Five years of WPREU

Critical reflections on evaluation, policy and practice in widening participation and student success

Dr Julian Crockford, Dr Zoe Baker, Greg Brown, Dr Rita Hordósy, Simon Linskill & Miriam Miller
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Dr Julian Crockford

I have managed the Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit since May 2012, when it was launched. I oversee a range of short term and longitudinal research and evaluation projects focusing on the whole student journey, student success and progression, inclusive learning and teaching, and equality and diversity issues. My research interests are wide-ranging but focus primarily on i) how widening participation and student success policies are implemented at an institutional level and how this intersects with forms of experiential and tacit knowledge ii) issues of effective and meaningful evaluation and how ‘impact’ can be defined and understood in this context, and iii) the role of evaluation in HE policy discourse. I am currently working on a Doctorate in Education exploring the positioning of evaluation in policy and practical discourses around widening participation and fair access.

Dr Zoe Baker

I joined WPREU in 2017 as a Researcher and Student Engagement Practitioner on the ‘Equivalent Qualifications’ project. I graduated with a BA (Hons) in Education Studies and Sociology from Sheffield Hallam University in 2012 before being awarded an MA in Educational Research at The University of Sheffield in 2013. Following this, I completed my ESRC funded PhD at the University of Sheffield in 2017. My undergraduate, MA and PhD research have all focused on widening participation, paying particular attention to student choice, decision-making and transitions. My research interests more broadly, whilst all situated within widening participation, include educational inequalities, the sociology of education, policy and youth studies.

Greg Brown

I graduated with a BA (Hons) in Politics and Social Policy from The University of Stirling in June 2015, before being awarded an MA in Social and Public Policy at The University of Leeds in December 2016. I started as a researcher and evaluator with WPREU at the University of Sheffield in December 2016. I take a full student lifecycle approach to widening participation, and have a broad interest in all aspects of WP research and evaluation: from developing evaluative methodologies and frameworks for the WP context, to better incorporating research and theory into policy and practice. I am particularly interested in theory-driven and realist approaches to programme evaluation, as is evidenced in this book. I am currently working on a range of projects: including an evaluation of a pre-16 outreach programme; evaluations of the University’s financial support provision; and projects exploring differential academic experience and engagement across and between student groups.
Dr Rita Hordósy

I started working as a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Sheffield in 2013 to lead on a longitudinal project exploring the experiences of a generation of undergraduate students. After graduating with an MA in Sociology in 2009 at the Eötvös Loránd University in Hungary I worked at the Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development as a research assistant on several research projects dealing with vocational education. I conducted my doctoral research in education at the University of Birmingham between 2010 and 2013, comparing national information systems across Europe that shed light on school leavers’ and graduates’ path after compulsory education. More generally, my interests concern widening participation to higher education, social justice issues of education, and comparing educational phenomena between national settings.

Miriam Miller

I graduated as a mature student in 2014, with a BA in Philosophy from the University of Sheffield. After graduation, I worked for a year at Sheffield Students Union, as the elected Women’s Officer. When I finished my term as Women’s Officer, I worked as a research associate in WPREU for a year, focussing on the ethnicity attainment gap and the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic students in HE. I started as a researcher and evaluator in WPREU permanently in December 2016. Currently I am working on two collaborative projects with the Equality Challenge Unit. One is focussed on increasing the proportion of BME students in the Arts and Humanities faculty, and one is focussed on exploring how students experience our support services for people with Specific Learning Difficulties, mental ill-health and/or autism spectrum conditions.

Simon Linskill

Following completion of a degree in Social and Political Studies at the University, I joined the University as a staff member in 2005, first working for Student Recruitment, Admissions and Marketing, followed by a number of years in the Student Services Information Desk before joining WPREU in 2015. In addition to the day to day administration of the unit, I am also responsible for publishing the bulletin, organising events and publications and processing outreach evaluation data.
Other contributors

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Photography

Dr Rita Hordósy and Simon Linskill
Featuring street art by local Sheffield artists coLor and Phlegm

Design

Freyja Gillard
## Abbreviations & definitions

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<td>BME</td>
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<td>OFFA</td>
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<td>POLAR</td>
<td>Participation of Local Areas</td>
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<td>RCT</td>
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<td>University and Colleges Admissions Service</td>
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<td>Vocational Education and Training</td>
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<td>WP</td>
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Foreword

Rae Tooth, Head of Strategy and Change - The Office For Fair Access

I’m always happy to join a good party, and on that front WPREU colleagues rarely disappoint. So when I was asked to join in the 5th anniversary celebration of the unit I was quick to say yes!

As I write this, the Office for Fair Access is entering its final fortnight. I have been doing a lot of reflecting on how the sector has changed since our inception and the significant impact a relatively small, but committed community of people have had on very real outcomes for disadvantaged people.

WPREU was established prior to the development of OFFA’s Evidence and Effective Practice strategy, and as a forerunner in this area, was able to support and engage with OFFA in our early stages of this work and significantly contribute to the sector’s understanding of WP and the development of national policy.

One of OFFA’s key aims has been to increase the sector’s focus on evidence-led practice by:

• growing the depth, quality and breadth of shared knowledge in the sector
• ensuring that evaluation, research and analysis inform improvements in understanding, outcomes and practice
• identifying and disseminating effective practice across all of these areas.

This book sets out how one institution has approached the challenges of this work. The chapters below provide robust insights into a range of issues relating to learner identities, for example, Miriam and Greg’s insightful writing on gender, as well as thorough explorations of the application and robustness of the various research and evaluation methodologies that can be used to assess WP practice in different contexts – all issues that will remain pertinent for some time.

Perhaps what I have found most inspiring about WPREU’s work to date has been their ability to walk within and between both academic and practitioner communities, creating and occupying unique spaces where all kinds of wisdoms are valued and no viewpoint should be considered beyond question. This generous and courageous way of working has meant that over its first five years WPREU has been able to transform The University of Sheffield’s WP practice, and be transformed itself, by developing a better understanding of how academic enquiry can best serve the community with which it is concerned.

There is no doubt that the HE sector is about to embark on a period of significant change with the creation of the Office for Students. However, it is clear that our focus on ensuring that where you come from doesn’t negatively impact on where you go, will remain. Access and Participation will be woven through the work of the OfS, and so also, the work of the sector. This compendium provides a strong foundation from which to continue this work with new vigour and focus.

It also strikes me that it is a bloody good excuse for a party.

Cheers!
Introduction

WPREU: The first five years

Dr Julian Crockford

In May 2012, the University of Sheffield set up a dedicated unit to undertake research and evaluation into the impact of its widening participation activities. In this, it successfully anticipated increasing policy pressure on higher education institutions to evidence the impact of money spent on fair access. Accordingly, a small team of 2.5 staff set about the work of telling the University 'what works' in its efforts to support fair access to its degree programmes.

At the time of writing (December 2017) the Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit has more than doubled in size with 6 members of staff, including 2 post-doctoral researchers and 2 full-time researcher-evaluators. This expansion reflects both the intensification of the policy pressure to evaluate the large sums of money spent by the sector on widening participation interventions (£883.5 million according to the most recent report by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA 2017)) and the increasing breadth of 'widening participation' practice itself, which in recent years has grown to encompass student success, inclusive learning and teaching, degree outcome differentials, and student progression into careers or postgraduate study (Basit and Tomlinson 2012; Bathmaker et al. 2016; Burke 2012; David 2010; Haggis 2006; Thomas and Quinn 2007).

WPREU is, however, but one component in a large and complex mechanism delivering the University of Sheffield’s social mobility and equality and diversity agenda. The University’s resources include a large and expert central team leading the University’s outreach activities, with specialist outreach staff embedded in each faculty, a range of equality and diversity fora, a dedicated student transition and support service, student financial support provision, the Disability and Dyslexia Student Support service, the 301 Student Skills and Development Centre, and a wide range of other innovations and interventions delivered at departmental, faculty and institution levels.

In one crucial respect, however, WPREU is different from these other components, since its task is not to actively ‘change the facts on the ground’, but to support those who are directly engaged in widening participation, social mobility, equality and diversity or student support work by helping them determine what ‘works best’ and how the University’s investments in this area can be leveraged to maximum effect.

Of course, despite recent progress across the sector, significant work remains to be done. As such, this book, which marks five years since the launch of WPREU, represents less an attempt to reach a definitive conclusion than a chance to pause and take stock of the progress we have made so far in understanding how best to recruit and support under-represented and disadvantaged students into, through and out of higher education. It is also an opportunity to reflect on how the sector and policy environment has changed over the last five years, and a useful vantage point from which to think about potential future directions. As such, the narrative that unfolds over the following pages is, of necessity, fragmentary and partial, and sketches a situation very much ‘in progress’. We hope, nonetheless, that it will serve as a useful waymark of the progress made by the University of Sheffield, and the HE sector as a whole, so far.
References


Part 1.

Widening Participation to Higher Education: issues of access
In the first section of the book, we focus on issues around fair access to HE:

- **James Busson**, Head of Outreach and Widening Participation at Sheffield, begins by outlining the approach of this institution to widening participation outreach.

- **Julian Crockford** provides a brief overview of the ways in which English universities have attempted to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to access to higher education (1.1).

We then go on to explore the experience and situation of different ‘WP’ student cohorts:

- **Miriam Miller** explores how HE representation, progression and outcomes play out for students of different ethnicities (1.2) and with disabilities (1.3).

- Miriam and **Greg Brown** examine the impact of gender generally and the specific intersection of gender, class and ethnicity in contemporary HE policy (1.4).

- **Zoe Baker** goes on to discuss the situation of looked after children (1.5) and **Julie Askew**, Outreach Manager for Post-16 programmes, describes the University of Sheffield’s approach to supporting young people from a care background.

- Julian and Miriam reflect on the situation of mature students in higher education and summarise the outcomes of research carried out by the University’s Department for Lifelong Learning, tracking mature students through Foundation Programmes (1.6).

- Zoe and Greg examines the experience of students with ‘equivalent’ qualifications entering HE (1.7).

To conclude, Miriam unpicks the close relationship between widening participation and equality and diversity in HE (1.8) and **Rachel van Duyvenbode**, Faculty Director of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Arts and Humanities, provides an overview of the Sheffield SEED programme, which enables university staff to focus on equality, diversity, inclusion and social justice in higher education.
Comment

WP at the University of Sheffield

James Busson, Head of Outreach and Widening Participation

Outreach and Widening Participation is deeply embedded across the University of Sheffield, from our founding principles back in 1904 to ‘bring the highest education within the reach of the child of the working man’ to our sector leading work today. We adopt a whole student lifecycle approach to widening participation and aim to address the challenges that students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds continue to face when engaging with Higher Education.

Our approach to pre-entry work is one that ensures that disadvantaged pupils and mature learners from right across the city and wider Yorkshire region have access to information, advice and guidance to help them make an informed decision about their future and Higher Education. By working with those who are ‘most able, but least likely’ to access university, we strive to widen participation specifically to the University of Sheffield, as well as to Higher Education in general.

Working from primary school through to Post-16 and beyond, we aim to raise aspirations and build confidence in the learners we work with, showing them they can achieve anything if they work hard and apply themselves.

As you’ll see spread over the pages of this report, our activities are extremely varied ranging from single ‘hands on’ tasters of different subjects and university life, through to our flagship sustained engagement programmes which provide pupils with ongoing support and a pathway to admission at the University of Sheffield.

Engagement with teachers, parents and guardians is vital to our work, as well as our own University of Sheffield staff and students who provide positive role models for those young people and adults beginning their journey to Higher Education.

I do hope this book gives you an insight into our current research and the impact of our wide range of Widening Participation initiatives right across the University.
1.1.

Widening Participation to Higher Education

Dr Julian Crockford

Since at least the formulation of the Robbin’s Principle in 1963 (which famously argued that University places ‘should be available to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment’) and the subsequent expansion of the Higher Education sector (David 2010; Scott 2016), the relationship between access to higher education and its funding has been complex (Mountford-Zimdars and Sabbagh 2013; Whitty et al. 2015). Arguably, this tension entered a contemporary phase with the 1997 Dearing Report and the first introduction of English tuition fees in 1998, the latter marking the beginning of the shift of study costs from state to student. This process heightened with the trebling of annual tuition fees to a maximum of £3000 in 2006 and £9000 in 2012. On both occasions, these increases were accompanied by a sharpened policy focus on fair and equitable access to Higher Education and calls for universities to increase their efforts to address inequalities in progression to degree level study.

Approaches to widening participation

In response, HEIs have developed and implemented a range of interventions and activities intended to address disparities in representation and the poor rates of progression of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Such interventions are often driven by widespread concerns about the under-representation of particular groups of students¹ (for example, those from areas with historically low rates of HE participation) or that social and/or economic disadvantage prevents some student groups from accessing Higher Education and its associated life advantages. Mainstream institutional responses to these concerns have coalesced in recent years into a well-established catalogue of HEI-delivered outreach interventions, each of which are designed to respond to specific assumptions about inequalities in HE progression (see, for example, Harrison and Waller 2017b; Thomas and Quinn 2007; Whitty et al. 2015). In many cases, social, cultural, educational and/or economic barriers are assumed to prevent ‘disadvantaged’ students cohorts from accessing degree-level study (Thomas 2001)².

In responding to the marked inequalities in progression to university level study, WP practitioners have tended to focus in particular on a small number of key objectives:

The need to raise aspiration

In the early stages of the contemporary phase of widening participation (defined for present purposes as 1997 onwards), many widening participation interventions were designed to respond

¹. Although see Gorard and Smith (2006) for a critique of the methodology used to establish under-representation.
². For a critical discussion of the concept of barriers to HE participation, however, see Gorard and Smith 2007; Fuller et al. 2008.
to a perception that some underrepresented student cohorts, their families and/or socio-cultural environments were characterised by a deficit in aspiration for HE progression (Thomas 2001; Thomas and Quinn 2007; Sellar and Storan 2011; Brown 2011). Harrison and Waller (2017), for example, describe how early interventions developed by the Aimhigher programme were, as the name of the scheme suggests, predicated on an assumption that certain cohorts of students were under-represented in HE because they lacked sufficient ambition or aspiration for university-level study. The outreach interventions that practitioners developed in response were often designed to provide information, advice and guidance (IAG) about HE, to remove participants’ negative perceptions or assumptions about university, and/or otherwise inspire students to ‘raise’ their aspirations.

Recent academic work, however, has critiqued this approach for being predicated on deficit assumptions (see, for example, Brown 2011; Burke 2012; Gorard et al. 2012). In this vein, Gutman and Ackerman (2008) point to research that suggests the aspiration of both parents and their children for HE progression is initially high but comes under strain when encountering some of the practical implications of degree level study, such as financial cost or academic entry requirements, and that what results is not a lowering of aspirations, but a tempering of them by changing expectations about what might be possible. For more about this shift between aspirations and expectations, see St Clair and Benjamin 2011; Khattab 2015; Brown 2017. This recognition of the difference between aspiration and expectation has also encouraged new approaches to supporting disadvantaged or under-represented students and their families. Stevenson and Clegg’s (2011) work on ‘possible selves’, for example, argues that progression pathways are determined by what individuals view as possible to achieve. Their own expectations, in turn, are constrained by the limited available evidence of successful outcomes and lack of exemplar narratives upon which they can draw to imagine their future selves.

The need to raise social and cultural capital: Encouraging a sense of fit

Another strand of thinking in the ‘barriers to HE’ mode focuses on the social and cultural challenges of transitioning into university, for ‘non-traditional’ students. The foundational assumption of this approach is that universities represent, and are characterised by, a specific (middle class) culture, which will be familiar and comfortable for students from some backgrounds and alienating for others. This perspective is often informed by Bourdieu’s (1986) discussion of the role played by social and cultural capital in social progression. In response, some WP outreach interventions are designed to give students opportunities to access to forms of social capital that may not otherwise be available to them, because they have little immediate contact with or experience of higher education in their familial, social or cultural environment (Burke 2012; Hatt et al. 2005; Whitty et al. 2015). Such interventions might include campus visits, summer schools, taster sessions, mentoring and/or coaching or additional support and guidance around the HE application process (for example the writing of personal statements), designed to increase participants’ first-hand familiarity with HE.

The need to raise attainment

A more practical challenge to HE access is thrown up by the use of academic entry requirements to manage admissions to degree courses. Academic entry requirements set a prior attainment threshold, but also serve as a form of market differentiation, a device for managing demand for specific programmes (Adnett et al. 2011, Boliver et al. 2017).

Entry requirements also shift the focus to inequalities and disadvantage occurring earlier in the education system. The link between socio-economic disadvantage and levels of pre-HE attainment is flagged by a range of research outcomes (e.g. Chowdry et al. 2010; Crawford 2012; Crawford et
Such work suggests that high HE entry requirements might exclude students who may not have had the opportunity to demonstrate their full academic potential in their level three qualifications, perhaps because of resourcing limitations in their prior schooling environment, or inhibitions resulting from a school culture failing to emphasise HE progression (Schwartz 2004; Boliver et al 2017; Rainford 2017).

In response, HEIs have developed a range of WP interventions intended to support or increase pre-HE attainment outcomes for ‘WP’ student cohorts. However, although attainment-raising is often viewed as a key component in the WP toolbox, given the complexity of the compulsory education process and context, there is little consensus about how this can be achieved, or the intensity and type of intervention required to have a meaningful impact on pre-HE attainment outcomes. Nonetheless, many outreach interventions include attainment raising components, such as academic or revision skill development components. The role of HEIs in supporting attainment-raising interventions in the compulsory schooling sector has become an increasingly prominent feature of both compulsory and higher education policy landscapes (DfE 2016; OFFA 2017).

Some HEIs respond to academic disadvantage by acknowledging that resourcing, cultural, or experiential issues may have acted as a break on a particular student’s level of achievement and therefore their ability to demonstrate their academic potential. Some institutions, for example, intervene at the admissions stage by making ‘contextual offers’, which require lower than normal entry requirement grades to mitigate earlier educational disadvantage. Indeed, contextual offers were one of the recommendations made by the Schwartz’s (2004) report: *Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice*. There has been a recurrent interest in contextual admissions decisions, most recently in a HEPI report on contextual offers (Boliver et al. 2017) and has sometimes been picked up by policy-makers, for example, by David Willetts (Paton and Swinford 2013). The practice of making contextual offers appears to be gaining some traction across the sector.

### Provision of financial support

Since the first introduction of tuition fees, commentators have often viewed the significant financial cost of HE as potential barrier or deterrent to students from economically-disadvantaged backgrounds. Indeed, in the early days of OFFA guidance, financial support was viewed as one of the primary fair access interventions. In the first guidance letter from a Secretary of State to the Director of Fair Access, the then Secretary of State, Charles Clarke, instructed OFFA to make sure financial support was available for those ‘most likely to be deterred by the incoming £3000 maximum tuition fees’ (Clarke 2004). Despite having a dramatic impact on the recruitment of part-time and mature students, the tripling of tuition fees in 2012 did not appear to have an immediate impact on the progression of disadvantaged young people into full time degree courses. At the time of writing, however, publicity about the substantial levels of debt accrued by post-2012 graduates could be starting to change this by providing concrete evidence of the costs of degree level study (Fazackerley 2017). This has coincided with recent calls for a review of the current tuition fee system (Grierson 2017).

Irrespective of what happens at a policy level, the higher education sector has traditionally supported widening participation by making financial support available to eligible students. Subsequent OFFA sponsored research, however, has failed to produce quantitative evidence that such financial support impacts on either HE decision making (Cover 2010) or on student retention (OFFA 2014). More recent work, however, has suggested that financial support ‘levels the playing field’ (McCaig et al. 2016). Nonetheless, as a result of the relative lack of positive causal evidence, recent OFFA guidance has encouraged HEIs to shift their funding from financial support to outreach interventions. Of the total investment made by institutions across the sector in widening participation, the largest proportion is still used to provide financial support; in 2015-16, the latest
available figures, the sector spent 62% of total access agreement spend, or £428.8M on financial support (OFFA 2017a). Indeed, financial support still appears to be understood by many HEIs as a means of helping to mitigate actual and perceived financial impediments to study. In Part 3, we focus on financial support in more detail and outline the University of Sheffield’s own approach to, and evaluation of, the provision of institutional financial support.

The narrative above, which sketches out common types of widening participation intervention has, of necessity, been drawn in broad strokes. However, the variety and complexity of fair access challenges and the interventions designed to respond to them mean that there is no single or straightforward answer to policy calls for evidence about ‘what works’ in WP outreach and support provision. In the chapters below, we chart how the WPREU team have attempted to respond to this challenge and the research and evaluation approaches we have drawn on to provide such evidence.

**References**


1.2. Black and Minority Ethnic students

Miriam Miller

The term ‘Black and Minority Ethnic’ (BME) is used by the Government and policy makers to describe people from ethnic backgrounds which make up a minority of the UK population. ‘Race’ (a term which can include a person’s colour, nationality, and/or ethnic or national origins) is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act (2010); this gives public bodies such as universities a duty to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between different people when carrying out their activities.

