

# Effective enactment of widening participation policy: Where next?

Jon Rainford, The Open University  
email: j.rainford@open.ac.uk | twitter: @jonrainford

Research into widening participation has often centered on examinations of policy (e.g. McCaig, 2015; McCaig and Adnett, 2009), senior decision making staff (e.g. Harrison and Waller, 2018; Jones, 2017) or on students themselves (e.g. Higham and Gagnon, 2017). A group that has been notable by their absence in the literature is the practitioners who carry out pre-entry widening participation interventions. My recently completed doctoral research explored both what is said in policy and what is done in practice capturing detailed narratives surrounding the challenges faced by this group in enacting widening participation policy as summarised on the comic panels.

### EQUAL PRACTICES?

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WP PRACTICES IN PRE AND POST-92 HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

DUE TO POLICY DIFFERENCES, THE FOCUS WAS ONLY ON ENGLAND

A PRE-92 AND POST-92 INSTITUTION FROM EACH CITY WAS SELECTED

WHERE ARE THE INSTITUTIONS LOCATED?

Overton  
Norton  
Middleton  
Weston  
Riverton

### PHASE 1

THE STUDY SET OUT TO EXPLORE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN WIDENING PARTICIPATION POLICY AND PRACTICES ACROSS DIFFERENT TYPES OF INSTITUTIONS

THE 2016-17 ACCESS AGREEMENTS WERE ANALYSED TO IDENTIFY COMMON THEMES AND DIFFERENCES

### PHASE 2

THIRTEEN FEMALES  
THREE MALES  
THREE BAME

1 MONTH TO 17 YEARS IN WORKING IN WP

ALL DEGREE EDUCATED

WHO WAS INTERVIEWED?

EIGHT PRE-92 STAFF FROM OUTREACH TEAMS

EIGHT POST-92 STAFF FROM OUTREACH TEAMS

TWELVE OF THE PARTICIPANTS WORKED IN INSTITUTIONS FROM THE INITIAL SAMPLE AND FOUR FROM THE WIDER SECTOR

THE PRACTITIONERS WERE INTERVIEWED ABOUT THEIR WORK, CAREERS, UNDERSTANDINGS OF ASPIRATION AND TARGETING OF WP WORK

THE INTERVIEWS ALSO INCLUDED CREATIVE TASKS TO DISCUSS SOME OF THE THEMES ARISING FROM PHASE 1

JOHN RAINFORD, STAFFORDSHIRE UNIVERSITY  
JON.RAINFORD@RESEARCH-STAFFS.AC.UK  
TWITTER: @JONRAINFORD

### FINDINGS

WHERE PRACTITIONERS COME FROM AND THEIR PAST CAREERS OFTEN SHAPE THE WAY IN WHICH THEY THINK ABOUT AND THEIR UNDERSTANDINGS OF WP

PRACTITIONERS JUGGLE MANY ROLES

ASPECTS OF THEIR ROLES INCLUDED: PLANNING EVENTS, TEACHING, EVALUATION, RESEARCH, PRESENTING AT CONFERENCES, TRAINING AND MANAGING AMBASSADORS, MENTORING, PROVIDING CAREERS ADVICE, IN REACH WORK AND LOTS OF ADMINISTRATION

THE QUESTION OF 'RAISING ASPIRATIONS' WAS ONE OF MUCH DEBATE

MOST PRACTITIONERS FELT THAT YOUNG PEOPLE DIDN'T HAVE LOW ASPIRATIONS

HOWEVER THEY HIGHLIGHTED THE ABILITY TO REALISE ASPIRATIONS AS BEING A CHALLENGE ALONG WITH LOWER EXPECTATIONS AND HAVING A LACK OF AWARENESS ON FUTURE PATHWAYS OPEN TO THEM.

