

32 Context Matters: How Human and Material Forces Shape Approaches to Targeting in WP

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Inequalities in who accesses and succeeds in English higher education persist. A key feature of policy aimed at 'widening participation' to HE has been the idea that targeting should be used to reach the most in need, under-represented groups. Through interviews with nineteen WP practitioners working across England, this research explores how national policy is translated into local settings when it comes to targeting. With a focus on professional contexts (the values, beliefs, and experiences of WP practitioners) and material contexts (resources, budget, staffing), it examines the degree to which variations in practice can be explained by context. Importantly, it also sheds light on how context shapes the prioritisation of target groups and facilitates or impedes individual young people taking part in these activities.

Full paper

There remain stubborn inequalities in who enters and thrives in the English HE sector. For over two decades, government policy and regulation have directed HE institutions to deliver measures to widen participation and to target these efforts at students from under-represented groups. Practitioners working in discrete departments within universities which deliver WP outreach activities have been subject to shifting messages about targeting, with the conception of 'WP target groups' reconfiguring over time. Understanding how targeting policy is translated into practice within WP departments matters, because these decisions ultimately determine who is included, and who is excluded, from participating in potentially life-changing initiatives.

Taking a view of policy as enacted through a process of struggle, mediation and recontextualization involving a range of policy actors (Maguire et al., 2015; Ozga, 2000), this research explored the extent to which variations in targeting approaches are a product of the contextually-contingent nature of WP policy enactment. While a small body of research has examined the ways that English HEIs translate national WP policy into their local settings, this has tended to draw on institutional documents (McCaig, 2015; McCaig & Adnett, 2009) and interviews with university leaders and senior management (Butcher et al., 2012; Greenbank, 2006, 2007). Rarely have approaches to policy enactment been explored from the perspective of practitioners; policy actors situated 'on the ground' of WP (McCaig et al., 2022; Rainford, 2016, 2021).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nineteen WP practitioners working in HEIs across England, featuring a diverse sample of regions, institution types, and job roles. Transcripts were thematically analysed, guided by a framework of four contextual dimensions developed by Braun, Ball, Maguire, and Hoskins (2011) in theorising policy enactments within secondary schools. I focus here on two of the dimensions: professional and material (see Benson-Egglenton (2022) for a discussion of situated and external contexts).

The shaping force of the professional contexts that WP practitioners bring to their roles – their values, identities, and experiences - varied by the size of the WP team and its resources, the nature of their position within it, and their skills and knowledge related to targeting – but were always present. Practitioners were very rarely agency-less implementers of targeting policy; while heads and deputy heads of departments had more obvious roles in developing official strategies, those in non-management roles described ways that they nudged the execution of targeting to better fit with their personal ethics and beliefs about the aims of WP and which young people are most in need, as well as being informed by earlier experiences of delivering programmes. While this context was more subtle, there were multiple examples of practitioners shaping the prioritisation of different target groups, such as pushing for students outside of London to be eligible for programmes or making particular efforts to include more boys.

The material contexts of a WP department – its available budget, staffing and resources – reflected the institution's market position and student intake. Less diverse, high-tariff universities generally had much larger teams which included dedicated evaluation staff, who appeared to have a significant role in shaping the enactment of WP targeting policy, providing the 'interpretations of interpretations' that steer a team's approach. For some smaller WP departments, time and cost implications drove a reliance on postcode measures and school-level data. For all kinds of institutions, the quality of data available to carry out targeting policies – in particular the high degree of self-reporting for individualised measures – was a significant constraint. In some cases, this appeared to have consequences for the selection of target groups, as practitioners were dissuaded from data that was challenging to verify such as FSM and parental occupation, and more inclined to use 'quantifiable' postcode metrics. In addition, the level of demand for places on a WP programme relative to available resources also shaped targeting by necessitating a more or less strict approach. Effectively, those applying to popular programmes at high-status institutions are often required to meet a much greater number of WP criteria to be successful; this is likely to exclude young people who experience real disadvantage, but who don't tick every box.

While the interlinked contexts of an institution's position within the marketized HE sector, makeup of its student intake, and nature of its relationship with the regulator were found to be the primary forces shaping WP policy enactment, findings in relation to professional and material contexts suggest that a number of other factors inflect the interpretation of targeting and that these contextualised interpretations have clear implications for the target groups that are taken forward.

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