Between the introduction of tuition fees in England proposed in the Dearing Report (1997), and the increase of the tuition fee cap to £9,000 per year in 2012 (BIS, 2016), there was little focus on BME students in terms of how they accessed Higher Education (HE) or what their experiences of studying at University were like. Current HE policy, however, particularly since the introduction of £9k fees, is increasingly moving towards a more holistic approach that considers the entire student lifecycle, rather than only looking at how universities are widening participation at the point of access.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) generally use HESA categories to collect data on students’ ethnicity, which group the population into Arab; Asian or Asian British, Black or Black British, Chinese, Mixed, White, and Other. Each of these broad categories contains further subcategories, so students can select the one they feel best applies. However, even within these sub-groupings, it is important to note that BME people are not a homogenous group, and that while there are currently differences between White students and BME students in terms of both access and success, these patterns are not uniform for each group.

Access

BME participation in HE is high relative to the proportion of BME people in the UK, but this is in part due to the UK’s ethnic minority population being younger than the population as a whole (Gorard 2008). In 2014/15, of those students whose ethnicity information was known, 21.0% identified as BME, which represents a 44.0% increase from 2003/04 ratios (ECU 2016). The proportion of Black students has seen the most growth in this time period, increasing from 4.4% of all UK domiciled students in 2003/04 to 6.5% in 2014/15.

In 2004, the Schwartz report highlighted the fact that despite being over-represented in HE overall, BME students are underrepresented at pre-1992 universities and colleges. While some contributing factors were mentioned (including potential preference amongst BME students for certain subjects, and the possibility of geographic clustering), the report also noted that minority ethnic applicants appeared to have a lower chance of receiving offers from pre-1992 institutions than other applicants, even when other background characteristics and prior attainment are taken into account (DfES 2004). This is still the case now, with further research still showing that BME
applicants to Russell Group universities are less likely to be offered a place than white applicants with comparable qualifications (Boliver 2016). The patterns of participation are not homogeneous for all ethnic groups either, with Black Caribbean and Other Black pupils being significantly less likely to attend a selective institution than their White British counterparts. The proportion of Chinese pupils who go on to selective institutions however, is higher than the proportion of White British students doing so (Crawford and Greaves 2015).

**Progression to postgraduate study**

Postgraduate study should also be discussed in the context of access and widening participation for BME students. Progression to Masters level courses is higher; 14.2% of BME graduates progressed on to a Masters course compared to 12.8% of white graduates. However, 2.4% of White students had started a research degree within five years of graduation, compared with just 1.3% of BME graduates (HEFCE 2016; Havergal 2016). This will of course have an impact on the number of BME students who go on to become academic members of staff; currently just 6.2% of all academic staff in the UK are from BME backgrounds (ECU 2016).

**The lack of BME staff**

The lack of BME staff at universities is often cited as a factor that affects the experiences and outcomes of BME students (Berry and Loke 2011; NUS 2011), and so the issue of access is a circular one which needs to be addressed in a number of ways. For example, we know that BME students are currently systematically disadvantaged in terms of their degree outcomes. In 2014/15, 77.1% of white students were awarded a first or 2:1, compared with 61.8% of BME students; an attainment gap of 15.3 percentage points. (ECU 2017). There has been a decrease in the size of this attainment gap over time, from 18.8 percentage points in 2005/6 to 15.2 percentage points in 2013/14 (ECU 2016), although the 2014/15 figures demonstrate a small increase which reverses this trend. Degree attainment also differs for different ethnic groups within the broader BME category. It is particularly pronounced for Black African students (27.4 percentage points), Black Caribbean students (22.9 percentage points) or students from Other Black Backgrounds (26.9 percentage points) (ECU 2017).

**Differential attainment**

It is possible that the attainment gap is also affecting the number of BME students who are able to progress to postgraduate level, since the typical entrance requirements are a 1st or 2:1 at undergraduate level and the highest undergraduate qualifications are also more likely to attract postgraduate funding, which may influence on those students who may not otherwise be able to finance further study (Miller 2016).

To address these differential outcomes, current policy, such as OFFA’s guidance for writing an access agreement for 2018-19, asks HEIs to give specific emphasis to interventions which help to raise attainment for target groups, one of which is BME students. The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), with its use of split metrics for students with different characteristics (including BME) also initially promised to closely examine ‘any significant differences in the quality of teaching and learning experienced by different student groups’ (BIS 2016). However, critics have noted that some HEIs with significant BME attainment gaps have still managed to acquire a Gold standard in the TEF, suggesting that the TEF has not fulfilled this promise (Buckley-Irvine 2017).

WPREU has been working to address both patterns of differential attainment for BME students and to increase the proportion of BME students in the Arts and Humanities faculty at The University
of Sheffield. Further details of these projects can be found in the WP and Equality and Diversity section of this book.

References


BIS (2016) Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice. London: HMSO.


Disability

Miriam Miller

Disability is one of the protected characteristics under the Equality Act (2010). People are considered disabled under the Equality Act 2010 if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on their ability to perform normal daily activities. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collects data on disability based on the student’s own self-assessment. It is important to note that not every student who is recorded as having a disability may choose to use the label 'disabled' to describe themselves, even though this term is generally used by Government and policy makers.

Between 2003/04 and 2014/15, the proportion of Higher Education students across the UK who disclosed a disability nearly doubled, increasing from 5.4% to 10.6% (ECU 2016). It is difficult to say whether these numbers represent a straightforward increase in the number of disabled students accessing HE, or if these figures are at least partly down to an increase in reporting rates (Gorard 2008). It is difficult to compare the number of students with disabilities to the general population, as the proportion of people with disabilities increases with each age group; around 6% of children are disabled, compared to 16% of working age adults, and 45% of adults over State Pension age (DWP 2014). It is also difficult to tell if disabled students are under-represented in HE, as reporting figures for disability depend on whether or not students consider themselves disabled (Dearing 1997), and whether or not they then declare this to their institution (Simpson 2016).

Nevertheless, in the UK, 19.2% of working age people with disabilities do not hold any formal qualifications, compared to just 6.5% of working-age people without disabilities. Additionally, 14.9% of working age disabled people hold degree-level qualifications, compared to 28.1% of working age non-disabled people (DWP 2014). This suggests that there is still likely to be an under-representation of disabled people in Higher Education which cannot be explained by low reporting rates alone.

Participation in higher education

There are further differential patterns of participation for different groups of disabled students. The proportion of disabled students who disclosed a specific learning difficulty in 2014/15 was 46.2%, an increase from 11.1% in 2012/13. This was the most commonly disclosed impairment, followed by mental health conditions (14.8%) and longstanding illnesses (10.1%). 12.1% of students studying at undergraduate level disclosed a disability; this is nearly twice the proportion of taught postgraduate students who did so (6.6%) (ECU 2016).

These high proportions of students with Specific Learning Difficulties and mental health problems are, again, reflected by OFFA Access Agreement guidance to Universities; in 2017/18, for example, OFFA asked HEIs to gain a more in depth understanding of the challenges faced by different groups of students, with one of these target groups being students with mental health problems, Specific Learning Difficulties, and/or an autism spectrum disorder, such as Asperger Syndrome (OFFA 2016).
Attainment and graduate outcomes

There is also a national attainment gap for students with disabilities. In 2014/15, 70.1% of first degree undergraduate qualifiers with a disability were awarded a 1st/2:1, compared to 71.1% of qualifiers without a disability - a gap of 1 percentage point. There are also further differential outcomes for different groups:

- 71.1% of disabled qualifiers who were in receipt of Disabled Students Allowance were awarded a 1st or 2:1, compared to 69.2% of those not in receipt of DSA; a gap of 1.9 percentage points.
- 66.3% of disabled qualifiers disclosing a social or communication impairment were awarded a 1st or 2:1, compared with 72.4% of those disclosing a mental health condition, and 72.1% of those disclosing a disability, impairment or health condition other than those listed.

(ECU 2017)

As well as different degree outcomes, there are also differential graduate outcomes for disabled students. In terms of entering the labour market, a higher proportion of disabled leavers were unemployed six months after qualifying than non-disabled leavers (7.1% compared with 4.9%) and 60.5% of non-disabled leavers were in full-time work six months after qualifying, compared with 52.4% of disabled leavers. In contrast, higher rates of disabled leavers were in some form of further study than non-disabled leavers (20.2% compared with 18.4%) (ECU 2017).

In summary, disabled students are currently at a disadvantage in Higher Education, with higher rates of graduate unemployment and lower undergraduate attainment, particularly for those with social and communication disorders. While disclosure rates are improving, and it is encouraging to see national policy embracing the nuances between different kinds of disabilities and learning differences, people with disabilities are likely still be under-represented in HE compared to the national population.

Changes to Disabled Students’ Allowance in 2016

In 2014, David Willetts, former Minister of State for Universities and Science, announced a number of proposed changes to Disabled Students’ Allowance, aiming to “rebalance responsibilities between government funding and institutional support” (Willetts 2014). Changes to funding for computer equipment were made in the 2015/16 academic year while changes to non-medical help and accommodation costs came in in 2016/17. Students are now expected to pay a contribution of £200 towards a laptop and specialist equipment is provided only if required by virtue of a student’s disability, rather than because of the requirements of the course. HE providers are now expected to meet the costs of specialist transcription services, non-medical support roles that are classified as bands 1 or 2 (Practical Support Assistant, Library Support Assistant, Workshop/ Laboratory Assistant Study Assistant, Examination Support Worker, Manual Note Taker) and cannot pass the additional costs of accessible accommodation on to their students. HE providers are now expected to put measures in place that will reduce the need for support workers, whether through use of technology or changes in how the curriculum is delivered (Johnson 2015).

WPREU has been working on a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project to identify good practice and areas for improvement in the support provision for students with Specific Learning Difficulties, mental health, and/or autism spectrum conditions at The University of Sheffield. Further details of this projects can be found in the WP and Equality and Diversity section.
References


1.4. Gender

Miriam Miller and Greg Brown

Changing patterns of access

At the University of Sheffield, the gender balance is, and has been across a number of years, fairly evenly balanced. In 2016, the latest available data, men make up 51% of the undergraduate population compared to 49% of women. At postgraduate level, women make up 55% of the student population, compared to 45% of men (although this figure does not distinguish between taught and research postgraduates, potentially masking a different pattern).

Nationally, 56.2% of all students studying in UK higher education are women and with the exception of research postgraduates, the majority of students studying at every level are women (ECU 2016). This means men are actually over-represented at the University of Sheffield, compared to the national figures. Different patterns of participation for men and women also persist at the national subject level. In 2016, the subjects with the widest gender gaps were computer science (82.8% male), and engineering and technology (83.3% male). However, in subjects allied to medicine (79.4% female) and veterinary science (76.2% female), women were in the large majority (ECU 2017).

These differential patterns in subject choice highlight some continuing gendered expectations aligned with the labour market. Further, the lower rates of women undertaking postgraduate research degrees suggests that Higher Education has not yet been made completely accessible for women. We should therefore be wary of assuming that equal participation (in some subjects) for women at undergraduate and taught postgraduate levels means that women’s equality in Higher Education has been achieved (David, 2009).

There are also differential patterns of access for different groups of women within Higher Education.

- While women comprised the majority of students across all age groups, the proportions of students who were women tended to increase with age. 54.2% of those aged 21 and under were female, rising to 63.4% of students aged 36 and over.

- Within every ethnic group, the majority of UK domiciled students were female. This gender difference was largest among UK black students, with women comprising 59.1% in this ethnic group. Among UK Chinese students, this was considerably lower, at 52.2%.

- The gender gap is larger among disabled students (58.9% female) than non-disabled students (55.9% female).

- A higher proportion of female disabled students disclosed certain impairments than male disabled students. This was most pronounced among students disclosing a mental health condition, with 17.2% of female disabled students disclosing this impairment, compared with 11.4% of male disabled students. In contrast, larger proportions of male disabled students
disclosed two or more impairments and a specific learning difficulty (49.7% and 5.6%, respectively) than female disabled students (43.8% and 1.0%, respectively). (ECU 2017)

“White Working-Class Boys”

In discussions about access, gender has recently been used alongside class and ethnicity in policy discourse to identify White working-class males as a group acutely underrepresented in HE. White British ‘working class’ males are now the group proportionally least likely to participate in HE, with only 10% of those who took GCSE’s in 2008 subsequently entering HE (Crawford and Greaves 2015, cited in Baars et al. 2016). This is significantly less than economically advantaged White males (51%) and females (59%). However, the Social Mobility Advisory Group noted in their 2016 report that lower rates of participation in HE also disproportionately affect White working class girls and mixed race working class boys; with only 8% of White working class girls (defined as those living in the most deprived neighbourhoods according to the IMD measure) and 11% of mixed race working class boys (using the same measure) entering HE (SMAG 2016).

There are a number of issues that arise in defining who is and who is not a ‘White working-class male’, making the use of such a definition in targeting policy problematic. Typically, ‘working class’ within HE is defined using measures of participation (POLAR 2/3/4), parental occupation (NS-SEC), parental income, multiple deprivation (IMD) and by proxy measures such as free school meal (FSM) eligibility and first-generation status. Baars et al. (2016) note that there are varied and loosely specified ways of defining who is and who is not working class, with different definitions and proxies being used across research, policy or practice. As a consequence, there is a lack of consistency and comparability across the sector, making progress difficult to track and evaluate. Further, and as outlined by Gillborn (2015), there is likely significant disparities between the number of people who would be counted as White working class using the above measures and counted in the statistics used to prompt policy, and those who subjectively identify as being White working class. As such, those not included as White working class in this troubling data - but who subjectively identify themselves as such - can think inequalities exist in relation to them that don’t, leading to problematic misinterpretations of the situation at hand.

‘White’ is similarly ill-defined. It encompasses a number of identities beyond ‘White British’ - which is often used in a normative manner - including: White Irish, Gypsy/Roma and other (including the many categories of White European). The merging of these subgroups serves to mask the different ways each group may perceive HE, and indeed levels of under-representation relative to other ethnic groups. The term has also been criticised as being needlessly divisive (Shaheen 2017) - taking focus away from the shared struggle of the wider ‘working class’ who face the same hurdles and barriers, including those faced when accessing HE, regardless of their ethnic identity or gender (as outlined in the SMAG figures above). As such, we must be specific and focussed in our targeting policy when addressing access issues attributed to ‘White working-class boys’, and where possible, simultaneously undertake work that has cumulative benefit.

Nevertheless, central government - BIS (2016) and OFFA (2017) - have outlined their desire to see more HEIs engaging in activities focussed on working with ‘White working-class boys’ (WWCB), more recently updating guidance to refer more specifically to White British working class boys (WBWCB)’s, with a number of research articles and opinion pieces subsequently offering recommendations as to how HEIs can address the issue (Baars et al 2016; Hillman and Robinson 2016).

Here at the University of Sheffield, a newly developed Outreach initiative, ‘IMPACT’ is set to take a particular focus in targeting WBWCB’s past its trial year (academic year 2018-19). The intervention
will bring parents and children together to learn about HE progression, delivering targeted IAG that will raise awareness of key concepts, and set the foundation for their future interaction with universities – and as such, address many of the recommendations set out by Baars et al. (2016). Continued collaborative work across the University will help us better understand the issue at hand, and as a result, better inform our strategy in addressing it.

## Patterns of attainment

Nationally, a higher proportion of female first degree undergraduate qualifiers are awarded a 1st or 2:1 (73.5%) than male qualifiers (69.0%). However, women are overall less likely to be awarded a 1st class degree (21.7%) compared to men (22.4%). Again, this breaks down by subject. Of students studying Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) subjects, 25.4% of women and 26.7% of men are awarded 1sts while for non-set subjects, this is reversed - 19.7% women and 18.4% men are awarded 1sts (ECU 2017).

Again, there are different patterns of attainment for different groups of women across the HE sector. For example:

- The degree attainment gap narrows as the ages of graduates increases. Among qualifiers aged 21 and under, there was a 6.3 percentage point difference in the proportion of female and male qualifiers who were awarded a 1st or 2:1. This compares with a 0.4 percentage point gap among those aged 36 and over.

- The disability degree attainment gap is wider among female qualifiers than among male qualifiers. 73.8% of non-disabled female qualifiers are awarded a 1st or 2:1 compared with 71.3% of disabled female qualifiers (a 2.5 percentage point gap). In comparison, 69.1% of non-disabled male qualifiers are awarded a 1st or 2:1 compared with 68.4% of non-disabled male qualifiers (a 0.7 percentage point gap).

- While the gender degree attainment gap among UK domiciled first degree qualifiers stands at 2.9 percentage points, it increases to 6.8 percentage points for Chinese women.

- The degree attainment gap is at its most pronounced between Black male qualifiers (of whom 48.5% were awarded a 1st or 2:1) and White male qualifiers (of whom 75.4% were awarded a 1st or 2:1); a difference of 26.9% percentage points.

(Original data from ECU 2017)

## Sexual harassment and violence against women

There has been an increased focus in recent years on the issues of sexual harassment and violence against women. In 2010, the National Union of Students released a report titled *Hidden Marks*, which showed that one in seven of their survey respondents had experienced a serious physical or sexual assault during their time as a student. Over two thirds of respondents (68%) had experienced some kind of verbal or non-verbal harassment in and around their institution. The report also noted that this kind of behaviour – which includes groping, flashing and unwanted sexual comments – had become almost ‘everyday’ for some women students (NUS 2010). A Universities UK taskforce report in 2017 made a series of recommendations for universities to address these issues, and following on from this report, over 40 universities and colleges in England were awarded a share of £1.8 million from HEFCE to improve responses to hate crime and online harassment on campus. The University of Sheffield is one of these institutions, and members of the

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WPREU team are working with colleagues from across the institution on a project, ‘Empowering students to take an active role in the University community - combating sexual violence, harassment and hate crime’.

Moving beyond the gender binary

Whilst the sector has historically measured gender disparities in terms of differences between men and women, this binary categorisation is no longer appropriate for an increasing number of students. The National Union of Students (NUS) estimates that 28,000 UK students are trans (Fenton 2015): an umbrella term which encompasses a number of transgender, non-binary, and gender fluid identities. While we have not yet seen a specific mention of trans students in OFFA guidance, we have seen some key changes across the sector that suggest that work on trans issues may become a policy priority in future. These changes include the NUS appointing its first national Trans Officer in 2017-18, the Athena Swan charter expanding to include trans issues, updated guidance in 2017 from ECU on how to support trans students and staff, and the ongoing provision of specific professional development events such as AMOSSHE’s ‘Supporting trans students’.

References


BIS (2016) Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice. London: HMSO.


Looked after children

Dr Zoe Baker

Looked After Children (LAC) are a severely under-represented group in HE (OFFA 2017). As a result of this underrepresentation, scholarly work focusing on care leavers’ HE experiences is understandably limited (Jackson and Ajayi 2007; Jackson and Cameron 2012). The majority of the existing literature concerning LAC focuses on educational experiences, accommodation issues and the impact that instability has on compulsory educational success. These issues are, nevertheless, valuable to consider in a WP context; Jackson and Cameron (2012, p. 1108) highlight that LAC are more disadvantaged than low SES students, as ‘[f]amily background and lack of ‘cultural capital’ are still critical factors for all children but no longer insurmountable barriers for those who want to go to college or university’ as a result of the WP agenda. Moreover, minority ethnic young people, who are already regarded as underrepresented in HE, will face additional difficulties as care leavers (Barn 2010). Therefore, the issues faced by LAC prior to the age of 18, as well as during their time in HE, are crucial for HEIs to understand if we are to widen participation for care leavers.

HE progression for LAC: Issues and constraints

Care leavers are highly under-represented in HE; in 2017, only around 6.1% of care leavers (aged 19-21) were in HE (OFFA 2017). Additionally, in 2016, 40% of care leavers aged 19, 20 and 21 were not in education, employment or training (NEET) (DfE 2017). This compares to just 1% of all 19 to 21 year olds (OFFA 2017).

Scholarly literature offers some insight as to why this severe underrepresentation of LAC in HE, and the high proportion who are NEET, exists. Firstly, attainment outcomes and the number of qualifications amongst LAC are substantially lower than the wider population (Barn 2010; DCSF 2010; DfE 2014; Jackson et al. 2003; Stein 1994). A number of reasons have been identified to explain this, such as pre-care experiences, identity issues, low expectations from teachers and carers, disruptions to learning as a result of multiple placements, and education being a low priority when organising care placements (Barn 2010; Jackson and Cameron 2012; Jackson and Martin 1998; Hibbert 2002; Mayall et al. 2015; Stein 1994; Sugden 2013). Disruptions to schooling due to multiple placements can have a significant impact on the attainment of LAC, with those experiencing more moves having lower attainment than those with fewer moves (Jackson and Ajayi 2007; Stein 1994). LAC have also voiced that low priority is given to education by social workers when organising placements (Jackson and Cameron 2012). These points are notable, as ‘experiencing stability’ was regarded as one of the key factors that helped LAC achieve in Happer et al.’s (2006) study exploring 16-21 year olds experiences of the care system.

