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The 'business of WP' of WP: Reconciling values in practice

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

The enactment of widening participation policy is complex, multi-layered and occurs in many different settings from higher education providers to third sector organisations. Previous policy enactment research has tended to focus on organisational or national policy contexts, rather than on the practitioners operating within them. However, the interpretations of individuals and the values that they bring to their work (Sayer, 2011) are a crucial aspect of policy enactment and key to understanding the 'business as usual' of widening participation work, which can vary widely in how it is framed and understood. Drawing on data from in-depth interviews and a large scale survey with practitioners in different settings this paper seeks to explore the 'Business of WP' from the perspective of those at the coal face of policy enactment and the tensions between what they are required to do and what they think they should do.

Full paper

'Widening participation' as a term, has been used interchangeably as both an area of policy and a practice. Frequently it is discussed in research and policy as something that is 'done', most often by universities but also by a host of other organisations and institutions. However, this work requires individuals to translate often vague policy aims into practical work. These practitioners work in a range

of settings and with a range of personal and professional experiences that they bring to their work.

The enactment of policy, as demonstrated by Maguire, Braun & Ball (2014) in school settings, can be messy and complex. In the enactment of widening participation policy, there are a multitude of individuals and professional settings in which policy is translated. This takes place on multiple levels from the high-level national policymaking spaces to more localised institutional and operational levels (McCaig, Rainford and Squire, 2022). Whilst each level of policy making informs the lower levels, this is a process involving interpretation and translation of policy in order to enact it. This process being shaped by the needs of institutions but also by the values and understandings of individuals involved.

This paper focuses upon the 'last mile' of widening participation policy enactment. That is work done on the ground to operationalise this policy into practice. This takes place primarily in Higher Education Providers (HEPs), including FE colleges and newer private providers in addition to the pre and post 1992 universities more commonly associated with widening participation work. Furthermore, this policy is also enacted in a complex ecosystem involving Higher Education Providers, formal and informal local partnerships, and Third Sector Organisations (TSOs) operating often both as collaborators and competitors.

Despite the key role people play in policy enactment, what we know about the people who deliver this important work at an operational level is limited. This is an area with limited empirical investigation (Wilkins and Burke, 2014; Rainford, 2019; Squire, 2022; Benson-Egglenton, 2022). Furthermore, as the regulator for Access and Participation work, the Office for Students does not collect any systematic data about who, or how many people are employed in this work. With over 400 registered providers, 29 Uni Connect partnerships (Office for Students, 2022), and 40+ third sector or private organisations (Squire, 2022) it is a significant workforce. This matters as to understand because as Sayer (2011) argues, it is important to understand how individuals' values are reconciled with the work they do.

As identified previously, research examining the experiences and

values of WP practitioners has been scant. Our own previous research on practitioner within HEPs (Rainford, 2019) and TSOs (Squire, 2022) has focused on the depth experiences of practitioners through in-depth semi-structured interviews. These highlighted how practitioners navigate tensions between organisational or institutional values, personal values and the structural and perceived constraints of their roles. To add wider perspectives on these issues, this paper also draws on a 2021 survey of WP practitioners, involving 451 respondents, which examined the personal and professional characteristics, motivations and roles of those working in WP. 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.

This paper will discuss and explore some of the themes and issues spanning both data sets. Within this data there are a range of (sometimes contradictory) positions and opinions present in how practitioners conceptualise widening participation work and their role within in it. We will use this data to explore how professed values and values in use may align, or in some cases struggle to align. In doing so, we foreground the tensions in values in two ways. Firstly, the tensions between practitioners and institutional understandings of what the goals of this types of work should be. Secondly, and drawing back on the wider 'business' of WP, tensions between social justice and economic narratives.

It is evident from this data that practice does not exist in a vacuum and that, as Sayer argues, values are 'discursively and culturally mediated' (Sayer, 2011:27). It is therefore, we argue, imperative to think about how societal, institutional and individual's values are juxtaposed if we are to understand the complexity of the 'business of WP'.

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