INSTITUTIONAL DIFFERENCES

POST 92  
POST 16 USUALLY SEEN AS RECRUITMENT  
WE ONLY HAVE A SMALL TEAM  
IF THEY GO TO UNI WE HAVE DONE OUR JOB

PRE 92  
WE ONLY WORK WITH THE BRIGHTEST AND BEST  
OUR GOAL IS TO GET THEM TO COME HERE OR ANOTHER RUSSELL GROUP

COMPETING DEMANDS  
WE NEED TO INTERACT WITH MORE STUDENTS  
WE NEED TO RECRUIT MORE STUDENTS  
I WANT TO BE A PLUMBER  
MY SCHOOL NEEDS....

THERE ARE LOTS OF CHALLENGES PRACTITIONERS FACE....

POLICY CHANGES  
RAISE ATTAINMENT  
DO MORE OUTREACH  
THE SPEED OF POLICY CHANGES WAS A CONCERN FOR MANY

TIME TO REFLECT  
WHILST MOST EVALUATED THEIR WORK, FEW HAD TIME TO PROPERLY REFLECT ON THIS EVALUATION

CAREERS KNOWLEDGE  
I DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT THESE JOBS....

This study highlighted a number of key challenges to effective enactment of policy. These included issues at both institutional and individual practitioner level. At an institutional level, ideological issues surrounding who and what university is for were combined with the increasing pressures of marketisation to shape local agendas. The gap between those writing policies and those enacting them was also a distinct issue. At the practitioner level, increasing pressures on workload, lack of rigorous training to support the complex roles they undertook and the mismatch between the needs of their target groups and the institution they were employed by were often highlighted as key issues.

The study resulted in a number of recommendations for policymakers, institutions and practitioners. In order to make these more accessible than the thesis itself, these were condensed into a research-informed comic (Vigurs, Jones, & Harris, 2016). This comic was designed to both inform and provoke discussion. Whilst this research has foregrounded some of the challenges, the comic is designed to continue the conversation by engaging all stakeholders working in higher education. Delegates are encouraged to consider the three questions to the right and to discuss these at the conference and on twitter.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### NATIONAL

REWARD INSTITUTIONS NOT ONLY FOR WIDENING ACCESS TO THEIR OWN INSTITUTION BUT ALSO THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO WIDENING ACCESS MORE GENERALLY

PROFESSIONALISE THE ROLE OF WIDENING PARTICIPATION PRACTITIONERS AND CREATE FORMAL TRAINING ROUTES THAT SUPPORT THE COMPLEX ROLES THEY CARRY OUT

ENSURE STUDENTS IN FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGE ARE BENEFITING FROM INTERVENTIONS IN THE SAME WAY AS SECONDARY SCHOOLS