There are an additional set of challenges for care leavers when continuing education past their 18th birthday due to the pressure to find and finance accommodation, with little or no family support to fall back on (Barn 2010; Cameron 2007); many local authorities withdraw financial support to foster carers on their child’s 18th birthday, meaning that the child may need to leave to make room for a new placement (Jackson and Ajayi 2007). Care leavers in Cameron’s (2007) study cited how a lack of financial support and difficulties with the benefits system meant that some had no option but to withdraw from their education to work full time to afford housing. Jackson and Ajayi (2007, p. 68) note that those who are able to remain in foster placements until the point of starting HE
had ‘a much more ‘normal’ experience than those who left care earlier’. As a result, LAC are less likely to be engaged in post-16 education (Barn 2010; Jackson et al. 2003). Subsequently, it becomes problematic for students to regard HE as a possibility when they have not been able to access the requisite qualifications.

Experiences of HE

For care leavers who do progress to HE, a number of additional challenges may be encountered. Such challenges are sometimes a result of the disruptions and poor experiences in compulsory education outlined earlier, which then leads students to struggle with the academic demands of their HE courses (Jackson and Ajayi 2007). Other academic challenges encountered in HE may potentially be associated with the pathway taken; care leavers appear to be more likely to enter HE with ‘non-traditional’ qualifications, such as vocational qualifications, Access to HE and Foundation Degrees (Harrison 2017). Jackson and Ajayi (2007) found that care leavers who had progressed from non-traditional routes encountered additional difficulties with assessment. In addition to challenges associated with the academic demands in HE for care leavers, Jackson and Ajayi (2007) conclude that a lack of emotional support negatively impacted on students’ mental health. The importance of emotional support for students in HE is further emphasised by the authors, finding that those who maintained relationships with foster carers valued emotional support more than financial support.

The various structural challenges that LAC face before they are eligible to apply for HE, as well as those encountered within the HE environment, should be taken into consideration by HEIs when recruiting, and supporting students throughout their degree programmes. Yet, there is a need for a broader societal focus to issues facing many LAC and care leavers, such as housing, financial support and participation in education to improve their chances of HE progression (Cameron 2007).

References


Comment

Looked after children at the University of Sheffield

Julie Askew

The University publicly articulated its support for looked-after children and care leavers from 2007, in response to two main drivers:

- Calls for HE to do more by the charity BUTTLE UK
- UK policy drivers following the publication of Care Matters: Time for Change (Department for Education and Skills, 2007), and Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care (HM Government, 2006).

Both emphasised the need for multi-agency support and provided the impetus for the HE sector as a whole to establish clearer expectations of support measures and a greater commitment to improve their existing support for looked-after children and care-leavers into and through HE. There was also an opportunity for universities to be recognised for the support they offered through acquiring the BUTTLE UK Quality Mark, by providing the following:

- A named contact to give specific support and advice before, during and after application to university
- Additional specific financial support
- 365 days accommodation throughout undergraduate study
- Help and support with transition to higher education

The University of Sheffield acquired the Quality Mark in 2007, and renewed it in 2010 and 2013; gaining exemplary stats for enhanced support that spans the full student lifecycle: from pre-entry outreach; recruitment and application support; transition into higher education; retention, and successful academic attainment and progression. We also established stronger cross-sector links to facilitate collaborative work with external stakeholders in local authorities, HE and education and third sector organisations, in response.

There was concurrently a national call for organisations supporting university applications (such as UCAS) to provide better identification of care-leavers who apply to university, via a formal declaration within the UCAS applicant system. Local authorities were asked to provide one-off payments of £2000 to care-leavers progressing to HE. And universities were encouraged to undertake targeted outreach work, staff training, and further support to young people in care.
As a result, designated staff at the University identify care leavers via information shared on UCAS applications and finance applications. They contact care-leaver applicants at the earliest opportunity to provide a named contact and offer comprehensive support; in some cases, this may also extend to adjusted academic entry criteria following receipt of evidence of previous disrupted studies.

Trained Outreach staff at the University also work with looked-after children and care leavers via links within local authorities. These activities aim to raise aspirations towards HE; to support attainment; to familiarise young people with the university environment to build confidence. They also dispel myths about HE and support decisions at key transition points in Primary and Secondary years. Outreach and Admissions staff reassure youngsters and applicants about the university application process and emphasise the need to declare care status in university applications to benefit from the comprehensive support on offer. Many care leavers still have false preconceptions that revealing their care status may disadvantage them in their application and therefore this reassurance is vital.

Full information on current support available and video case studies can be found on the following University of Sheffield webpages: [sheffield.ac.uk/outreach/support/lac](sheffield.ac.uk/outreach/support/lac)

Our Looked-After Children’s Champions are excellent role models, as former care-leavers, now studying at the University. They work on activities with young people from care conveying the message "If I can do this so can you". A LAC Champion speaks with passion about the impact of supporting young people who are looked after:

“being a LAC Champion has given me the opportunity to make a difference by being a positive role model and enthusing children about learning. I have gained hugely from the role as it has allowed me to develop transferable skills which will increase my employability.”

Table 1 overleaf summarises work at the University undertaken to support looked-after children and care leavers.

A significant package of financial support and accommodation scholarships exist to support around 30 care leaver students each year and the University is committed to supporting the needs of this important group of students, throughout their learning journey and beyond.

The following national resources also provide reassurance and comprehensive information and guidance to those from care, and to their advisers:

- [ucas.com](ucas.com)
- [nnecl.org](nnecl.org)
- [propel.org.uk/UK](propel.org.uk/UK)
Table 1: Summary of work at the University of Sheffield undertaken to support looked-after children and care leavers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-entry Outreach</th>
<th>Admissions</th>
<th>Finance</th>
<th>Student Support</th>
<th>Learning &amp; Teaching</th>
<th>Careers</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Access to designated contacts before and during university study</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Support from “LAC Champs”</td>
<td>• Guidance calls to applicants from LAC Champs</td>
<td>• Financial support via scholarships and tuition fee reduction</td>
<td>• 365 day housing throughout the course</td>
<td>• Study/skills support classes and workshops</td>
<td>• Skills tracker, CV and interview workshops, internships and placements</td>
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<tr>
<td>• University tasters and summer schools</td>
<td>• Consideration of previous disrupted studies during application process</td>
<td>• Local authority financial support</td>
<td>• Student mentors</td>
<td>• LAC Champs develop skills and experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Transition to HE events an information for care leavers</td>
<td>• Homework club for younger looked after children</td>
<td>• Postgraduate scholarships</td>
<td>• Support includes help with accessing financial assistance and liaison with external agencies</td>
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<td>• Contribution to national initiatives (e.g. “Care Leavers Week”) via social media and events</td>
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<td>• Annual conference and development events for teachers, local authority staff and carers</td>
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<td>• Development of publications and web pages</td>
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<td>• Sharing of best practice through local, national and international networks</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Partnership working with local colleges and universities</td>
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</table>
Mature students

Dr Julian Crockford and Miriam Miller

The Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA 2018) regards a student as mature if they are aged 21 or over on the 30 September of the year of starting their course. This criterion is used consistently by many other HE bodies (for example, UCAS, OFFA, HEFCE) - although crucially, not for the Student Loans Company, which uses 25 years as a threshold (see Part 3.3). Although there is a degree of consistency in the way in which mature students are officially defined this does not reflect the heterogeneity of mature students themselves, who are likely to bring very different sets of life experience to their learning and the HE environment.

The impact of high tuition fees on mature students has been inconclusive. As OFFA (2018) observe in their topic briefing on mature students, the fees increase, was initially viewed as having a detrimental effect on the recruitment of mature students, but that subsequent HEFCE analysis, which included ‘other’ undergraduate programmes such as Foundation Years or HNDs, suggested that there was no disproportionate effect (OFFA 2018). Nonetheless, the proportion of mature students has significantly fallen since 2010/11, with 2014/15 marking its lowest level to date (ECU 2016).

Both mode of study and outcomes tended to be different for this group than for others. For example, a higher proportion of mature students than those under 21 were in part-time study. In addition, mature students studying at their first undergraduate degree had higher rates of leaving HE without qualifying, receiving a degree class lower than a 2:1, and lower rates of progressing onwards to further study (ECU 2016). The ECU (2016) observe that the proportion of mature students achieving a 1st or 2.1. outcomes in their degree declines the higher the age band. 77.1% of those aged 21 and under and 70.6% of those aged 22–25 received a first/2:1, compared with just 63.8% of those aged 26–35 and 62.6% aged 36 and over.

Furthermore, a report by the Million+ Group and NUS, suggests that, given their diversity and usually ‘non-standard’ route into HE, mature students are more likely than younger students to:

- have non-traditional qualifications
- come from lower socio-economic backgrounds
- have family or caring responsibilities
- be disabled
- be from black and minority ethnic groups
- leave higher education within a year of entering.

(McVitty & Morris 2012)

This diversity and these factors can result in a more complex student experience for mature students than for ‘standard’ students. The process of learner identity formation, for example, can be more complex, as their student identity has to be formed alongside the other adult identifies.
they assume in familial or employment contexts (Busher et al. 2015). Furthermore, Mature students can experience being ‘othered’ or stigmatised by normative undergraduate culture (Mallman and Lee 2016) or develop ‘imposter syndrome’ (Chapman 2017). Much writing about mature students focuses on their difference from ‘mainstream’ young students and thereby risks reinforcing a deficit model. In their writing on student transition, Gale & Parker (2014, p.747), however, argue that successful student transition (including that of mature students) does not depend on the extent to which students adapt to pre-existing institutional structures, practices and cultures, but to which HE is ‘more flexible and responsive to students’ and redresses ‘the marginalisation of certain forms of knowledge and ways of knowing’. By so doing, higher education institutions can ensure that a diversity of experience and perspectives are valued and included as a cultural norm.

Tracking the mature student experience

In 2017, the University of Sheffield’s Department of Lifelong Learning (DLL) completed phase one of a project Tracking the progress of Department of Lifelong Learning Foundation Year Students through The University of Sheffield (Priede and Nicholls 2017). Researchers followed the transition of nine current full-time undergraduate students into their chosen degree course from a discipline specific Foundation Year.

Key findings of the research were that:

- The networks these students formed in their Foundation Year were crucial; these ties and relationships remained a lynchpin for emotional and social support during their transition to undergraduate level study.
- The support these students received within their Foundation Year was extremely valuable to them and helped them to develop coping mechanisms for managing workloads and deadlines as undergraduates.
- They found that the greatest challenges when transitioning from foundation course to undergraduate study were the difference in workloads and the varying levels of support.
- Many of the students commented that the move from small group teaching to larger groups felt daunting, but that overall, the knowledge they had developed and confidence gained from the Foundation Year meant that they were able to cope with these changes.
- Managing their own shifting and multiple identities was an unforeseen and ongoing challenge for participants, and both sense of belonging and age were the most significant themes relating to their student experience at undergraduate level.
- University media and culture was highlighted as being problematic by many participants, as this was seen to exclude particular groups. Respondents presented narratives of discomfort towards social constructions and depictions of university life, indicating that they often feel ‘othered’ and invisible within the university setting.

(Priede and Nicholls 2017)

References


Priede, C. and Nicholls, K. (2017) Tracking the progress of Department of Lifelong Learning Foundation Year Students through The University of Sheffield. Sheffield: The Department of Lifelong Learning
1.7. Equivalent qualifications

Dr Zoe Baker and Greg Brown

‘Equivalent qualifications’ (EQs) are credentials that can be used to gain entry into higher education but are not typically regarded as ‘traditional’ level 3 qualifications (i.e. A or Advanced Levels in England). Equivalent qualifications are often regarded as ‘vocational’ in nature and are presented as a ‘parallel stream’ for both entry into HE, and the labour market (Shields and Masardo 2017). Below, we will assess the issues of access, transition, retention and HE culture related to equivalent qualifications, focusing on Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) qualifications in particular, and highlight the need for increased awareness and development in inclusive practices in HEIs.

In recent years, an increasing number of students have entered HE with EQs, with the proportion of those holding a BTEC as their sole Level 3 qualification doubling between the 2005-06 and 2012-13 academic year (HEFCE 2015). Despite this increase, those entering HE with A-levels continue to form the majority of the cohort. In 2015, just 3.5% of 18 year olds holding BTEC Level 3 qualifications compared with 19.6% of those with A-levels were accepted into HE (UCAS 2015). In 2016, the picture was similar amongst the young student population, with 3.5% of BTEC holders accepted compared to 20.1% of those entering with A-levels. Yet, it is important to highlight that the progression of BTEC and A-level holders is more complex due to many young people studying combinations of the two qualifications. HEFCE (2015), for example, reports that the number of pupils in the Level 3 population taking A-level and BTEC combinations have more than tripled between 2005-06 and 2012-13. While it is evident that more and more students entering HE are doing so with BTEC qualifications and/or a mixture of BTEC’s and A-levels, the persistent gap between the BTEC Level 3 and A-level population in HE remains.

These inequalities in HE progression rates between students with traditional and EQs point to wider WP concerns; BTEC students are more likely to be from lower socioeconomic groups (BIS 2015) and Black or Minority Ethnic backgrounds (Kelly 2017).

Preparedness, attainment and retention

The growing prevalence of students entering HE with non A-level, or a mixture of A-level and other pre-entry qualifications, mean that the ‘level and prior experience of learning prior to the point of entry can no longer be assumed’ (Haggis 2006, p. 522). Yet, scholarly literature focusing on transitions to HE for EQ holders identifies a variety of challenges relating to ‘preparedness’ for HE and calls for more inclusive learning and teaching practices (Catterall et al. 2013; Ertl et al. 2010; Garratt 2011; Hockings et al. 2010, 2012).

Catterall et al. (2013) argue that ‘preparedness’ and expectations affect students’ transitions to HE. This can differ between those with traditional, and equivalent qualifications. For instance, in Ertl et al.’s (2010) study exploring rates of HE participation amongst those with Vocational Education and Training (VET) backgrounds, they concluded that VET students needed, and expected, more

4. Of the 18 year old UK population.
Individualised advice and support. In Catterall et al.’s (2013) research into VET to HE transitions in Australia, a number of ‘gaps’ between students’ expectations and experiences were identified. They found that the most common gap was the amount of face to face contact with teachers, and the level of educational support provided. This can lead to what Griffiths et al. (2005, p. 275) describe as ‘learning shock’, where students become confused or anxious when they are ‘exposed to unfamiliar learning and teaching methods…and subjected to ambiguous and conflicting expectations’. In Tett et al.’s (2017, p. 404) work on transitions from FE to HE in the Scottish context, they found that tutor support played a key role in helping students understand ‘what university was about’. In turn, this assisted students in developing beneficial learning approaches in HE, such as being more autonomous, rather than dependent.

The concerns and difficulties experienced by students entering HE with EQs, and with prior experience of a highly supportive environment, can contribute to issues with retention. Ertl et al. (2010) found that there was a negative relationship between VET backgrounds and retention at the end of the first year of study. There are also differences in retention rates of EQ students depending on type of HEI, with BTEC students having the lowest degree completion rates in Russell Group institutions (Kelly 2017). A similar pattern is evident in terms of attainment; students with EQs have lower degree outcomes compared to A-level holders, and this difference is more pronounced in research intensive institutions (Shields and Masardo 2017).

In response to issues of retention, attainment and students’ overall experiences in HE, research has called for more inclusive learning and teaching practices. Some key recommendations focus on ways that teaching staff can establish understandings of their students as individuals, with their own specific educational experiences and levels of existing knowledge, and suggest incorporating learning activities to help students apply this to their degree content (Garratt 2011; Hockings et al. 2010, 2012). Notably, Ertl et al.’s (2010, p. 87) research concluded that students with VET backgrounds wanted more advice on how to ‘effectively integrate their vocational background and experience into their new learning environment’.

HE culture and environment

In addition to inclusive teaching and learning practices, the HE culture and environment can play a role in student retention, and their academic experiences more broadly. The literature highlights that students can find some HE cultures alienating (Hockings 2011; Leathwood and O’Connell 2003). This may be more pronounced for EQ students for a number of reasons. Firstly, EQ holders are more likely to be from groups that are underrepresented in HE (BIS 2015; Kelly 2017). Secondly, a lack of knowledge and understanding of EQs leads to assumptions that they are ‘not worth much’ (Leathwood and Hutchings 2003, p. 143). As a result, EQ students may be marked as ‘other’ compared to those who have entered HE via the A-level route (Leathwood and O’Connell 2003), contributing to feelings of alienation in the HE environment. Such perceptions may create, or exacerbate, anxieties over ‘measuring up’ academically to peers, a concern that has been noted to exist amongst FE students when transitioning to the HE environment (Christie et al. 2006; Pike and Harrison 2011). These findings are also consistent with Zoe Baker’s (WPREU 2018) case study research on the academic experiences of EQ students in a Northern Russell Group HEI. Participants spoke of the stigma associated with EQs and described how these messages had been implicitly and explicitly conveyed by tutors and peers. Subsequently, this led some participants to internalise these views, perceiving A-level students as more confident and knowledgeable than themselves.

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5. See 3.1 Inclusive Learning and Teaching for a more detailed discussion.
There is a wealth of literature that uses Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) concepts of ‘habitus’ and ‘field’ as a conceptual lens to understand why some students may feel uncomfortable in particular HE environments (Crozier et al. 2010; Reay et al. 2005; Thomas 2002); scholars have highlighted how dispositions that ‘non-traditional’ students, such as those with EQs (Leese 2010), have prior to entering HE may not fit with specific HE cultures or environments.

The literature contends that post-1992 institutions, which tend to admit a more diverse student body, are better at providing supportive environments to students who have progressed through ‘non-traditional’ pathways. This is because it has been necessary for them to ‘consider the needs of a diverse student body’ (Leese 2010, p. 240). This may also help explain why there is an overrepresentation of EQ holders in post-1992 institutions (Christie et al. 2006; Hoelscher et al. 2008; Leathwood and O’Connell 2003; Shields and Masardo 2015), and a lower retention rate amongst such students in Russell Group institutions.

The issues outlined here can contribute to problems in students’ transition to ‘elite’ and traditional, pre-1992 institutions, which are less diverse in their student intake, and have limited experience in supporting students entering with EQs. HEI’s must consider how their learning and teaching approaches, and further, their cultures and practices can be more inclusive of those not entering with ‘traditional’ pre-entry qualifications.

References


1.8. Widening Participation and Equality and Diversity

Miriam Miller

How equality and diversity relates to widening participation

Widening participation strategies (WP) help underrepresented groups to access further or higher education to continue their education. The traditional focus of WP is on socioeconomic disadvantage. However, at their heart, both WP and equality and diversity are concerned with advancing equality of opportunity for disadvantaged groups throughout the student lifecycle. They both seek to address issues of access, retention or success for protected groups.

(ECU 2017a)

While the traditional focus of Widening Participation is on socio-economic class, this is just one aspect of students’ identities and it cannot easily be separated from other aspects of their identity such as gender, ethnicity, and disability. This helps to explain why work to widen participation in Universities often ties in with work that focuses on equality and diversity issues.

Research by the Equality Challenge Unit has looked at the way the two strands of work interconnect in Scottish Higher Education Institutions and found that:

- Many Widening Participation initiatives reached and supported access of protected groups, sometimes inadvertently.
- There are intersections between WP targeted groups and equality groups, for example there are overlaps with race and areas of deprivation.
- Equality is beginning to be incorporated into access, retention and success strategy though outcome agreements with the Scottish Funding Council.

(ECU 2017a)

Additionally, national Widening Participation policies are increasingly moving towards a more holistic approach that considers the entire student lifecycle, rather than just widening participation at the point of access (OFFA 2016a; OFFA 2016b; HEFCE 2016). As we have noted in the preceding pages, students entering HE from a diverse range of backgrounds should therefore be supported in their studies to ensure they are able to succeed in the same way as their more ‘traditional’ counter-
parts; with a focus on their experiences of their time in HE, and outcomes such as degree awards, and progression to further study and employment.

Research has shown that different student groups have different experiences of Higher Education, with different degree and graduate outcomes. For example, disabled students are less satisfied with their courses than non-disabled students (HEFCE 2014); there is a persistent sector-wide attainment gap for BME students (ECU 2017b); and the gender pay gap still exists for female graduates (Costa Dias et al. 2016).

