach (Harrison & Rainford, 2020; Rainford, 2021b).

References: Ball, S. J., Maguire, M. and Braun, A. (2012). *How Schools Do Policy: Policy Enactment in Secondary Schools.* Abingdon: Routledge.

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