

111 “You have to play the game”. Discomfort and compromise in third sector organisations’ strategic decision making to influence widening participation policy.

Ruth Squire

Leeds Trinity University, Leeds, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

In a climate of ‘evidence-based policy’ in education, researchers have debated at length the moral and practical dilemmas of engaging with education policy. However, academic researchers are not the only ‘experts’ called upon in the policy process and, in the field of widening participation in the UK, third sector organisations are increasingly regular contributors to public and private policy discussions. Publicly, many of these organisations conform to dominant narratives about the policy problem, its solutions and how we know ‘what works?’ but, in less public fora, they acknowledge a discomfort and disconnect between the positive image of TSOs as experts and moral authorities and the challenges actually faced by charities in pursuing their social missions. Based on interviews with those working in charities and policy experts, this paper explores what it means to ‘play the game’ as an organisation trying to influence widening participation policy.

Full paper

Widening participation (WP), as the process of broadening higher education participation to under-represented groups, is a global concern for expanding economies and has been part of UK Higher Education policy and practice for several decades. The modern establishment of WP as a policy concern has its origins in the 1997 Dearing Report, which highlighted the roles of government and universities in challenging issues of under-representation within HE. The report, and the policies that followed, were intended to align with the newly-elected New Labour government’s turn towards a more technocratic era of policymaking (Nutley et al., 2019) where ‘evidence’ would take the ideology out of decision-making. This focus on evidence and the expertise behind it has had a lasting impact on widening participation, including who is considered a valid participation in WP policymaking.

Expertise is a core element of policy (Colebatch, 2002) and, in education policy contexts, where the ‘what works’ focus dominates, there have been a proliferation of ‘ideas’ organisations such as think tanks and ‘public policy labs’, as well as demand for organisations and individuals who can act as policy ‘experts’ (Ball & Exley, 2010). The ‘third sector’ particularly has been seen as a strong site for the generation of policy ideas due to its public image as ‘non-political or pre-political’ (Rose, 1999:188) and in some ways ‘better’ than public or private sector alternatives, whether ethically or in terms of structures that make it more effective at tackling social issues (Macmillan, 2015). Within widening participation, there has been a proliferation of organisations of this type since 1997 (Squire, 2022). Most focus on delivery of WP activity, but there is also an established practice of acting as ‘ideas organisations’ or experts in WP policy. The largest organisation of this type, the Sutton Trust, has published research that is frequently cited as the basis for policy action, and acts as Secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on social mobility. For many of these organisations, being part of the policy space is a core part of their mission and seen as essential to their organisational survival.

Who is accepted as an ‘expert’ within policy is significantly shaped by networks, relationships and values (Stevens, 2021) and it is common for individuals and organisations to engage in ‘credibility work’ (Geiger, 2021) to advance their positions. This credibility work can involve multiple and complex personal tensions and negotiation of values. Some researchers have noted a tendency to ‘self-censor’ amongst chosen ‘experts’ (Stevens, 2021), as they negotiate an understanding that policymaking ‘tends to favour the politically feasible over the technically possible’ (Monaghan et. al. 2018: 436). How individuals and organisations develop their credibility and navigate these tensions is an important factor in understanding how expertise is used within policy but has not been explored within widening participation and only to a limited extent within third sector contexts.

This paper draws on 19 interviews with those working within TSOs and a wider group of 'policy experts', undertaken as part of my PhD thesis, to explore how they are negotiating the discomfort of, in their words, 'playing to the premise' in policy work. Interviewees reflected 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 was 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).

These interviews revealed less public concerns about dominant narratives in widening participation, a preoccupation with quantitative 'evidence' under the 'what works' banner, a lack of diversity in the sector, and the dominance of a few voices on policy. They also revealed a focus on relationships in their policy work and highlighted the importance of networks where policy conversations take place, often outside formal structures of government engagement with 'experts'. There were varying levels of comfort for interviewees with the compromises that they felt policy work entailed and varying levels of confidence in its effectiveness in supporting their social mission. Some were seeking alternative routes to influence, particularly in response to a government that is 'not listening'. Their reflections on policy influence offer an interesting exploration of what 'playing the game' of policy can mean at an individual and sector level and what it means to be a credible policy expert. They offer an insight into higher education policy spaces and the potential for expertise to influence policy.

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