Issues of differential experiences and outcomes are now being reflected in the reporting requirements for HEIs. For example, OFFA’s guidance on writing an access agreement for 2018-19 (OFFA 2016b) asks HEIs to give specific emphasis to interventions which help to raise attainment for target groups. These groups include: BME students, disabled students, mature and part time learners, and white males from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

In 2016, the Government also introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), a system building on the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which purports to assess the quality of teaching in Universities in the UK. The TEF has a focus on widening participation, and all of its measures for analysing a provider’s submission are broken down to split metrics which closely examine whether the institution is delivering positive outcomes for all students. These split metrics include (for providers in England): age, disadvantage (using POLAR data), ethnicity, sex, and disability. Universities are then measured against each of these metrics on outcomes such as student satisfaction, progression to postgraduate study, and progression to employment (HEFCE 2016).

Counterproductively, other Government policies and practices can serve to create barriers impeding some of this work. The increased cost of studying at University, and consequently potential students’ perspectives on debt are an issue, as debt-averse attitudes are more likely to deter working class students from applying to Higher Education (Callender and Mason 2017). Funding changes to disabled students’ allowance introduced in 2016/17 put more responsibility into the hands of Universities to support their disabled students (Willets 2014), despite disparity across the sector in the extent to which individual universities are able to meet the costs of this additional support. Finally, although the TEF initially promised to closely examine ‘any significant differences in the quality of teaching and learning experienced by different student groups’ (DfE 2016), critics have noted that some HEIs with significant attainment gaps for BME students have nonetheless managed to acquire a Gold Award in the first year of the TEF, and it has therefore failed to deliver on this promise (Buckley-Irvine 2017).

The purpose of equality and diversity in higher education

There are differing perspectives on the importance and purpose of equality and diversity in higher education. Nunan et al. (2000) point to two in particular. Firstly, they describe what they term a ‘liberal’ view. This might focus on increasing both access and success in HE for those groups which were traditionally excluded, but it will still generally frame success according to how academic achievement benefits the individual. Secondly, they describe a more ‘critical’ idea of inclusivity. On this view, education is seen as a way of providing more options for success, taking the view that education for all is better for society as a whole. Personal benefit, while still a desirable outcome,

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6. Changes to Higher Education policy brought in by the Coalition government in 2010 led to the majority of UK Universities increasing the cost of tuition to £9000 per year. As part of this change, Universities had to demonstrate that a proportion was being spent on widening access to Higher Education. Universities have to demonstrate this expenditure via their Access Agreements, written by the University each year and approved by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA).
is less important than an outcome where all graduates operate in more inclusive ways for the betterment of society (Nunan et al., 2000).

Additionally, Shaw (2009) describes a “diversity paradox” which questions whether diversity enhances or challenges excellence in a University context. While Shaw notes that there is evidence on the one hand to show that diversity brings some desirable benefits (e.g. students interacting with a diverse peer group, leading to enhanced development of critical thinking; the development of academic self-concept which in turn promotes better student retention; and changes to the curriculum which allow students to understand different forms of knowledge and ways of knowing), she also argues that simply broadening the social mix of students is not sufficient to bring about these positive outcomes. Diversity takes on this paradoxical nature depending on how it is managed; if the “norms, practices and tacit assumptions” (Shaw 2009 p. 326) of the institution are not adapted to reflect its changing student body, this can be damaging both to the institution and to these students as individuals; challenging the concept of ‘excellence’ rather than enhancing it. This suggests the need adopt an inclusive learning and teaching approach to enable students from all walks of life to fulfil their potential. (A more detailed exploration of this concept can be found in the Inclusive Learning and Teaching section of this book).

Boliver (2016) also notes that it is important to be clear that increasing diversity and being representative are not synonymous. The equal treatment of all students, no matter what their social background, does not necessarily equate to a perfectly diverse student population. Universities also have a duty to comply with the Equality Act (2010), which stipulates the provision of fair treatment, rather than proportional representation. Furthermore, we also need to think about which population we compare our student body to; the local, the national, or the global? Archer (2007) notes the relationships between the different standards awarded to Universities by the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and perhaps by extension, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). These standards of ‘Gold’, ‘Silver’ and ‘Bronze’ are awarded to institutions that are respectively considered to work within remits which are global, national, and local. This is problematic for those institutions who consider their remit to be global but nonetheless have to engage with the widening participation agenda, which largely concerns itself with the national and local populations. The question arises, if an organisation wishes to be seen to be ‘global’ in its reach, should it be aiming to have a student body that is more closely representative of the global population than the national?

This also reflects a broader concern about whether the current Higher Education system truly enables social mobility, or whether it in fact serves to reproduce inequality. (Bourdieu 1977; Lane and Birds 2013). For example, research shows BME students may ‘self-exclude’ themselves from applying to Universities which are seen as higher up in the pecking order (Shiner and Noden 2015) and working-class students feel that only some, less prestigious, universities are accessible to them whereas the ‘dream’ universities that guaranteed better graduate jobs were only for middle class students who had the necessary financial and family support to go (Archer 2000). When thinking about how the widening participation agenda fits in with equality and diversity, it becomes necessary to not just ask who is going to university, but who is going where, and why (Ball et al. 2002).

It is also worth exercising some caution in other areas which aim to combine the widening participation agenda with equality and diversity aims. One potentially problematic strand of the discourse around equality and diversity is the deficit model of ‘non-traditional’ students needing to have their aspirations raised, in order to conceptualise themselves as future students, while little or no attention is directed at the culture and practices of universities that are deemed unattainable by certain social groups (Archer 2007). Research by Baker et al. (2014) found - contrary to policy discourse - generally high aspirations across all students, albeit with some differences by income group and other background factors. Cummings et al. (2012) argued against activities explicitly tasked with ‘raising’ aspirations, and instead called for programmes and interventions that kept
young people’s aspirations ‘on track’. Moreover, Croll and Atwood (2013) argue for the importance of national policies and practices targeted at improving the school-level achievement of such students, as attainment is a more concrete mechanism by which access may be improved, and further, a tangible way in which students can realise their already high aspirations.

Another area to be mindful of is that of contextual admissions. Boliver et al. (2015) argue that while contextualised admissions policies “represent a potentially powerful means of addressing the persistent under-representation of HE students from less advantaged backgrounds” - and show promise - there are difficulties in administering contextual admissions effectively and appropriately. In order to avoid just tackling the symptoms of “stratified participation” they propose conducting further and sustained research that examines what contextual indicators would work well in practice and what difference they would make to the widening participation agenda as a result.

There are therefore challenges to be overcome when combining the two agendas, however closely linked they may be. One suggestion for addressing this is highlighted by Thomas (2005), who says that while no single agenda for reform can hope to meet the diverse needs of modern student populations, students have to be involved in the processes of change in order to remove the various barriers that stand in the way of both access to HE and progression into further study and employment. We are starting to see this type of approach nationally in the work of many institutions who are not just interested in widening access for different groups, but also moving towards more holistic views of participation and ensuring that all students are enabled to fulfil their potential.

A key area of WPREU’s work over the last two years has been the focus on differential attainment for Black and Minority Ethnic students. WPREU has published both a comprehensive literature summary, The Ethnicity Attainment Gap: An Overview (Miller 2016) and the BME Attainment Gap Project: Report (Powell and Quyoom 2016). In 2017 we also published further analysis undertaken by two placement students from Sheffield Methods Institute (Denby and Smith, 2017).

WPREU has also been working collaboratively with academic staff in other faculties who are developing their own strategies to improve the experiences of their BME students in order to begin addressing - and ultimately close - the attainment gap. To date this has included working with the Faculty of Engineering on qualitative research as part of a project exploring the BME Attainment Gap, and with the Faculty of Social Sciences on their differential attainment task and finish group. This group produced a report of their findings from interviews with staff and students, titled You Have to Put on Your White Self to Progress (Awan et al. 2017).

We are also working with the Arts and Humanities Faculty and the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) on a collaborative project which aims to increase the proportion of BME students in the faculty. BME students currently make up 5.9% of our Arts and Humanities students, compared to 14% of the national population (ONS 2011). This project will continue until December 2018, and we expect to publish the outcomes of the project subsequently.

We have also been working on a second collaborative project with ECU, which is aimed at improving the support provision for students with specific learning difficulties, mental health and/or autism spectrum conditions. We are currently working with a group of students who self-define as having one or more of these conditions or learning differences as co-researchers, using a Participatory Action Research approach and plan to share the outcomes of this project towards the end of 2017 (for more details see 1.3 Disability and Access).

As part of our work with the faculties, we have developed a Community of Practice (CoP) that any member of staff interested in achieving race equality can join. This helps to share information and disseminate examples of good practice with colleagues across the organisation, in order to bring together the work on closing the attainment gap. We are also using this community to build a bank of resources to help staff in their ongoing work to liberate the curriculum.
The future of equality and diversity work in WPREU

The University already has a Silver institutional Athena SWAN award, in recognition of its ongoing commitment to promoting gender equality. The Equality Challenge Unit also started developing a Race Equality Charter Mark (RECM) in 2012, similar to Athena SWAN. The RECM provides a framework for institutions to identify and reflect upon the institutional and cultural barriers faced by their minority ethnic staff and students. So far there are 36 member organisations and 9 award holders, and we anticipate the University of Sheffield signing up to this charter in the near future.

It is important to note that there are also other aspects of equality and diversity that aren't always explicitly mentioned in Widening Participation work, but are nonetheless worth our consideration. For example, LGBT+ people are not considered to be a target group for widening participation or outreach. However, ECU research into the experiences of these students shows that:

- The majority (90.2%) of LGB students are out to their university friends, but almost two-thirds are not out to tutors (61.3%) or lecturers (64.3%) as they fear discrimination.

- 15% of LGB students and 34.8% of trans students fear losing financial support if they come out to their parents about their sexual orientation or trans status.

- The parents of 4.9% of LGB students and 7.1% of trans students refuse to provide financial support for them as specified by their local education authority assessment. A further 3% of LGB students and 9.2% of trans students are, in effect, estranged from their parents, but do not know how to prove this legally and so receive no financial support.

- LGB students reported significant levels of negative treatment on the grounds of their sexual orientation, from fellow students (49.5%), tutors/lecturers (10.4%), and those who work in other areas of their HEI (10.6%).

- Trans students encountered even higher levels of negative treatment, with almost a quarter (22.6%) of trans students having been bullied or discriminated against since starting university.

(ECU 2009)

This suggests not only a potential strand of work in itself to examine the experiences of our own LGBT+ students, but also the need to ensure these students’ perspectives are included in other areas of work into Widening Participation, to better understand where and how students’ sexuality intersects with other aspects of their identity and how this might impact on their experiences and outcomes.

References


Comment

Sheffield SEED Project

Dr Rachel van Duyvenbode

The Sheffield SEED Project is a peer-led professional development equality and diversity programme which offers a space for university staff to reflect on critical issues related to equity, diversity, inclusion and social justice in higher education. The 7-month programme is modelled on the work of The National SEED Project (nationalseedproject.org) a U.S. based programme working in schools, local communities and Higher Educational institutions since 1987. In 2015, The University of Sheffield launched the UK’s first SEED programme (van Duyvenbode 2016) and the project has attracted national acclaim for its sector leading innovative practice in equality and diversity by Equality Challenge Unit, Higher Education Academy and HEFCE (ECU 2017c). In the following section, the Director of the Sheffield SEED Project, Dr Rachel van Duyvenbode, reflects on the work of SEED in conversation with this material presented in this chapter on the intersections of Widening Participation strategies and Equality and Diversity.

Research on the intersection of WP with equality groups not only reflects the reality of the diversely inhabited identities and backgrounds of our students (and staff) but also acknowledges the requirement to have more effective “interventions” to support students to flourish during their time at university. However, the policy focus on student intervention neglects to turn a mirror to the organisation and its people asking difficult questions about how some of the deeply held beliefs about the culture and function of the university (i.e. meritocracy, privilege, elitism etc.) undermine the success of EDI initiatives.

The function of SEED is to support staff at the University of Sheffield in developing their understanding of educational equity and to facilitate a process where staff can work collaboratively with others to become leaders for change in their workplaces. Here the work of “raising attainment” shifts away from what “target groups” need to do differently and instead invites staff to explore the ‘gaps’ in our knowledge of diversity, inclusivity and educational justice.

SEED aims to develop staff competencies in equality and diversity by opening up conversations about key underlying beliefs that critically shape our approach to WP and students from equality groups. The sessions incorporate both personal reflection and experiential learning with interrogation of wider systemic inequalities reproduced by educational institutions; sexism, racism, ableism etc. SEED aims to hold these conversations between staff in an open and meaningful way so, through peer-led learning, colleagues are enabled to identifying ways to intervene and transform personal behaviours and thinking, remake institutional processes and transform professional teaching practice.

SEED complements many of the allied initiatives for developing professional learning and teaching practice offered at the University of Sheffield. Although the domain of learning and teaching constitutes an important strand of the SEED programme, encompassing inclusive pedagogy and curriculum diversification and/or decolonisation, our interpretation of ‘inclusive curriculum’ attends to wider forms of knowledge production, evaluation and meaning-making which is particularly pertinent to WP and equality group students who carry with them forms of ‘community cultural wealth’ (Yosso 2005) marginalised within the educational process. In SEED workshops,
counter-narratives (voices and perspectives of students marginalised within the institution) provide windows of expertise into experiences of the hidden curriculum and the programme advocates inclusivity as a process (a doing) that requires embedding throughout the higher educational environment: its systems, campus cultures and classroom practices.
Part 2.

Researching and evaluating Widening Participation
In this section of the book, we explore how widening participation has, and might be approached through research and evaluation methodologies.

Julian Crockford begins by providing an overview of how the evaluation of WP outreach has been positioned in recent HE policy discourse and how expectations have changed over the last decade (2.1). Julian then summarises the key outcomes from WPREU’s own evaluation activity, to outline the impact on the University’s WP participation work (2.2), before reflecting on the progress made and potential future directions in the evaluation of this area (2.3).

We then explore specific research and evaluation methodological approaches in more detail:

- **Greg Brown** describes the potential use of experimental and quasi-experimental approaches to evaluating WP outreach (2.4). As a counterpoint, he then describes how realist evaluation approaches might be usefully applied to this area, using a hypothetical mentoring programme as an example (2.5).

- **Miriam Miller** explores the use of participatory approaches that engage WP students as co-researchers and describes some of the benefits and challenges of this approach in the context of widening participation (2.6).

- **Zoe Baker** describes what narrative methodologies have to offer research in this area, and how they can support efforts to make universities richer and more inclusive places (2.7).

- **Rita Hordósy** contextualises this discussion about research and evaluation methodology by outlining the prior work and longitudinal research design that underpinned her four-year investigation of student experience, *The Sheffield Student 2013* (2.8).

The section concludes with a reflection by **Dr Tom Clark**, University Teacher in Social Policy and Sociology, and WPREU’s academic advisor on the importance of choosing the right methodology to explore widening participation issues.
2.1.
The development of WP evaluation

Dr Julian Crockford

Policy focus on the importance of effective evaluation as a central plank in institutional widening participation strategies has intensified over the last decade. In the early days of the current phase of widening participation regulation (2006 and onwards), the primary concern for both OFFA and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) was with monitoring the financial investment made by HEIs and ensuring that the interventions and support it paid for were reaching the most disadvantaged or under-represented students (e.g. OFFA 2004). The trebling of tuition fees in 2012, and the resulting increase in institutional spend on WP, intensified scrutiny of the increasingly large sums being invested and raised the volume of calls for it to be properly evaluated.

A cautionary tale: The fate of Aimhigher

Running parallel to the expansion of HEI-delivered widening participation interventions between 2006 and 2011 was the rise and abrupt fall of Aimhigher. This nation-wide programme was created in 2004, when two previous access interventions (Partnership for Progression and the Excellence Challenge) were merged under the auspices of the then Department for Education and Skills to form 45 regional consortia (Passy & Morris 2010; Passy 2012). As Aimhigher developed, regulators increasingly stressed the need for effective evaluation of the programme. In its early stages, as with institution-delivered WP activities, the primary focus was on monitoring appropriate take-up and reach of the interventions offered (e.g. HEFCE 2007). Each consortium was responsible for undertaking its own evaluation, however, HEFCE also commissioned an evaluation of the whole programme. Both interim (Passy et al. 2009) and final reports (Passy and Morris 2010) cast doubts on the effectiveness of local level evaluation processes and the ability of consortia to demonstrate impact. They pointed, in particular, to an over-reliance on qualitative data and small scale quantitative studies that identified correlations rather than causal relationships between interventions and outcomes (Passy et al 2009, p. 23). The perception of failings in evaluation may have fed into the decision, by David Willetts in 2010, to cease funding Aimhigher in the run up to the introduction of variable tuition fees (Harrison 2012), the stated rationale for which was the need to redistribute funding (Attwood 2010). For Neil Harrison (2012), the demise of Aimhigher stemmed from a mismatch between broad and wide-ranging policy objectives and the practical implications of their implementation at the ‘coalface’. Either way, the demise of Aimhigher has cast a long shadow over subsequent WP interventions and serves to highlight the important role played by robust and effective evaluation and the need to produce clear outcomes that speak to policy makers, if practitioners are to make an effective case for HE-delivered outreach.
Stages in the evolution of WP outreach evaluation

Stage 1: Tracking and monitoring

As noted above, regulators were initially most concerned with the monitoring and tracking of outreach interventions and spend. In his 2006 guidance, for example, then Director of OFFA, Martin Harris, flagged the need for institutions to explain how they would monitor progress against their milestones and targets, but did not refer to the need to evaluate the interventions themselves, except to note that

as part of our monitoring process and to develop good practice, we will be interested in talking to and visiting a sample of institutions each year to ask for further qualitative information about how things are working and what measures are effective.

(OFFA 2004)

In the same way, HEFCE’s evaluation guidance for Aimhigher required practitioners to focus mainly on ensuring that activity was properly targeted, with the assessment of the effectiveness of interventions subordinated to a subclause:

The comments of learners, teachers, parents and others are invaluable when the effectiveness of provision is evaluated. However, it is the quality of information collected from (or about) participants in WP activities that will tell schools, colleges, HE providers and Aimhigher partnerships whether their targeting is effective and whether they need to do more to make it so.

(HEFCE 2007)

Stage 2: Identifying best practice / ‘What Works’

Although an initial interest in evaluation as a means of identifying and sharing good practice was evident from the early stages of OFFA’s involvement in HE-delivered WP, this rested on an assumption that the identification of good practice would emerge naturally from the regulatory structures put in place. This was primarily because OFFA would have oversight of HEI’s Access Agreements. Thus, in 2004, in his letter to Sir Martin Harris, the Director of Fair Access, Charles Clarke delegated responsibility for identifying good practice to OFFA, assuming that this would be an inevitable by-product of their work approving institutional Access Agreements;

I expect you will come to have an active role in identifying and supporting best practice. Through your overview of access agreements, you will be well placed to see what interventions are most successful, and to make institutions aware of one another’s successes.

(Clarke 2004)

David Lammy’s 2009 letter to OFFA was more explicit about the need for the regulator to take a more proactive role in gathering information from individual HEIs about how their WP strategies were being implemented and they could ‘ensure that measures for wider access are prioritised most effectively [and...] whether the money currently being used by universities under access agreements […] can be better targeted in order to give more effective support to fair access’ (Lammy 2009). This instruction prompted Harris to publish What can be done to widen access to selective universities, the first significant regulatory intervention pointing to the need for effective evaluation. Harris pointed to a contemporary lack of evaluation activity and therefore evidence
about what was effective, but also acknowledged the difficulties in developing a robust evaluation response.

There is also limited evaluation and evidence around widening participation activities, particularly activities designed to raise aspirations generally. This is partly due to the inherent difficulty in disaggregating particular programmes from the multiplicity of factors that influence decisions about whether and where to attend university, as well as difficulties arising from the long-term nature of some outreach work and the fact that many outreach programmes are relatively new.

(Harris 2010, p.3)

In this guidance, the stated primary driver for WP evaluation was to support the targeting of ‘resources at programmes with proven track records’ (Harris 2010, p.48). This represents a clear shift to the influential ‘what works’ agenda, in which evaluation is positioned as the primary mechanism for identifying the most effective interventions, with ‘effectiveness’ used as the key criteria for determining investment; ‘evaluation is essential in enabling institutions to allocate their resources effectively’ (Ibid., p.15). Crucially, it also moves on from the assumption that good practice will be captured through the existing Access Agreement mechanisms, and charges HEIs with an active evaluation role. ‘There should be an expectation that institutions undertake their own research and analysis – making use of national data where appropriate’ (Harris 2010, p.88). From this point, HEIs were tasked with being much more proactive in using their own evaluation to determine their approach to WP.