DEVELOP A CONSISTENT NATIONAL PICTURE OF WHO WORKS IN PRE-ENTRY WIDENING PARTICIPATION AND WHERE THEY WORK

SET MORE NATIONALLY COMPARABLE TARGETS TO CREATE CONSISTENT APPROACHES THAT LIMIT "CREAM SKIMMING" IN ELITE INSTITUTIONS

#### INSTITUTIONAL

THINK ABOUT WAYS TO CHANGE THE INSTITUTION TO MEET THE NEEDS OF DIVERSE STUDENTS INSTEAD OF EXPECTING STUDENTS TO FIT IN

VALUE QUALITY OF INTERVENTIONS OVER QUANTITY OF INTERACTIONS

PLACE WIDENING PARTICIPATION TEAMS AT THE HEART OF THE INSTITUTION NOT ON THE PERIPHERY

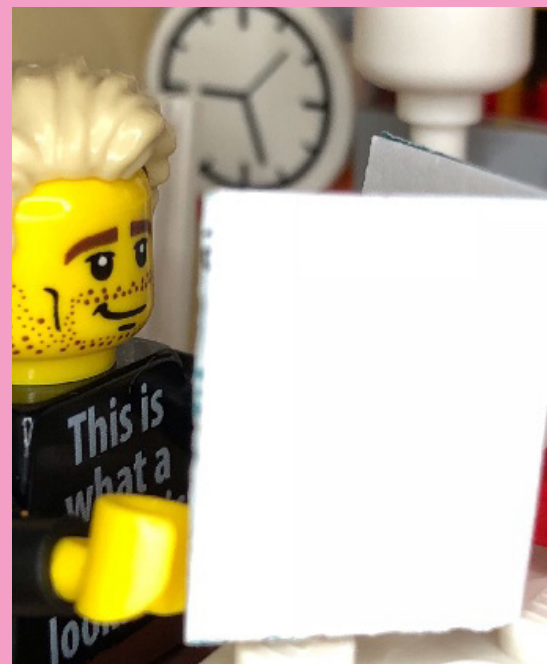
RESOURCE THIS AREA OF WORK EFFECTIVELY INCLUDING INVESTING TIME AND MONEY IN STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND VALUING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

#### PRACTITIONER

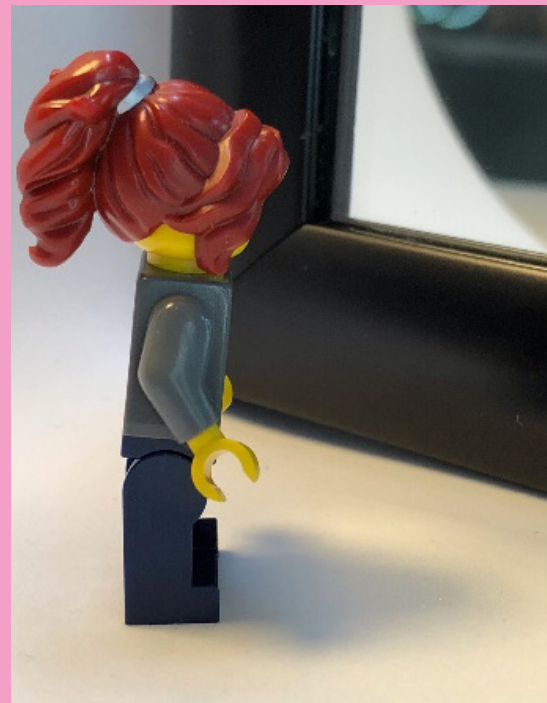
DEVELOP YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF INEQUALITY AND THE COMPLEXITY OF THE LIVES OF TARGET GROUPS OF STUDENTS

REFLECT, CHALLENGE AND RESIST IF WORK IS NOT IN THE INTERESTS OF THE INDIVIDUALS YOU ARE WORKING WITH

What more do we need to know?



What can we do as individuals?



What can we do collectively?



Share your thoughts on twitter

#WPwherenext

## References

Harrison, N., & Waller, R. (2018). Challenging discourses of aspiration: The role of expectations and attainment in access to higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(5), pp. 914-938. doi:doi:10.1002/berj.3475 Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/berj.3475>

Higham, L., & Gagnon, J. (2017). *White Working Class Males in British Higher Education: Pre and post-entry perspective*. Southampton: <https://www.sunoutreach.org/file/ReportWhiteBritishWorkingClassmalesresearch5March.pdf>

Jones, I. (2017). *Policy, memory and voice: Re-constructing narratives of widening participation in higher education in England*. University College London, Unpublished EdD thesis.

McCaig, C. (2015). The impact of the changing English higher education marketplace on widening participation and fair access: evidence from a discourse analysis of access agreements. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 17(1), pp. 5-22. doi:10.5456/WPLL.17.1.5

McCaig, C., & Adnett, N. (2009). English Universities, additional fee income and Access Agreements: Their impact on Widening Participation and fair access. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 57(1), pp. 18-36. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8527.2009.00428.x Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2009.00428.x>

Vigurs, K., Jones, S., & Harris, D. (2016). *Higher Fees, Higher Debts: Greater Expectations of Graduate Futures? – A Research-Informed Comic*, Stoke-on-Trent: Staffordshire University.