Stage 3: Demonstrating return on WP investment

The trebling of tuition fees to a potential maximum of £9000 per year generated another wave of calls for institutions to intensify their evaluation efforts. Cable and Willett’s 2011 Ministerial letter to OFFA, shadowed by the recent fees announcement, was explicitly outcome-focused, marking a shift from the concern with inputs that was characteristic the early regulatory focus on monitoring and tracking; ‘we want to encourage you and the higher education sector to focus more sharply on the outcomes of outreach and other access activities rather than the inputs and processes’ (Cable and Willetts 2011). This shift was driven by a focus on ‘value for money’, which in turn was viewed as an inevitable consequence of ‘encouraging best practice’ (Cable and Willetts 2011, paragraph 1.9). This approach combines both a ‘what works’ approach and an emphasis on effective spend. By the time of Jo Johnson’s 2016 Ministerial guidance letter to the Director of OFFA, evidencing a return on investment had become the dominant and explicit concern.

We look to you to continue to encourage institutions to invest wisely in widening participation, basing their decisions on robust evaluation plans and evidence. This depends first and foremost on having good data and using it effectively, and we look to you to champion the effective collection of reliable and relevant data and its effective use. We would like you to require more from institutions in the information they provide to you about how they use evaluation and reflective practice and the expertise they draw on to help them make their investment decisions.

(Johnson 2016)

Preparations for the 2012 increase in tuition fees coincided with Les Ebdon stepping into the role of Director of Fair Access. From the outset, his guidance emphasised a ‘what works’ approach, underpinned by the Government’s increasing interest in demonstrating a clear return on the substantial investment made in HEI-delivered WP activity. In his foreword to guidance for HEI’s on the preparation of their 2014-15 Access Agreements, for example, Ebdon noted:
Perhaps the single most important difference between this and previous guidance is our increased emphasis on the need for evidence and evaluation. We want you to build in evaluation of your access measures right from the start so you can maximise the effectiveness of your efforts. We appreciate that evaluating the outcomes of access activities is not always easy, but it is vital if we are to improve understanding of what works best, share best practice across the sector and demonstrate to Government the value of investment in this area.

(OFFA 2013)

This guidance also marked a further intensification of Harris’ (2010) concern with the effective embedding of evaluation into outreach practice, by requiring HEIs to actively demonstrate that they were using their evaluation outcomes to inform their delivery of outreach activity and that an evidence-based approach was being adopted:

We expect your plans to demonstrate how you have responded to the results of your evaluation work, e.g. by expanding successful programmes, or refining or discontinuing unsuccessful programmes.

(OFFA 2013)

The formulation used here suggests that the HE sector had not yet adequately responded to the ‘what works’ agenda and that although it was providing evidence that evaluation was taking place, it had not yet demonstrably used evaluation outcomes to steer its WP practice. This expanding of regulatory focus to include the evaluation process itself marks the beginning of a policy shift that was to become increasingly prominent in subsequent guidance.

Stage 4: Meta-evaluation

From 2014 OFFA’s policy focus shifted from the evaluation of intervention impacts to the (meta) evaluation of evaluation itself. OFFA’s annual monitoring return guidance, which required HEIs to report on progress made towards their Access Agreement targets and milestones, tasked institutions with providing ‘an assessment of your approach to evaluating your access, student success and progression activities and programmes’ and a clear example of how their evaluation was driving their strategic WP plans:

We are keen to understand the types of activities that form your approach to evaluation. [...] Table 10c provides an opportunity for you to highlight your best examples of evaluation of access agreement activities over the past year, across the student lifecycle, and to set out the key findings. We are keen to understand more at a sector level how institutions are using evaluation to help meet their WP objectives.

(OFFA 2014)

Subsequent OFFA guidance has continued in this direction by requiring institutions to give examples of, and assess, their progress towards undertaking effective and robust evaluation and explain how they have used outcomes to change and develop their outreach practice.

We suggest that this is indicative, despite evidence of pockets of effective practice, of the sector as a whole not yet having provided OFFA and HEFCE with a satisfactory demonstration that their WP evaluation is robust, effective and being used to determine their practice. In turn, this relative lack of progress feeds back into a broader concern with establishing effective evaluation methods and approaches to explore the impact of WP interventions.
Contemporary and divergent approaches to WP evaluation

The increasing policy emphasis on the need for robust evaluation of WP outreach has resulted in the development and expansion of evaluation resources across the sector, even if, as yet, it has not provided concrete and extensive evidence of ‘what works best’ in terms of WP outreach interventions. This failure has led to divergent ways of thinking about and approaching the evaluation task.

As we note below in 2.3, there is an increasingly widespread focus on the potential of experimental and quasi-experimental evaluation approaches to establish robust evidence through the use of control groups or a randomised control design. As a Sutton Trust report, Evaluating Access (2015) acknowledges, however, there have been very few successful attempts to apply this methodology to WP interventions, particularly in the UK. It identifies only one successful example, Hoare and Man’s (2011) evaluation of Sutton Trust Summer Schools, which incorporated a number of comparator groups, using a quasi-experimental approach.

At the same time, however, other commentators are concerned this kind of approach, which often draws on clinical methodologies, was not appropriate for the messy complexities of social reality (see 2.3 and 2.6; Harrison & Waller 2016; Bellaera 2018; Crockford 2017). In particular, critics argue that even with a randomised design, it is not possible to control for the wide range of potential intervening variables that could impact on a young person’s decision to progress into HE. A related concern is that although this kind of approach might identify correlations between intervention and outcomes, it does not establish robust causal relationships. Moreover, it adopts a ‘black box’ approach, which might provide evidence that something works, but does not establish why. As such, it is not capable of isolating what is effective and, crucially, generalizable in WP outreach practice.

Without understanding why something has worked and understanding the contextual factors that underpin this success, it is not possible to assume that just because an intervention worked in one context, it would work in another. This serves to pull the rug from under the ‘what works’ approach, which implicitly depends on the generalisability of WP outreach interventions; the assumption that because something correlated with a successful outcome in one context, a wholesale transfer of the intervention to another context would inevitably result in equivalent success. And without secure knowledge that interventions and intervention success are transferable, the ‘value for money’ / return on investment argument begins to unravel. Without a guarantee of generalisable success, the same intervention implemented in unsuitable contexts might result in unsatisfactory outcomes and therefore wasted investment.

Given these concerns, there have been recent attempts to push back against calls for experimental methods, in favour of a more nuanced and context-dependent approach which acknowledges that outreach interventions take place in a complex, systemic reality and might work differently in different contexts or for different participants. Harrison and Waller (2016) for example, suggested that rather than simply focus on the macro outcome of HE progression outcomes, if we want to understand how WP outreach works and what it does, we should consider a ‘small steps’ approach, which attempts to evaluate smaller meso- and micro-level changes that happen at the level of the individual. These small steps are viewed as components in a more complex pathway of progression. This is a view that WPREU researchers are increasingly sympathetic to. As we detail below, some of our evaluation work is founded in an assumption that WP interventions (whether for access, student success or progression) are complex and nuanced, taking place in a systemic and variable context, and as such are likely to have different impacts on different participants and in different contexts.

Moreover, we are starting to suspect that as a sector, we may have approached evaluation from the wrong (top down) direction. Therefore, we are increasingly adopting mixed-method approaches...
and working from the bottom up, by paying more attention to the nuts and bolts workings of WP practice, and the practitioner experience and expertise which underpins it. This also allows us to reposition WP practitioners, recognising them as experts who possess a wide range of practical, experiential and tacit knowledge, which can go unrecognised and unacknowledged in other forms of evaluation. In the pages below, we work through a number of different evaluation and research approaches and consider the benefits and challenges of each, for the purpose, not so much of identifying ‘what works’ in WP outreach, but for understanding what parts of what we do work best, for whom and when.

References


Harris, M. (2010). What can be done to widen access to highly selective universities, OFFA: Bristol.


2.2. Outreach evaluation outcomes

Dr Julian Crockford

At the time of writing, WPREU have completed and published (to an internal University of Sheffield audience), the outcomes of 11 evaluation projects. These cover a range of outreach interventions from activities with primary school children, through to interventions with young people from care backgrounds, and potential students from Year 9 to 13. We have also undertaken evaluations of student success and progression activities, such as employability initiatives, and the University’s own financial support packages. We briefly describe each project, and the evaluation outcomes, below.

Early education interventions: Pre-16 Outreach outcomes

Cool to Be Clever Miller and Cohen (2016)

The University of Sheffield participates in the 'Cool to Be Clever' initiative, a collaborative programme developed with one of Sheffield’s Independent Schools. The scheme works with Y6 students from some of the most disadvantaged areas in Sheffield and offers them an activity each term, which takes place either on the university campus or in our partner school; Pupils have attended a variety of activities at the University, exploring topics such as biology, University clubs and societies, social sciences, architecture, chemistry, and engineering. Pupils also experience a visit to Sport Sheffield and a Medical Adventure Day, led by medical students.

We evaluated this programme twice, in 2015 and 2016, exploring the impact of the intervention though separate focus groups with participants, their parents and school staff:

- Participants told us they particularly enjoyed learning about new topics and making new friends.
- School staff observed that participating students appeared to grow in confidence and have their ‘eyes opened’ about the university experience.
- Parents noted that their offspring had more focused aspirations for progressing into HE.
- Student ambassadors were observed as being effective and engaging the participants.
- Participants valued the experience of being taught by expert university staff and in ‘authentic’ university locations.

1. Full evaluation reports are available to University of Sheffield staff via sites.google.com/a/sheffield.ac.uk/wp-resources/evaluation-outcomes
Negative observations were made about the lack of information for parents about forthcoming events and the necessary limits on the numbers of pupils who could benefit from the activity.

**Looked After Children Homework Club: Building Learning Power** *Simms (2014a); Simms (2015a)*

As we observe in 1.5, Looked After Children (LAC) - those in care - often face a number of challenges, including lower educational outcomes. The University of Sheffield Outreach Team works with Sheffield Local Authority to support looked after young people in Y5 and Y6 with a homework club, intended to support the development of their educational outcomes and help build their confidence. The programme invited young people to weekly sessions, which included an hour of student ambassador led activities and culminated in a recreational activity.

WPREU evaluated the programme in 2014 and 2015 employing a mixed methods approach. This involved: A before and after programme bar chart (2015) requiring young people to rate key social and emotional aspects of learning; the generation of a collaborative word cloud using post-it notes (2014); feedback sheets at three points in the programme (2015) / on a weekly basis (2014); focus groups with participants, their carers and student ambassadors, an individual interview with the participating teacher (2015); and interviews with individual participants (2014). Textual data was coded using NVIVO software.

Evaluation suggested that:

- Participating children felt positive emotions about the programme and felt they were learning more than at school. Participants noted that, as a result of participating in the programme, they felt more confident in their educational abilities. They also valued the opportunity to revisit topics they had covered in school.

- Participating children responded positively to the ambassadors.

- Student ambassadors (many themselves from a care background) felt that the routine represented by the regular activities was beneficial for participants, many of who had experienced significant domestic disruption.

- Carers suggested that the relaxed but structured setting was effective in supporting young peoples’ academic progress and the development of their confidence. In 2014, carers noted that the children in their care had been keen to attend the homework club and had practiced specific activities from the club at home.

- Carers also positively noted the individualised care and attention received by participants.

- Carers and ambassadors pointed to the positive impact of having a high adult to pupil ratio.

- Evaluation participants also suggested that the range of activities on offer (which focused predominantly on Maths and English skills) could be expanded to include science activities.

- Carers requested more information about what the young people had been doing during the sessions and noted that communication, which passed through schools first, had not always reached them.

Unfortunately, we did not have sufficient attainment data to robustly evidence any impact on the participants’ academic development.
Evaluation of the ‘Heads Up’ Scheme Simms (2015b)

The Heads Up scheme was a collaborative project undertaken between the University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University through the two universities’ Higher Education Progression Partnership (HEPP).

The two-year programme was designed to support 50 young people (Y10) from WP backgrounds by encouraging them to progress to post-16 education and stay on an HE progression pathway. The programme was designed to: offer intensive and sustained support to participating young people through individual IAG; provide a programme of activities exposing participants to the campuses of both HEIs; make available individual support from dedicated careers advisors and student ambassadors; and give participants access to a mentoring programme and regular careers IAG. A greater range of activities were offered in Y10 than Y11 because of an increased focus on GCSE study in the latter year of the programme. Although reduced in quantity, the activities in year two were more tightly focused, and concentrated on increasing participants’ knowledge about the range of HE courses available and supporting the development of their self-confidence and team-working skills. The programme also included a residential summer school.

We adopted a mixed method, longitudinal approach to collecting data (primarily through post-session questionnaires at three key points in the programme). We also asked students to complete a reflexive log book, an introductory questionnaire, and a before and after ‘quiz’ to test their knowledge of higher education and application-related topics. In addition, we undertook interviews with a sample of participants and the Project Lead, as well as holding focus groups with Student Ambassadors involved in programme delivery.

Unfortunately, we were unable to complete the evaluation plan as originally intended. The project design included a counterfactual group (a matched group of non-participating students in each school, against which outcome measures could be compared). However, participating schools were ultimately unable to provide the required data. Moreover, other organisational factors (e.g. changes in participating schools and therefore the participating cohort, as well as the introduction of late starters) meant that data collection was not as consistent or robust as we had anticipated.

Nonetheless, evaluation outcomes suggested:

- Targeting of the activity was generally effective, with participating students generally meeting one or more of the required WP indicators.

- On average participants attended 7.5 activities across the two years of the programme. Where they had chosen not to attend an event and had recorded a reason, this was primarily because a) it was not of interest to them b) they had not known about it, or c) they were unable to get to the activity because of lack of transport or had other commitments.

- At the beginning of the project all but one of the 43 completers had planned to progress onto post-16 education and 36/43 indicated that they planned to progress onto HE. Unfortunately, the response rate at the end of the programme was reduced, but 22/24 of the final respondents indicated they were planning to go to university.

- Participants viewed the programme as a useful, positive experience that increased their understanding of HE.

- The Summer School offered as part of the programme appeared to have increased participants’ knowledge about higher education and respondents suggested that they had valued the experience of seeing, first hand, what it was like to be a student.
Some participants expressed concern that being taken out of school to participate in Heads Up meant that they missed study or revision time, and others noted that they would have valued some on-programme support with GCSE revision.

Some participants noted that activities became repetitive over the duration of the programme.

The Heads Up project delivery team noted several unexpected challenges with the delivery of the programme. These often related to complex and different administrative procedures across different school stakeholders, the high turnover of school contact staff during the programme and, on some occasions, pupils’ academic attainment appeared to have been prioritised over participation in the programme. All of these aspects were assessed to have had some negative impact on the outcomes of the scheme.

Evaluation Summary: Pre-16 Outreach Interventions

Taking stock of the evaluation outcomes discussed above suggests that:

- Participants have broadly valued the interventions they have been involved in.
- Participants feel that participation has helped them develop academic, skills, or self-confidence.
- Student ambassadors are valued as being engaging and supportive facilitators.
- There can be challenges when working closely with school stakeholders; often this is connected with the flow of information to participants (or their parents) and can also result from change and flux within the schools sector, which in turn, can result in important personal contact networks being disrupted with a detrimental impact on operational delivery.

Post-16 Outreach interventions


The first overall WPREU evaluation report on the impact of WP outreach interventions covered the initial phase of evaluation from 2012-13.

136 separate outreach activities were evaluated using a mixed methods approach consisting of post-evaluation semi-structured questionnaires, coupled with focus groups and interviews with key stakeholders (participants, parents and teachers).

Evaluation outcomes suggested:

- Outreach activities were effectively targeted and reached their intended cohort. However, the targeting process was complex, and often needed to reflect the objectives and nature of each individual activity.
- A substantial proportion of participants (78%) already reported considering progression to HE at the start of their intervention, suggesting that aspiration-raising was not a key requirement of these activities. This throws up a challenge to HEIs as to how to balance outreach between those easy-to-reach-already-aspiring students on a HE pathway and harder-to-reach-cohorts.
without fixed HE progression plans. However, 8% of those who began with no initial plans to enter HE reported changing their mind as a result of participating in an activity.

- Outreach activities appeared to be successful in increasing many participants’ reported self-confidence about their ability to fit in at University. This was particularly true of activities with a strong social or networking component.

- Many participants reported concerns about their ability to get the grades required to progress into HE. Activities with a clear academic focus (e.g. revision sessions) were effective in increasing levels of reported academic confidence.

- 77% of participants reported increasing their knowledge of HE as a result of participating in one or more of the activities.

- Sustained activities appeared to support the development of peer-networks that operated as an important source of motivation and support for some participants.

- Some participants saw university-delivered outreach activities as providing them with authoritative guidance about HE progression. This was particularly the case where participants did not feel they could rely on parents or their school / college for trustworthy advice. This was confirmed by some parent focus groups, where respondents reported feeling unable to adequately support and advise their offspring.

- Student ambassadors appear to have a played a key role in supporting, advising and inspiring participants and were reportedly viewed as being both approachable and authoritative. Respondents saw them as more trustworthy than the information coming directly from the university, and some revealed cynicism about institution-provided resources, viewing it primarily as marketing material.

- For similar reasons, participants responded positively to the opportunity to see the ‘reality’ of student life; residences, real lecture theatres, and student shops. Again, some respondents made a distinction between this experience and the more mediated information available to them via websites or university-provided materials.

- Participants positively responded to the relaxed and open structure of many of the interventions and the opportunity for one-to-one or small group interactions with each other, ambassadors and facilitators.

- Respondents generally had a positive response to ‘hands-on’ active interventions, more so than for passive information giving sessions. This was particularly the case, where they had been required to engage with other participants (even where they had not initially felt positive about the prospect).

### Evaluation Summary: Post-16 Activities

Evaluation of sustained post-16 programmes suggests that:

- Participants broadly value the interventions, and most feel that they have developed across skill, knowledge or attitudinal domains as a result of their involvement.

- Student ambassadors play in a key role in supporting interventions, participants and engendering a sense of fit between participants and the University.
The social component of sustained programmes is important for helping participants to build a supportive network.

Participants responded positively where they felt that activities included an opportunity to address their individual needs.

Parents often felt unable to effectively support or advice their offspring and appreciated the role of universities in doing this.

Evaluation of Student Success and Progression Activities

In addition to pre-entry outreach interventions, WPREU staff have also evaluated a number of ‘student success’ interventions designed for current ‘WP’ student cohorts (those from under-represented or disadvantaged groups) during their period of HE study.

Evaluation of Work Experience Bursaries Simms (2014b)

The work experience bursary scheme was a collaboration between the University of Sheffield’s Careers Service and the Faculty of Social Science. A bursary scheme was designed to enable students to find and take up work experience opportunities over the summer break. The rationale for the intervention lay in a recognition that disadvantaged and under-represented students tend to have different career outcomes than their more advantaged peers, whilst often facing barriers to accessing the working experience that could operate as an ‘enabler of success’ (Moore et al. 2013).

WPREU researchers adopted a mixed-methods approach to evaluation, drawing on information provided in the bursary application forms, information about application outcomes, a survey of unsuccessful students, and reflective and skills development reports from successful students.

The evaluation indicated that:

- The scheme was effectively targeted and reached the students for whom it was intended (26/28 applicants met the criteria).
- The scheme was most popular with students in their second year and those studying Law (possibly reflecting an expectation that all students studying law should complete relevant work experience).
- Successful participants reported developing skills and knowledge in the following domains: time management, organisation, communication, listening, teamwork and commercial awareness.
- 18/26 respondents indicated that they would not have been able to undertake the work experience without the bursary. Some of the reasons given were; their family was unable to support them; they felt unable to turn down paid work in favour of voluntary work; and they were unable to cover the costs of accommodation or travel associated with a placement.

City Connections Simms (2015c); Lane (2016)

WPREU researchers evaluated the City Connections Programme in 2015 and 2016. The intervention was a collaboration between the University of Sheffield’s Faculty of Social Science and Alumni and Development team and aimed to increase WP students’ employment capital, networking skills and to engender commercial awareness. As such it represents a response to evidence (Pennington
et al. 2013) that socio-economically disadvantaged students are more likely to have a poorer understanding of the job market and to apply for jobs later than their advantaged counterparts and are less likely to prioritise employability development (Greenbank and Hepworth 2008). The programme consisted of a series of training events, followed by a visit to successful University of Sheffield alumni in London. During this visit participants were presented with case studies about different career progression pathways. The visit culminated with a networking event in which students networked with successful university alumni. The aim was to increase participants’ employability skills, their appreciation of the importance of commercial awareness, to help them gain business insight and networking skills, and to begin developing a career support network.

The project was evaluated via a mixed methods approach, which included gathering data via pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, reviewing participants’ reflexive journals and running participant focus groups.

Evaluation found that:

- Participants viewed the programme positively and appreciated the opportunities it provided them.
- Participants reported a) being more motivated to take up future opportunities to improve their employability b) having developed a network of contacts, and c) feeling more confident about their ability to network.
- In focus groups, participants reported feeling much more knowledgeable about commercial awareness and its importance than they had been prior to the intervention.
- Participants also reported being much more knowledgeable about business sectors they had not previously been aware of and appreciated the diverse range of employers they had visited.
- Respondents found it valuable to hear about the experience of successful alumni.
- Participants were confident they had developed organisational and planning skills required for business meetings and networking.
- Interestingly, participants also reported being much more relaxed about their career development after the intervention than they had been before. This appeared initially to be a counter-intuitive outcome. However, focus groups revealed that learning about the career digressions that many successful alumni had taken served to reduce some of the anxiety participants had previously felt about career development.

Given the short-time frame of the evaluation process, it was not possible to determine the long-term career outcomes of participating in the City Connections project.

WPREU researchers have undertaken a number of evaluations of the University of Sheffield’s financial support provision. Discussion of these projects are included in Part 3.3.

References


2.3. Evaluation reflection

Dr Julian Crockford

The discussion of the University of Sheffield’s own evaluation projects in the preceding section reflects all phases of WPREU’s development, but of necessity early phase projects are over-represented. Most of the early phase projects described above are based in a ‘conventional’ approach to evaluation. As such, they do not reflect subsequent development and thinking about evaluation approaches, which inform projects that are currently underway but will not be completed in time for inclusion in this book.

Having reflected on our evaluation progress so far, the WPREU team are currently exploring and developing alternative approaches to evaluation. As discussed in Part 2.8, we are exploring realist evaluation techniques, for example, to explore what works, when and for whom in the field of WP outreach evaluation. We also continue to look for opportunities to design evaluation projects with a comparator group or employing experimental designs – but to deploy these only when we are confident we have the evaluation questions and measures that will make these methods truly impactful. Our work is currently pushing in the following directions:

**Designing evaluation projects to surface and represent practitioner knowledge and experience**

We are concerned that many of the evaluation approaches currently used to investigate the impact of HEI-delivered outreach (with the exception of participatory and/or action approaches to research) can inadvertently (or deliberately) silence the voice of the practitioner in favour of the academic researcher’s perspective, which therefore positions itself as the key point of interpretation or ‘expertise’ (see for example, later discussion of participatory action approaches in Part 2.4). Drawing on Polyani’s (1983) work on ‘tacit knowledge’ (‘we know more than we can tell’), we start from the assumption that all practitioners draw on tacit or experiential knowledge when designing and delivering interventions, but that this is seldom captured or represented in conventional evaluation approaches. For this reason, we are endeavouring to include more practitioners as co-researchers in our evaluations. This will help us understand the implicit theory of change that has informed the initial design and ongoing development of the intervention at hand.

**Closer attention to theory-driven approaches including theories of change**

Theories of change (or in realist evaluation terms, programme theories) often remain implicit in evaluations of widening participation activities and can fail to inform the evaluation process. The use of logic models, however, is more widespread in systematic approaches to evaluation. Logic models seek to break down the intervention into a series of stages or components along an - often linear – process and are frequently used to map intervention inputs and outputs.²

² The diagram overleaf draws on Midlands and Lancashire NHS Commissioning Unit’s Your Guide to Using Logic Models.
This kind of model is very useful for mapping the procedural logic of an intervention, but, we suggest, ultimately serves to displace practice itself into a ‘black box’, thereby rendering it unknowable. As a result, what is actually happening (the what and why questions) in the course of/as a result of the practice is often bracketed off.

Between the ‘IF’ and ‘THEN’ components in the chart above, lie a series of assumptions, hypotheses or theories about how the activities translate into outcomes. These unarticulated assumptions will have frequently fed into or determined the design of the activity or intervention itself. The ‘assumptions’ in the model above are hypotheses about what conditions need to be met for the logic to flow from left to right, and also about what actually happens at each stage. We suggest that for real insight and understanding, we would need a more detailed and developed theory of change about the mechanisms that underpin the progression through each stage of the model.

A theory of change, however, might also demand more detailed consideration about contextual factors impacting on outcomes, for example, what pre-existing experience participants may have had when starting the intervention, their willingness to take part, and/or whether the intervention is appropriate to them. Crucially a theory of change is often founded in the assumed mechanisms which generate the change, underpin the design of the activity and map how the design of the activity is expected to generate it’s intended outcomes.

In this way, the ‘black box’ of practice and change (which some evaluation approaches are content to leave closed and unexamined) is opened up to plain view. By clearly articulating what we expect to happen and hypothesising how we expect to generate this change, we can design evaluations that are much more clearly focused on expected outcomes along with a preliminary understanding of how and why we expect these to happen. And with a clearer understanding of what we expect to see happen and why, we can design much more relevant and specific evaluation measures than might otherwise have been possible.
Recalibrating the level at which we evaluate

In line with our thinking about theories of change and defining appropriate evaluation measures, we are also revising the outcome level at which we evaluate. In terms of widening participation outreach, for example, the highest (macro level) objective is, as OFFA and HEFCE put it in the 2014 National Strategy for Access and Student Success, to make ‘significant and sustained improvements in the participation rates for the most disadvantaged groups, and in the diversity of the student population.’ (BIS 2014, p.16) From this perspective, the objective of most WP outreach interventions is to change the demographic make-up of the student population in English higher education.

Given, however, the scale, size and reach of even the most expansive HEI-delivered WP outreach interventions, the fact that we might work with individual students at a number of points in the year, and that those individual students are located in a complex system of influences and variables, we believe that these interventions can only be viewed as making a potential contribution to this high-level outcome rather than being a causal determinant. In short, we feel there is a discontinuity between the relatively small scale of most HEI-delivered outreach interventions and the intended/evaluated (often macro-level) outcomes. We suggest that common evaluation approaches, or the policy pressure to evaluate, often fail to acknowledge this.

Our response is influenced by Harrison and Waller (2016, p.85), who argue that evaluation should be orientated towards ‘intermediate processes’, smaller steps that might happen on the path to eventual HE contribution, and will contribute to it, but might not determine it. As they point out, this requires a detailed theory of change underpinning the intervention and an approach which thinks of progression to HE as a multi-stage pathway rather than a single totalising destination.

Our ongoing evaluation work with practitioners is intended to help us construct better theories of change based on practitioners’ tacit and experiential knowledge of their work. We hope this will help us begin to construct these much more complex pathways, and therefore recalibrate our evaluation focus onto these smaller steps. In this way, we may be able to make more robust causal claims and be able to begin answering the question of what works at these smaller meso- and micro-levels. In so doing, we hope to begin building a complex patchwork of understanding about the individual pathway steps that might ultimately lead to HE progression.

References


2.4. Experimental and quasi-experimental evaluation

*Greg Brown*

As outlined previously, across WP evaluation experimental approaches have begun to enter mainstream consciousness, appearing increasingly across guidance (Crawford et al. 2017), and through collaborative projects with external experts (Makinson 2017). Heralded by some as the 'gold standard' in evaluative research, experimental (Randomised Control Trials - RCTs) and quasi-experimental designs allow us - via means of counterfactuals\(^3\) - to see how effective a programme or policy is and infer causal relationships between the introduction of said programme or policy and any specific outcomes of concern. In short, they seek to offer insight into programme impact, outlining programme effect size and highlighting 'what works'.

Below, we will explore the broad processes through which control-based (quasi-) experimental evaluations are conducted; the proposed benefits of using such an approach; and the operational and conceptual issues often faced. This section will conclude with an overview of when WPREU have looked to use similar designs in our work, and where we see their effectiveness going forward.

**The logic of experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations**

On the surface, the means through which experimental and/or quasi-experimental evaluations are conducted is relatively straightforward. A target sample (often those groups outlined as being in need of such an intervention) are randomly assigned (RCT) or 'matched' (quasi-experimentation) to a control and experimental group. From here, pre-intervention tests are run, the intervention is introduced to the experimental group but not the control group, and upon completion, post-tests are done and compared. This piece of 'splendid epistemology'\(^4\) is encapsulated in the classic experimental design, illustrated overleaf.

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3. There are recognised quasi-experimental approaches that do not use counterfactual groups, we will not discuss these designs here. For further and sustained discussion see Shaddish et al. (2002, p. 106).

4. Whilst a piece of 'splendid epistemology', its ontological assumptions are called into question by some (see Pawson and Tilley 1994).
The impact of an intervention, programme or policy is then measured by taking the adjusted (controlling for differences at pre-test) difference between the mean post-test scores for participants (individual or clustered) in the experimental group (those subject to the intervention, programme or policy) and the control group (those not subject to the intervention, programme or policy) and dividing them by a ‘pooled’ standard deviation of the two groups. This is expressed as an ‘effect size’. If the effect size is positive, and the experimental groups post-test scores are greater than the control groups, we can infer that the intervention has a positive impact - it appears to ‘work’. Similarly, if our effect size is neither positive or negative, the intervention would appear to have no measurable impact. Moreover, if the effect size is negative, we can infer that the intervention was instead counterproductive.

Cook and Campbell (1979), and then Shaddish et al. (2002) set out and detailed the means of ensuring experiments tasked with isolating causal relationships are fit for purpose. Thus, according to both texts, methodological quality is ascertained through ensuring our experiments meet the
following four criteria: statistical conclusion validity, internal validity, construct validity and external validity. This short section does not have the space to outline and discuss these concepts in-depth. It is, however, extremely important to recognize their importance, and the need to properly engage with them prior to conducting such evaluations. For detailed discussions of how to ensure trial-based evaluations are methodological rigorous in this tradition, please see Shaddish et al. (2002).

Limitations and criticisms

There are a number of practical and ethical issues associated with experimental approaches to evaluation. A number of WP researchers and evaluators have outlined this as a key cause for concern, with randomisation being inappropriate and difficult to do given the nature and context of the work undertaken. Much of this criticism rests on the premise that withholding an intervention from participants when we have prior evidence that it is likely to be effective is seen as unethical - more formally recognised as equipoise, or the ‘uncertainty principle’ (Connelly et al 2017).

Let’s take the fictitious evaluation of a WP summer school as an example. Practitioners run summer schools with the faith that the ‘experience’ (coming on campus, attending classes etc.) will benefit those students enrolled, making them more comfortable in an HE setting, more confident in their abilities, resulting in increased applications, and so on and so forth. This faith is most likely cemented by qualitative formative evidence, and/or other evaluations of summer schools at other institutions that suggest they have a positive impact. To deprive students who may then benefit greatly from this intervention could be considered counterproductive, purely in order to conduct an experiment to measure its impact.

Further, there has been sustained conceptual and methodological criticism of such evaluative designs usage in social research, with scholars challenging the ontological and epistemological assumptions built into the (quasi)experimental approach. An eminent critique of experimental evaluation on these grounds, for example, comes from Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley, who in their book *Realistic Evaluation* (1997) devote a chapter to outlining the many and varied pitfalls they see inherent in the experimental approach. They begin by interrogating the notion of randomisation:

> Random allocation, or efforts to mimic it...represents an endeavour to cancel out differences. This is absurd, it is an effort to write out what is essential to a program - social conditions favourable to its success.

(Pawson and Tilley 1997, p. 52)

This critique relates directly to Pawson and Tilley’s adherence to a generative model of causation (Harre 1972). Here, causation is not understood as X leading to Y when we are sure all other confounding factors are equated for, but instead that outcomes come from underlying mechanisms (i.e. ‘fear’ or ‘belonging’) being triggered or not in certain contexts (for sustained discussion of this evaluative methodology see the section on Realist Evaluation). This criticism, rooted in debates surrounding the philosophy of scientific inquiry; extends to the ‘black box problem’, also frequently levelled at experimental approaches. This refers to their focus on whether something has an impact, failing to account for *why* and *how* the intervention had the impact that it did, neglecting the ‘active ingredients’ necessary for success or failure, i.e. contexts and volitions.

Usage in educational and WP research and evaluation

With experimental, and just below that quasi-experimental, approaches being considered by some to be the evidence-based ‘gold-standard’, resting atop of the ‘hierarchy of evidence’, a number of influential research bodies (EEF and Sutton Trust) have been strong advocates of RCT’s and other quasi-experimental methods usage. As an example, the Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF)
has commissioned over 120 trials in the last 5 years, looking at the effectiveness of a range of in
school interventions designed to improve attainment.

Conceptually, further weight has been added by prominent educationalists, with recent
publications outlining the potential that trial-based evaluations hold, and the desperate need for a
Both Gorard et al. (2017) and Connolly et al. (2017) lament the lack of ‘robust’ and causally focussed
evaluation in educational research and see the adoption of experimental approaches as the best,
and in some cases, only means to address this glaring weakness.

The Sutton Trust, long-time advocates of (quasi)experimental methods in the evaluation WP
interventions, commissioned the most commonly cited evaluation of this kind to date. Hoare and
Mann’s (2011) quasi-experimental, controlled observation evaluation of the Sutton Trust summer
school programme was a multi-arm trial. Application rates to high-tariff universities were compared
between an experimental group of those taking part in one of their summer schools, two inner
control groups of those who had applied and were on a reserve list, and those who applied and
were unsuccessful. Further, three outer control groups, none of which had even applied, but were
considered comparable due to their socio-economic status and prior attainment at GCSE were
included in the analysis. They found that summer school attendees, when compared to both the
inner and outer control group, were more likely to apply to, and be successfully awarded a place at,
‘high-tariff institutions’.

Beyond this example, and more generally speaking, there are few published WP evaluations utilising
such approaches (quasi-experimentation). Torgerson et al. (2014) note that in their meta-analysis
of the most promising WP interventions, there was limited evidence of their promise taken from
quasi-experimental evaluations, and no evidence taken from randomised control trials. A more
recent systematic review by Younger et al (2018) identifies little change in the intervening four
years.

**WPREU work and conclusions**

Across the previous 5 years, WPREU have attempted, on a number of occasions, to conduct quasi-
experimental evaluations. Given the nature of the context in which we work, and particularly where
projects involve external stakeholders, randomisation has often proved difficult, for the ethical
and operational reasons highlighted above, and so attempts to use non-random ‘matched’ control
groups as counterfactuals have been deemed more suitable. However, on the occasions in which
such a research design has been adopted, acquiring the appropriate data upon which to create and
match suitable control groups has proved very difficult. This has, ultimately, derailed attempts to
evaluate this way.

Moving forward, WPREU researchers see RCT’s and other control group-based designs as intriguing
means of gathering evidence around the general impact of specific interventions. Experimental
approaches potentially enable us to identify broad causal descriptions - but not to interrogate
causal explanations. As such, and drawing on assertions made by experimentalists - including
Donald T Campbell himself - (see Connolly et al. 2017; Farrington 2003; Shaddish et al. 2002), if such
a design is taken forward, it must be accompanied by methods that seek to explore and unpick
why, and how the observed change has occurred - unearthing what it is about the programme or
intervention that sparked the change we see beyond the effect size. To this end, the need to run a
concurrent process evaluation is self-evident, something stressed by many experimental evaluation
textbooks and proponents. As observed by Shaddish et al. (2002, p. 9), ‘experiments do not aspire
to answer all the kinds of questions, not even all the types of causal questions, that social scientists
ask’.
There are significant volumes of literature and a range of methodological debates surrounding the design, use and impact of experimental evaluations, which have a nuance and complexity which was not possible to address in this short section. For further accessible information and guidance - as well as published outcomes of trials, both experimental and quasi-experimental - we would recommend searching for the following online resources:

- KCLxBIT blog: blogs.kcl.ac.uk/behaviouralinsights
- Education Endowment Foundation ‘Projects and Evaluation’ webpages: educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation
- ‘Why Evaluate’ conference legacy webpages: sheffield.ac.uk/apse/wp/whyevaluate
- WPREU webpages: sheffield.ac.uk/apse/wp/wpevaluation

References


2.5. Realist Evaluation

Greg Brown

Realist Evaluation was first set out formally by Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley in their 1997 book *Realistic Evaluation* and has since gained significant traction in the evaluation of complex social interventions. Here I take a look at the realist approach, outlining its methodological basis, pointing to its potential usefulness in the WP context. I finish by outlining our formative plans to take forward realist, and more generally, *theory-driven* evaluations in the near future.

**What is ‘Realist Evaluation’?**

Realist evaluation is a form of *theory-driven* evaluation. It posits that all social policies, programmes, and interventions are ‘theories incarnate’ - that is to say that they are products of the human imagination, formed by policy makers, delivered by practitioners, and experienced by participants - they are ‘hypotheses of social betterment’ (Pawson and Tilley 2004). Whilst the acknowledgement of programmes and policies as theories has formed a strand of evaluative methodology for some time (see Chen 1990; Rossi and Chen 1983; Weiss 1997), what separates realist evaluation from its theory-based cousins is its explicit underpinning in a realist philosophy of science (see Archer 1995; Bhaskar 1978; Harre 1972; Sayer 1992). Realist inquiry is then both bound together and separated from other approaches via some key concepts.

The first of these is the use of a realist ontology; realists assert that a real world does exist, but that this world is navigated and understood via our senses and experiences (Pawson 2013). In very simple terms, realism can be seen to sit between both positivism, and constructivism (for more information see Cohen et al 2018, p.10) - closer to post-positivism in its ontology, and closer to constructivism in its epistemology (RAMESES Project 2017). The second, and perhaps key concept that shapes the realist approach centres around how realists conceptualise causation. Realists subscribe to a generative causal model (Harre 1972); causation must be understood in terms of how underlying and often *unseen* mechanisms operate or do not operate in certain pre-existing contexts.

Realist evaluators combine the principles outlined above to test and refine ‘programme theories’ (explanations of how an intervention is set up to work), using appropriate methods to uncover what underlying mechanisms fire (or not) in what contexts, to deliver what outcomes. Realist evaluation begins with a period of ‘theory elicitation’ - scouring the grey literature, previous research, and tapping into the experience and assumptions of various stakeholders to build up an idea of how the intervention is intended to work (Marchal et al. 2015).

These theories are then re-imagined in CMO configurations - context + mechanism = outcome. This allows the evaluator to disaggregate a broad theory into constituent processes and theorise about the relationships and connections between certain pre-existing contexts, the programme under study, the underlying mechanisms this gives rise too, and the footprint of associated outcomes.

From here, and with regards to data collection, realist evaluation is method neutral, not favouring either qualitative or quantitative methods (Pawson and Tilley 2004). The researcher must choose those methods most appropriate to the research circumstance in which they find themselves, so
long as they are useful in answering the realist question, and in testing those specific programme theories developed at the outset and placed in CMO configurations.

So, realist evaluation, and realist evaluators do not ask ‘what works?’ - or ‘what seems to work?’ - but instead ask ‘what works for whom, in what circumstances, and how?’ (Pawson and Tilley 2004, p.2).

**A brief example: Post-16 mentoring**

Here, we outline a fictitious example of how we might design and enact an explicitly realist evaluation of a WP related programme or intervention. We take a post-16 mentoring programme as the focus of our fictitious evaluation.

Once we have agreed upon the scope of our evaluation (audiences, budgets, resources, time constraints), we can begin surfacing and developing our initial programme theories (explanations of how the scheme is intended to work). As outlined previously, theory surfacing can be done in a number of ways. Making it specific to our evaluation, we might first look to our own resources; for example, is there an information page for the scheme we are about to evaluate? This might give us some justifications and explanations for how it is expected to work, and for whom it is intended. We may then look across the sector at other sources of grey literature outlining how other institutions approach their own mentoring schemes. We can consult the vast array of research literature outlining and/or evaluating the use of mentoring schemes, both within the WP context and in other policy domains (in schools or further education, social care, rehabilitation and development for example).

Further, and of particular importance, we could sit down with Outreach practitioners, and ask them how they see the scheme working. Moreover, as evaluators, we may have our own ‘hunches’ based on experience or informed guesswork that we may wish to include and test (RAMESES 2017). A quick scan of such material might lead us to some of the following broad programme theories:

**Hypothesis 1:** The post-16 mentoring programme boosts participants’ educational aspirations through providing them with access to information and guidance from a relatable figure they can trust.

**Hypothesis 2:** The post-16 mentoring programme improves attainment through building confidence in students’ abilities to successfully undertake their school work with help from mentors.

Here we have two broad programme theories, dealing with two main and desired outcomes of most WP mentoring schemes. These are raising aspirations, and (increasingly) raising attainment, as a means to unlock pathways to HE study. To make our theories realist, they must reflect the principle of generative causation; we need to take these theories and make them relate to how and why the programme may work, for whom, and in what circumstances. This is expressed in the following hypotheses using the context + mechanism = outcome (CMO) configuration:

**(H1):** If students who are interested in university but know little about it (C) are given IAG by a university student with whom they can relate, they feel an increased sense of belonging (M) and are more likely to apply to university as a result (O).

**(H2):** If a student with the potential to attain academically (C) is provided tutorage by a student mentor they trust and can relate to, they are more likely to listen and engage (M) with the material and improve their grades as a result (O).

These two hypotheses are then outlined with further, and potentially associated mechanisms and outcomes in Table 1 overleaf.
Here we have begun to map out a few theories outlining what causal processes we expect to see occur within our post-16 mentoring programme. Further, these theories outline mechanisms that we do expect to fire in certain circumstances, and deliver specific outcomes, however, our surfaced theories may also wish to outline what we do not expect to work and in what circumstances.

Moreover, these theories are purposively ‘middle-range’ (Merton 2007), being specific enough to our own programme (post-16 mentoring scheme) - and for empirical testing - but also abstract enough to relate to other post-16 mentoring programmes. This is useful for others looking to use our research to make changes to their own programme and practice, addressing issues of generalisability – and feeding into the wider evidence base in a constructive manner. However, we cannot hope to properly test every possible, and often competing, theory. In relation to this, Pawson (2013) stresses the importance of the ‘theory adjudication’ process - wading through the potentially endless range of plausible theories and finding those most suitable for our particular evaluation and programme, ‘concentrating our fire’ (Pawson 2004, p.102).

Once we have agreed upon those theories we wish to take forward and test, the next step for our realist project is data collection. Conducting a realist evaluation is an iterative process, and using our theories to guide us, we can move between data collection and analysis simultaneously (Pawson and Tilley 1997). Data collection in our example may involve interviews with practitioners running and overseeing the programme. Yet, in this hypothetical example, it may also involve mentors and mentees. Given the theory-testing nature of the evaluation, our interviews would be ‘theory-driven’ (see Manzano 2016; Pawson 1996). We would put forward our ideas of how the intervention works as exhibited above, and have participants refine these explanations from their perspective. Being method neutral, we could also test our theory that mentoring improves attainment by conducting quantitative analysis of participants’ school performance in concurrence with the intervention timeline.
Using the CMO configurations in our analysis, we map and refine our theories on the back of the data we have collected. In our example, we may look for further contexts that facilitate (or stifle) participants’ sense of belonging, and how this impacts on outcomes associated with application rates. Once we are happy that we have explored all means of data collection that are available and feasible and have refined our CMO configurations (CMOcs) to be as explanatory and robust as possible, we can present our refined theories. These can be as specific or as abstract (see discussion of middle-range theories previously) as is appropriate for the target audience. Realist evaluation stresses the stopping point nature of programme evaluation, and the contextually bound complexion of our refined theories. Thus we cannot, and should not, make sweeping ‘one size fits all’ generalisation in our conclusions, but instead point to what specific contexts facilitated the changes we see (or do not see). As Pawson and Tilley (2004, p. 3) outline: ‘as it embarks on its explanatory quest, realist evaluation is (realistically) panacea phobic.’

This brief example has attempted to outline a realist evaluation within the WP context, and initiate thought around both the uses of programme theories, and further, the exploration of these theories using a realist lens. For further examples of realist evaluation in practice, and resources outlining ‘quality standards’ for their use see Pawson and Manzano 2012; RAMESES II Project 2017; Wong et al. 2017.

Conclusions and implications for WPREU’s work

The use of theory-driven and realist designs enable us to properly engage with the complexity inherent in our work and move towards an evaluative approach that interrogates why and how our work has an impact, as opposed to just inferring the whether. Given the often atheoretical nature of WP evaluations, sector-wide periods of ‘theory elicitation’ are required to map what it is we do, and why, so that these assertions - which are high stakes both in terms of economic investment and their potential to forward the social justice agenda - can be tested empirically, forging a robust evidence-base that can directly inform practice. Realist evaluation specifically, offers us a refined and methodical means to do just this, engaging with the underlying mechanisms that spark those changes we see in specific contexts.

Here at WPREU, we are beginning to build realist strands into our evaluative work - thinking about developing realist programme theory that can be tested to refine our understanding of what works for whom, why, in what circumstances and how. This work is set to be focussed on both the evaluation of Outreach interventions, but also, the evaluation of other student lifecycle programmes designed to aid WP students once they reach university. After discussions with colleagues from across the University, we hope to formally trial this approach across the next calendar year.

References


Participatory methodologies

Miriam Miller

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is about breaking out of a ‘top down’ research paradigm, where social issues are investigated by a supposedly impartial outside observer, and actually exploring the social realities of the people we work with as co-participants. This ultimately aims to surface their insider knowledge about their own lives, which can then assist in improving the practices of an organisation in ways that are meaningful to those affected by them (Burns 2007; McNiff 2013).

The key features of typical PAR approaches are community collaboration, knowledge production, and bringing about change (Bergold and Thomas 2012; Greenwood 1993; Gustafson and Brunger 2014; Kemmis et al. 2014). PAR is not a method in itself, and PAR projects may use a range of different research methods to achieve their participatory aims. These might include group discussions, interviews, diagramming, video, photography, art, surveys, mapping, and so on (Pain et al. 2012). It is also important to acknowledge that researchers, practitioners, research participants, students, and groups of students who share certain characteristics can be socially positioned in different ways; they may produce knowledge outcomes of different types, and these outcomes may be awarded different statuses (Bergold and Thomas 2012). Each PAR project is therefore likely to be structured differently and to provide different kinds of research outputs.

Why use Participatory Action Research?

In a higher education (HE) context, the move towards participatory ideology relates to the increased focus on student experiences and outcomes, and aims to reinforce the link between the widening participation (WP) agenda and the focus on equality and diversity. Working with students as participants in our research is an attempt to avoid the problematic tendency of seeing any such group as something to be studied or observed from a distance, without their direct involvement. Such an approach can often involve making recommendations for improvement which have not come from the students themselves. Research shows, for example, that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students find targeted interventions to support them problematic, and inadvertently racist (Stevenson 2012), particularly when these are interventions that they did not ask for, or had not been consulted on (Awan et al. 2017).

We hope that by using a participatory approach, we can instead give students a meaningful opportunity to engage in improving the institutional practices and policies that directly affect them, leading to changes that they will actually value.

What might a PAR project look like?

Whatever methods a PAR project involves, it is important to involve participants in the whole lifecycle of each project, including the initial research design, analysis of findings, and the dissemination of the work (Pain et al. 2012; Maunder et al. 2013; Morgan et al. 2014). While this is not
necessarily an exhaustive list of all the components of a PAR project, each is an important stage and all three are discussed briefly below to highlight some of the potential challenges in each area.

**Research design**

The flexible nature of PAR means that there is no one way to design a project, but the PAR Toolkit proposed by Pain et al. (2012) usefully lists five key questions to ask participants, which they term "the 5Ws":

- What will be done?
- Who will be involved?
- Where will it take place?
- When will each stage happen?
- How will we do this?

Reflexivity is also important to any PAR project; plans are likely to change as the research progresses and new ideas surface. There are also practical elements to consider, as some aspects of the initial research design may no longer be possible to accomplish, and other areas of the research may begin to take priority over others. While this is to be expected, ensuring that everyone in the group has an equal voice in discussing any change of direction is essential in order to ensure genuine participation in the development of the research design (Pain et al. 2012).

**Analysis**

Participatory data analysis has been attempted less frequently than participation in other aspects of research, particularly research design (Nind 2011). Participation in data analysis is important as it allows participants to reflect on what the findings mean to them, and because their perceptions are crucial when planning potential interventions (Jones 2004). There are, however, challenges inherent in analysis, such as participants’ inexperience of lack of training (Nind 2011). Nonetheless, with appropriate time and resources allocated to a project, it should be possible to develop an analytical framework using a bottom up approach for the research, based on what participants perceive to be important (Cahill 2007).

**Dissemination**

Cahill (2007) highlights the importance of addressing different audiences when disseminating findings from a PAR project. Her work with 'The Fed Up Honeys', a group of young women of colour in New York, emphasised the need for research outputs that were accessible to other young women of colour, and not just an academic audience. It also presented tensions around the idea of 'dumbing down' their research:

> If we were going to do that, what would that say about what we thought of our audience (other young women)? Most of us were in agreement that we felt that simplifying the work would either be insulting to our audience and/or would defy the point of us wanting to challenge the people that came into contact with our research products.

(Jasmine, Fed Up Honey, quoted in Cahill 2007, p. 334).
Their solution to this dilemma was not to simplify the work itself, but to develop various ways of engaging different audiences, including a sticker campaign, website, educational workshops, presentations, and book chapters. This enabled them to successfully share their research with a range of audiences.

Challenges of using a PAR approach in Higher Education

There are a number of challenges of using a PAR approach in HE research, including: how we decide who should take part; the extent to which students have the power to make changes within an organisation; ethical considerations about who to involve, and to what extent, as well as related challenges around informed consent, and ‘vulnerable’ participants; and how we ensure that a project is genuinely participatory and evaluate it as such.

The first challenge concerns how to decide who should take part. There is a theoretical dilemma that participatory action researchers face; you cannot decide what to research until you know who will be doing the research. Yet, on the other hand, you cannot know who will be doing the research until you know what to research (Kemmis et al. 2014). The challenge then is how to begin a project without potentially excluding relevant stakeholders or participants from the process, and there are additional challenges associated with ensuring a broad range of voices are heard, and not just the ‘usual suspects’. PAR projects therefore need to start with an open conversation to bring in different stakeholders and explore what their shared concerns might be (Kemmis et al. 2014).

Secondly, the ‘action’ element of PAR usually involves practitioners undertaking a critical reflection of their own practice (McNiff 2013). In a HE environment, this is likely to be academic and professional services staff, particularly those with student-facing roles. When we work with students as participants or as co-researchers, it is important to remember that ultimately these students are not reflecting on their own practice, so they may be less able to make change. That means that their power lies in influencing rather than enacting or embedding change; it also means that as practitioners, we have an extra responsibility to empower students by listening carefully and developing future policies, practices, and processes in collaboration with them. Working closely with colleagues in relevant departments is crucial, as students will need access to people who have the ability to see through any proposed changes, and who are committed to doing so. It also requires a certain amount of institutional readiness to act on the findings of the students’ research (Jones-Devitt et al. 2017).

Thirdly, working with individuals who are going to be affected by the research raises a methodological question about which people, or groups of people, should be involved (Bergold and Thomas 2012). Even when we work with students who share particular characteristics, such as learning differences or disabilities, we recognise that they are not necessarily a homogenous group, and so we must pay attention to ensuring that the project is inclusive and accessible to students from all backgrounds. The topics we wish to research may also be sensitive, affecting different groups in different ways and with strong feelings involved that may have an effect on participants both in the context of the project, and in their lives outside of it (Pain et al. 2012). This requires researchers working on PAR projects to be particularly mindful of ways the project may impact on participants, and to address this within relevant ethical approval processes.

The ethics process itself can also raise issues for which groups of students are considered “vulnerable”, leading to tensions between the PAR ideology and the reality of HE research (Morgan et al. 2014). For example, participants with disabilities or learning differences may disagree with being labelled as ‘vulnerable’, and this can impact on the ability of HE researchers to successfully build a relationship with this group (Gufstavson and Brunger 2014). The issue of vulnerability is particularly important in light of the ethical requirement for informed consent. Should individuals be deemed as unable to give informed consent, this can result in the exclusion of those considered
most vulnerable from participating in research projects that directly affect them (McClimens and Allmark 2011).

Finally, there is a further challenge around how we ensure that the project is genuinely participatory. Given students’ comparative lack of power to actually effect or embed change, we want to ensure their full participation in a PAR project, i.e. where they are empowered, and where change does happen and is sustained. We also need to evaluate each PAR project with these criteria in mind. According to Greenwood (1993), participation is a process; we can begin a project with participatory intent but must continue to build in participatory processes throughout the life of the project in order to ensure its success. This means that when we evaluate whether or not a PAR project is genuinely participatory, and to what extent, we may only be able to fully do this at the end of a project, where we can reflect on how empowered the participants felt and see what changes have taken effect.

### WPREU and PAR

WPREU is currently working on a PAR project in collaboration with the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU). This explores how students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs), mental ill-health and/or autism spectrum conditions experience the support services currently offered by the University, and what improvements to this support these students would like to see.

Early in 2017, we recruited a group of students who self-define as having one or more of these conditions or learning differences, as co-researchers. They have designed a questionnaire which will help us to understand how these students access and experience support across a wide range of existing disability and dyslexia support services, and how this might be further impacted by other demographic factors. Analysis of the questionnaire results is now underway, and the student co-researchers will be sharing the outcomes of this project through various dissemination events with staff and students at the start of 2018.

### References


2.7.

Narrative methodologies

Dr Zoe Baker

What is narrative research?

Narrative research is regarded as a biographical method (Wells 2011), and refers to research which uses ‘other people’s lives as a basis for social research’ (Merrill and West 2009, p. 191). The discussion here will focus specifically on narrative inquiry, which is regarded as both the method, and phenomena of study (Pinnegar and Danes 2007).

The characteristics of narrative inquiry are broad. Narratives can ‘come in many forms and sizes’ (Riessman 2008, p. 23), and narrative research is a collaborative process, where both the researcher and participant are involved in an ‘inter-subjective exchange’ (Goodson and Gill 2011, p. 24). Hence, both parties contribute to the construction of narrative data.

Narrative inquiry

Canadian scholars, Clandinin and Connelly (1990, 2000), devised the term ‘narrative inquiry’ in the 1990s when qualitatively exploring teachers’ experiential accounts of knowledge. They outline that the study of narrative focuses on ‘the ways humans experience the world’, recognising that humans ‘lead storied lives’ (Clandinin and Connelly 1990, p. 2). As human experience is the primary focus of narrative research, it is incredibly flexible; narrative approaches have subsequently been adopted in various disciplinary areas.

As a result of this flexibility, there is no single method, methodological approach or philosophy for narrative inquiry; rather, such approaches are ‘combined with other methodological approaches and philosophies which have been influential in that particular field of study’ (Webster and Mertova 2007, p. 6). My own PhD research (Baker 2017), for instance, combined a longitudinal approach with narrative inquiry to qualitatively explore and track Further Education students’ HE decision-making and choices, with a specific focus on events, experiences and influences. The longitudinal approach was partially inspired by research in the field of youth studies (Thomson 2011), as well as sociological studies of HE decision-making (Brooks 2003, 2005). Hence, echoing Webster and Mertova’s (2007) earlier point, I combined narrative inquiry with a methodological approach that was influential in similar fields of study; this collectively allowed me to explore change over time,\(^5\) and establish how participants experienced their HE decision-making journeys.

There are also crossovers in the features of narrative inquiry with other approaches outlined in this book, further evidencing its flexibility. In the previous chapter (2.6) on Participatory Action Research (PAR), Miriam explains how this approach explores co-participants’ social realities, and provides opportunities for them to interpret, and represent this, themselves. This is accomplished through being involved in not only the design and implementation of the research, but also in the analysis and interpretation of the data, rather than this being imposed on them by a researcher.

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5. See the following Section 2.8 for a discussion of longitudinal research designs.
This prioritisation of the individual’s lived experiences, and the collaborative nature that underpins participatory approaches, demonstrates clear similarities with the features of narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 1990; Goodson and Gill 2011; Riessman 2008). Importantly, combining narrative inquiry with other approaches, such as participatory research, can assist in overcoming ethical dilemmas. As narrative inquiry is a collaborative process, with both the researcher and the participant co-constructing knowledge (Goodson and Gill 2011), there is then a potential risk of pathologising the storyteller through the interpretation and re-representation of their experiences (Wells 2011). By providing power to the participant to, as Miriam states, ‘reflect on what the findings mean to them’, this can help overcome such issues associated with narrative inquiry.

The value of narrative in WP research

This focus on people’s lived experiences, combined with the versatility that narrative approaches offer, means that they can be particularly apt for WP related research (Stevenson 2016). In exploring people’s experiences in the HE environment, researchers can understand how individuals are not only included in institutions’ practices and cultures, but also how they can be marginalised or excluded from them (Trahar and Yu 2015). For this reason, narrative approaches have been valuable in exploring access to, as well as student experiences within, HE. For instance, Benson et al. (2010) researched the experiences of non-traditional students to explore what contributes to ‘success’ in HE using a longitudinal narrative inquiry approach. In the US, Sandekian et al. (2015) conducted a narrative inquiry into the lived experiences of Saudi women on campus, comparing this to their educational environments at home. Stevenson (2014) used narrative interviews to explore the first-year experiences of religious HE students, with a focus on institutional internationalisation policy. Through using narrative accounts and life histories, Waller (2010) explored the impact of formal education on the development and sense of identity of mature learners entering HE via Access programmes. Finally, Jackson and Cameron (2014) adopted a narrative approach when interviewing young people who had been in European public care systems to track their educational plans.

The above examples are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather serve as a means of demonstrating the versatility of such approaches, particularly within WP research. More importantly, accessing individual stories allows researchers to link micro levels of analysis to the macro; narrative inquirers recognise and emphasise the ‘social political and historical context within which a given narrative occurs’ (Lodico et al. 2010, p. 147). Narratives are ‘composed and received in contexts’, they do not ‘fall from the sky’ (Riessman 2008, cited by Trahar and Yu 2015, p. 17). Taking context into consideration, especially in WP related research, is undoubtedly crucial to identify issues of inclusion and exclusion in HE access and participation, to then ‘help us make universities a richer, more inclusive place to be’ (Trahar and Yu 2015, p. 23).

References


2.8.

Research case study: Longitudinal design in understanding the whole student lifecycle

Dr Rita Hordósy

In 2013, WPREU launched a project into student experiences in the context of the higher tuition fees. This study aimed to understand the expectations and experiences of students at the University of Sheffield in terms of university life. The study focused on the cohort starting in September 2013, and the expectation and experiences of the lowest-income students in particular. This research provides an overview of the patterns across the cohort using administrative data. Through understanding the characteristics, outcomes and experiences of cohort 2013, this research provided valuable information to both academic departments and the different student support services. Furthermore, research outcomes have contributed to discussions about HE, student experiences at universities, student finance, and student support.

Understanding of ‘student experience’ or ‘student satisfaction’ has remained ambiguous, with some commentators linking the terms to the shift towards university education being seen as an investment in one’s capital, with the student conceptualised simply as a customer or a consumer (Budd 2017; Scott 2014; Tight 2013). In our work, and especially in the context of the Sheffield Student 2013, we use the terms to refer to our interest in the lived experience of university life, whilst being mindful of the larger processes that contextualise the ‘here and now’ of student life, such as the current high HE participation rate for young people and a shift towards individuals shouldering an increased proportion of the teaching and learning ‘bill’ (Callender 2012; Callender and Mason 2017; Marginson 2016).

The main aim of this research has been to understand the complex, diverse and ever-changing nature of student experiences in the context of increased HE tuition fees, focusing on themes such as the academic, career, social, wellbeing, and financial aspects of university life (Clark et al. 2014). Some of these map onto Jones’ (2016, p. 8) recent work on ‘influential microsystems’, the interaction of which are conceptualised as the student experience.

First (and second) year experience

Regarding student experience research, a large of work focuses on the first academic year; Harvey et al. (2006, p. 1) in their review of the literature relate this heightened interest to the expansion of higher education and an ‘increased requirement to support the diverse student population’.
They suggest that the main areas of interest are performance and retention as well as the factors impacting on these, such as learning and teaching, and supporting students.

Reflecting on the decades of research on retention in the USA, Tinto (2007, p. 4) suggests that a common theme is that ‘involvement, or what is increasingly being referred to as engagement, matters’. His model of retention as centring on the student (Tinto 1987) has been influential in setting the research agenda for research into the First Year Experience (FYE), which now has a dedicated journal and research following.

Exploring what matters in the context of the FYE and in retention within the UK, Yorke and Longden (2008) point to several factors such as university choice, social integration, financing the first year, the quality of teaching and learning as well as institutional resourcing, the academic demands, and satisfaction with the university space. This work also paints a diverse and complex picture, suggesting that both student characteristics and the institutional contexts shape the multiple different student experiences that concurrently exist (Harvey et al. 2006; Yorke 2000; Yorke and Longden 2008). A lot of the FYE literature looks at the aspects that can support students throughout their first academic year, with research pointing towards an integrated, holistic approach and arguing that it is ‘everybody’s business’ to avoid piecemeal provision (Harvey et al. 2006; Kift et al. 2010).

Work complementing FYE research through the analysis of student’s diverse needs and experiences of the second academic year started in the US, with Milsom et al. (2014) more recently looking at the UK context. The ‘sophomore slump’ or ‘second year dip’ is attributed to the psychological makeup of the student, such as self-efficacy and motivation; changes in the curriculum and the expectations of exam and essay outcomes; lack of engagement and contact with staff; social integration; orientation towards the future regarding career planning; and external factors, such as higher levels of part-time work (see for instance: Gahagan and Stuart Hunter 2008; Lieberman and Remedios 2007; Milsom et al. 2014; Provencher and Kassel 2017; Schaller 2010).

The student journey

Beyond researching the academic years in isolation, some others aim to understand the overall student journey, conceptualised by Temple et al. (2016, p. 34) as follows:

- the application experience – covering the interactions between potential students and the institution, up to the point of arrival;

- the academic experience – students’ interactions with the institution associated with their studies, excluding for these purposes teaching and learning processes;

- the campus experience – student life not directly connected with study, which may include activities away from the actual campus (insofar as one exists);

- the graduate experience – the institution’s role is assisting students’ transition to employment.

There are several research projects built on longitudinal designs that aim to understand the student journey in their entirety, such as the FutureTrack study (Purcell et al. 2013) and the Paired Peers project (Bathmaker et al. 2016). Further, the policy and practice of supporting disadvantaged students into, within, and beyond universities also emphasises the importance of looking at the whole student lifecycle (OFFA 2014).
Conceptualising transitions

For the Sheffield Student 2013 project, the concept of transitions proved useful in understanding change over time in a diverse university cohort, building especially on Gale and Parker’s (2014, p. 738) review of existing research. They identified three conceptualisations of transitions:

- **Transitions as induction:** Such research understands transitions as the entry, the stepping stone into the university from a previous institutional or disciplinary context. It is predicated on reaching several milestones within a more or less straightforward academic journey. For instance, Brinkworth et al. (2009) look at the first year as the transition year from secondary schooling to university education.

- **Transitions as development:** Transitions in this context are made up of distinct stages of maturation, with a clear pathway ahead. The qualitatively different steps here relate to shifts from one identity to another, with university conceptualised as the time to become somebody upon graduation (Ecclestone et al. 2010).

- **Transitions as becoming:** Understanding transitions here means embracing the ‘perpetual series of fragmented movements’ and looking at the lived reality of multiplicity and fragmentation. Tett et al. (2017, p. 389), for example, suggest that the critical moments of transitions deriving from their longitudinal account are ‘the loss of a sense of belonging on coming to university, learning to fit in by the end of the first year, changing approaches to learning and belonging in the final years of study and changing selves in the years following graduation’.

In the Sheffield Student 2013 project, student experiences are understood as multiple, diverse and ongoing transitions based on Gale and Parker’s (2014) transitions as becoming, adding further points from a number of authors (for instance, Furlong 2009; Harvey et al. 2006; Heinz 2009; Leathwood and O’Connell 2003; Plgur 2014; Tett et al. 2017). The facets listed here concern the field of higher education transitions centring around the individual’s perspective, rather than the structural (institutional and) view:

- Transitions are nonlinear, more than a stepwise process of change over time;
- Transitions are not singular, they have multiple dimensions (horizontal);
- Understanding transitions has to go beyond the first-year experience (vertical), they are happening continuously;
- Transitions are individual, hence the multiplicity of experiences;
- Transitions are not universal, hence they should not be normalised;
- Individual agency should be understood within the structure, as having the capability to navigate change.

Methodology of the Sheffield Student 2013 project

The research questions sought to investigate how students at the University of Sheffield experienced their university years. These questions were informed by the literature on experiences in HE, on transition to and from HE, and on widening participation within the university sector. Moreover, the questions were also informed by the research conducted as a pilot study with the cohort of 2012 (Clark et al. 2014).
The research questioned were, as follows:

- What are the expectations and experiences of students of 2013 at Sheffield in terms of transition to university, student support, and academic progression? How do their experiences change during their studies?

- Is there a difference regarding expectations and experiences between the lowest-income students and the higher-income students? If yes, what relevance does this have for student support and engagement?

Research design and combining methods

To understand the changing experiences of students over their university years, this project is based on a longitudinal design (Bryman 2012; Denscombe 2007; Gorard and Taylor 2004). A mixed-method longitudinal design was proposed to gain an overview of the patterns of university pathways, as well as an in-depth understanding of student lives. The underpinning reasons to explore student lives over time, rather than cross-sectionally, were threefold: conceptual, underpinned by previous research, as well as the wider policy context.

Firstly, a prospective longitudinal study allows conceptual understandings of change over time, in close proximity to such change happening. This also means that it is possible to establish causal inferences and individual level changes (Ruspini 2002; Gorard 2013). This means that capturing academic transitions in their granularity and diverse nature at the individual level was possible (Singer and Willett 2003). A prospective design that is gathering data repeatedly about the same individuals is regarded by Ruspini (2002, p. 4) as ‘truly longitudinal’, thus providing ‘the most reliable data on change in knowledge and attitudes, because longitudinal measures are collected while the subjective states actually exist’. Moreover, as the research was designed to gather data about students every year of their – normally – three-year long Bachelor degrees, it has at least three data collection points deemed necessary to identify change over time (Ruspini 2002; Singer 2003).

Secondly, adopting the longitudinal approach builds on previous research within the area, such as the FutureTrack study conducted using repeated large-scale surveys since 2006, as well as interviews, and the Paired Peers project following matched samples of 2010 entrants from the Universities of West of England and Bristol. The FutureTrack study highlighted the issues of student debt and part-time work, the wide-ranging problems non-traditional students face, and the harsh labour market conditions that these graduates face when starting their careers (Atfield et al. 2010; Purcell et al. 2013). The Paired Peers project focused on how class differences impacted on the university experience, as well as ‘moving on up’ to the labour market (Bathmaker et al. 2013, 2016), showing the initially narrowing inequalities between middle class and working-class students who achieve broadly similar pre-HE academic outcomes, but then an outcomes gap that opens up as students’ progress into working life. Furthermore, their work also points to the polarisation of the higher education system based on social class, adding further support to the work of Reay et al. (Reay et al. 2009, 2010). Gathering evidence longitudinally from subsequent cohorts provides the opportunity for some limited exploration of how HE student pathway might change over time, although there is no robust data that would allow detailed comparisons of change between cohorts.

6. This study was funded by Higher Education Careers Service Unit and led by researchers at the Warwick Institute for Employment Research.
7. This research compared student journeys at the University of West of England and the University of Bristol.
Third, the Sheffield Student 2013 tracking project operates within the policy context of widening participation, reflecting efforts by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to understand non-traditional student experiences throughout the whole student lifecycle, defined as:

(...) supporting students as they prepare for and enter higher education, as they progress on the course through to successful graduation, and then as they journey onwards to further study or employment.

(OFFA 2014)

The longitudinal design employed in this project allowed light to be shed onto the occasionally-dramatic changes in the student budget over the course of the university years, pinch points of living expenses funding, the detrimental effect of excessive part-time work, and the changing attitudes to student debt. This research has added to the growing evidence of the positive impact of financial support in alleviating financial pressures and providing a financial safety net (Bowes et al. 2016; Callender 2010; Crockford et al. 2015; Harrison and McCaig, 2017; Hordósy 2015, 2016; McCaig 2014, Gorard and Smith 2006).

The research achieved triangulation by using different methods of data-collection (Gorard and Taylor 2004). Using multiple types of data, as well as several different sources, the validity of the outcomes can be enhanced (Richards 2005). The main aim of using different research methods throughout this project was to gain insights into the bigger picture first, before seeking deeper understandings of the ongoing processes (Gorard and Taylor 2004). To describe the broader picture and thus the cohort of 2013, this research utilised administrative data available through the student record.

The administrative data were complemented with the longitudinal tracking of a smaller subset of cohort 2013 to tap into their experiences at the University of Sheffield (Ruspini 2002). Hence, the ‘bigger picture’ can be contextualised and understood at the individual level of experience. In gathering ‘qualitative’ data, the project provided a deeper understanding of the attitudes and experiences of students towards their university education. Moreover, through gathering information several times, the changes could be analysed and compared across the different stages of the university career.

**Sampling for the interview cohort**

Regarding the longitudinal tracking of students from cohort 2013, a non-probability sample was used to achieve a diverse picture, whereby depending on the size of the undergraduate population in the faculty, two or three departments were chosen, reaching a total of 12 departments. Departments with a higher number of students receiving a fee waiver were targeted. A total of 6 or 10 students are interviewed in each faculty, reaching a total of 40 students.

Fee waiver eligibility was chosen as a proxy for relative disadvantage; approximately 10% of students from the cohort starting in 2013 received such financial support from the university based on their household income and Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score. The aim of this sampling frame was to interview three to five fee waiver, and the equivalent number of non-fee waiver students, from each faculty. By over-sampling fee-waiver students, the research provides a better picture of the experiences of the poorest 10% at the University of Sheffield; the sampling frame helped to contextualise these experiences within the wider university setting, as they allowed comparisons with the ‘generic’ student body. Although the eligibility for fee waivers was chosen as the main characteristic for the sampling, we did not regard fee waiver students as a homogeneous group. On the contrary, the initial analysis of the information held on fee waiver students suggested that they were from diverse backgrounds, especially in terms of age, ethnicity and home residence.
From each faculty, two departments were chosen on the basis of a) having the most students receiving fee-waivers (proportionately compared to the size of the department and having ‘enough’ numbers to pick from) and b) represent substantial variety of the types of degree programmes and ‘kinds’ of students. Although, for example, within the Faculty of Social Sciences the second most fee waiver students are in the Management School, we felt that it would provide us with a broader understanding of ‘students from social sciences’ if East-Asian Studies and Sociological Studies are targeted.

The research aimed to oversample students from a non-traditional backgrounds through a) having fee waiver students constituting half of the sample, b) boosting the sample with mature students, c) ensuring the inclusion of potential refugee groups in the sample, and d) sampling more students from BME backgrounds for the supplementary sets. The original sample goal was to reach 38 students through the departmental sampling procedure. Finally, 40 students in total were recruited and interviewed. A high number of participants were retained throughout the course of the project, with all 40 initial members of the group agreeing to be interviewed in their second year, 38 in their third year and 33 taking part in the fourth round of interviews.

**Yearly interviews: Towards a broad narrative of student experiences**

The first-year interviews were exploratory and broad, revolving around the experience of transitioning to university. The topics for the interview were informed by the research literature on the FYEs in HE, as well as by the pilot study conducted with cohort 2012 (Clark et al. 2014). Regarding the student’s previous experience, one of the major topics included in the interview schedule focused on the exploration of their choices in relation to their university course, the university and the city itself, alongside the main aspects that the student took into account when making their choice. The bulk of the first-year interviews touched on issues concerning their student status, asking interviewees to relate their current experiences back to those from their previous stage of education, especially in terms of the teaching and learning at university, and the difference between their previous social circles and current ones.

The second-year interviews built on the data collected in the first year, and therefore were partially personalised depending on the circumstances of the student. The interviews involved asking students to reflect on their first year, and the different experiences encountered during their second year. The interviews also gathered data about the teaching and learning experiences in their second year, especially as the results from this academic cycle counts towards their final grade. The interviews explored how students assessed the first half of their university studies, and what plans they have for the remainder of the time as an undergraduate student. The interviews touched on the social setting of the students, their living conditions and their engagement with extracurricular activities.

The third-year interviews covered similar topics to the previous years concerning the academic and the social aspects of university life. In the third year the difference between those students about to complete, and those continuing their studies, is marked; whereas the first group spoke more about their future plans and reflected on their university education, data from the second group are more similar to that which was collected during the second-year interviews. The interview relied heavily on discussing future plans and thoughts about the next steps after finishing university. This involved discussing career plans and preferences, as well as the steps taken to reach these. When talking about the future, students commented on their university experiences and what they felt they had gained throughout their time in HE so far. Students who were continuing with their studies were asked to take stock of their current situation and future plans.

This project was originally planned to cover the three years of a conventional undergraduate degree. However, we judged it as advantageous to extend the length of the data collection period to
gather additional data from participants in the subsequent year as well. At this time, some students were close to completion of their longer degrees, whereas others were already engaged in the employment market. These interviews encouraged students to look back at their university years, and critically reflect on them in the context of the life-course. As a result, rich data was gathered on the initial experiences of leaving HE and entering the labour market.

Outcomes of STP2013

The ‘Sheffield Student 2013’ longitudinal project’s main aim has been to explore how the second generation of undergraduates paying higher fees responded to the changes in the funding regime, as explored in Clark et al. (2017). Further, the research provides an in-depth view of the complexity and diversity of student budgets, as well as change over time as detailed in Chapter 3.3, and elsewhere (Hordósy 2015, 2016; Hordósy & Clark, Forthcoming; Hordósy et al., Forthcoming).

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‘What works’ and WPREU: reflections on method

Dr Tom Clark

There are three substantive themes that appear centrally within the discourse on WP: access, experience, and outcome. That is to say that there is much interest in who enters Higher Education, how they experience it, and the trajectories they have after they leave. And as this book demonstrates, WPREU’s work has certainly helped us to understand how these decisions, experiences, and destinations are often stratified by socioeconomic status, prior qualification, ethnicity, and disability. But within both policy and practice, one question often appears to underpin these three issues: ‘what works’?

Having been the academic advisor on a number of WPREU’s projects over the last few years, it is apparent to me that a clear understanding of research design and method is crucial in making any assessment of this complex question. However, it is also my belief that the technical demands of trying to answer the question can often obscure the driving purpose of asking it in the first place. This short paper will attempt to outline why I believe that our values toward widening participation are just as important as the means we use to investigate them.

Research methods are those techniques of design, data collection, and analysis that are directed toward the investigation of the human world. Collectively, they provide a range of options with respect to describing, understanding, and explaining the things we are interested in.

But neither the choices made about what methods to use, or the methods themselves, can be considered neutral. As can be seen in this section of the book, some methods rely on relatively fixed measurements of quantity, others emphasise more changeable perspectives of quality. Some are much more collaborative in approach.

These types of approaches to research also produce different types of answer, for different types of people - and any answers are always dependent on context. In this respect, the way we choose to build educational environments can variously advantage and disadvantage - and the evidence suggests that across institutions and time, there are differences within and between university landscapes. That is as much to say that ‘what works’ in one instance need not be the same as ‘what works’ in another.

Indeed, there is a further, more conceptual, complication with respect to our original question ‘what works’? The label ‘widening participation’ is an external classification of circumstance that we impute onto students. And as a classification that covers a diverse population, many wouldn’t necessarily recognise themselves as ‘WP’ - and for those that do, it is likely to only be a marginal point of identification in terms of their self-image.
This point is not merely a technical one. Clearly, there are long-standing differences in opportunity, attainment, and outcomes associated with being a WP student. Indeed, the evidence suggests that WP students are all-too-frequently on the wrong side of those landscapes that can variously enable and constrain. But collective labels do not always overwhelm the individual, and diversity does not inevitably have to lead to assimilation or exclusion. WP students succeed and fail in all sorts of ways. I should know, I was one.

This suggests a final ‘methodological’ problem - and that is how to make an assessment of success and/or failure. There are, of course, external drivers that purport to guide such measures. However, initiatives that solely rely on quantity are likely, in themselves, to be somewhat limited if they do not take into account the relative context of individual and institution. To this end, all routine classificatory measurements need to be understood with reference to the specific histories and social relations that shape them, not to mention the structures through which they are experienced. Life is dynamic. Our measurements need to be too.

So, if context matters, and my experiences with WPREU suggests that it does, this quickly means that any overarching assessment of ‘what works?’ is likely to be better phrased as ‘what works, for whom, when, and why?’ This is exactly why WPREU have developed a number of different, and sometimes innovative, approaches to examine the range of issues that can impact on students who happen to find themselves in the WP category. This sometimes means ‘measuring’, but it also often means listening and collaborating too.

Indeed, having robust methodologies can help us to examine some the benefits and costs of different interventions. They can help to articulate particular perspectives that we might not be able to imagine ourselves, or help point towards those more useful avenues of talking with ‘hard to reach’ groups. However, what they rarely do is give a conclusive answer to the problem of ‘what works?’ with respect to WP.

But the point is that we continue to try to answer those questions in ways that can help guide our decision making, and perhaps more importantly, continue to reaffirm our commitment to widening participation. WPREU’s work has, for example, provided much needed evidence that non-repayable bursaries make a real difference to the experience of low income students so they can afford to find points of connection with TUs - and feel more valued by the institution in the process. We have some brilliant examples of programmes within our faculties that have helped students to bridge the pedagogical gaps between HE level study and both A Levels and BTECs - and both groups do struggle with transitions into and through the University. Similarly, we have been working hard to get BME students ‘on the map’ in respect to the attainment gaps that can occur within those pedagogical and campus landscapes that sometimes unintentionally disadvantage. We are also working hard to try and understand and improve those mechanisms - invisible to many of us - that can both constrain and enable people with different learning needs.

In the current climate of austerity and continuing change in the Higher Education sector, it would be foolhardy to suggest that money doesn’t matter, or that we can change things overnight. However, the search for ‘value for money’ under the disguise of ‘what works’ should not obscure our values as a civic university that is built on the communitarian spirit of our local population. That we continue to try to widen participation is just as important as what we might discover about ‘what works’.
Part 3.

Student experience and success
In this section, we explore the experience of WP students whilst they are at university through two of the key areas that have preoccupied WPREU researchers over its first five years.

**Zoe Baker** starts by outlining current thinking about inclusive learning and teaching in an increasingly complex higher education system and suggests a range of potential approaches (3.1). **Andrea Bath**, a University of Sheffield Learning and Teaching Development Manager, provides an overview of efforts to further develop inclusive learning and teaching in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

**Rita Hordósy** and **Greg Brown** go on to explore the complex relationship between finance and student experience (3.2), beginning with an account of the changing policy context, before approaching financial issues through a consideration of the student budget, how it is constituted and managed by students (3.3). They look at the relationship between paid term-time work and the student experience (3.4). Rita and Greg draw on three years of WPREU evaluations of the University’s financial support (3.5) and the outcomes of the Sheffield Student 2013 longitudinal tracking project to paint a detailed picture of how financial issues impact on the student experience (3.6).

**Catherine McKeown**, Head of Student Financial Support at the University of Sheffield, concludes this section with a reflection on the value of collaborative research in understanding how best to support students.
3.1. Inclusive learning and teaching

Defining ‘inclusive learning and teaching’ (ILT)

The movement to a mass HE system in the UK has marked increasing diversity amongst the student body. While ‘inclusive learning and teaching’ (ILT) has, as Hockings (2011, p. 192) notes, been predominantly associated with developing inclusive learning and teaching environments for students with disabilities or Specific Learning Difficulties, this no longer refers to ‘one category of student’. Instead, this now incorporates research on WP, lifelong learning, teaching and learning in HE, as well as equality and diversity (Hockings 2011). With this in mind, Hockings et al. (2010, p. 1) proposes that ILT refers to:

the ways in which pedagogy, curricula and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all. It embraces a view of the individual and individual difference as the source of diversity that can enrich the lives and learning of others.

Hockings et al. (2012) argue that it is becoming increasingly critical to understand how HEIs can support diverse student bodies to achieve highly. This can be accomplished through researching learning and teaching environments, particularly following revisions to the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) in 2011, calling for teachers to demonstrate ‘respect for individual learners and diverse learning communities’ (HEA 2011, p. 3).

It is too simplistic to describe student diversity as referring to ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ students; in their research on academic engagement in HE, Hockings et al. (2010, p. 98) conclude that ‘diversity’ goes beyond structural divisions, and includes life and educational experiences, entry routes into HE, family commitments, living situations, different approaches to learning and subject knowledge. As a result of this diversity, prior learning experiences and knowledge cannot be assumed when students enter HE (Haggis 2006). The expectations of students’ in the HE environment regarding tacit knowledge and aptitudes, or ‘invisible pedagogy’ (Bernstein 1990), may differ substantially from their prior educational experiences (Meuleman et al. 2015).

‘Valued’ knowledge

Despite this, research has outlined how discourses, cultural knowledge, as well as types of linguistic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) are implicit and taken for granted in the HE field (McLean et al. 2013; Watson 2013). Certain forms of knowledge may be viewed as ‘culturally misaligned’ or ‘irrelevant’ by HEIs and less favoured in comparison to ‘dominant’ forms of knowledge (Apple 1986). Such knowledge, as Yosso (2005, p. 70) states, is only considered ‘valuable’ in the institution because it reflects the values of the upper and middle-classes in a hierarchical society. Moreover, the underlying principles of certain ‘values’ that are embedded into models of learning, such as
'independent learning', 'learner responsibility' and 'deep' approaches to learning, are 'usually only implicit in course outlines, assessment instructions and assumptions about the structuring of work' (Haggis 2006, p. 524). This can lead to difficulties in understanding the expectations placed on students by the institution for students who are not familiar with such discourses.

Scholarly work has suggested that this situation can encourage a deficit view, where the student is framed as not possessing sufficient knowledge or ability, or as being 'unprepared' for HE (Clegg 2011; Haggis 2006). Haggis (2006, p. 525) suggests that responses to these issues by HEIs that focus on 'support' can work to pathologise those who need to access it, as this formulation 'suggests the existence of a superior group who function in a strong and 'unsupported' way'. She goes on to argue that while researching, developing, and providing support and new teaching technologies are important, there will be limited change without the interrogation of deeper assumptions (p. 523).

**Moving towards ILT practices**

Recognising and overcoming the implicit assumptions in learning and teaching in HE, touched on above, is of vital importance to the WP and social inclusion agenda (Jones and Lau 2010). A range of recommendations targeted at HEIs and practitioners that can assist in establishing more inclusive learning and teaching practices, whilst avoiding deficit perspectives, has been put forward by the existing literature in this field.

Scholars have outlined the importance of making tacit knowledge and discourses explicit to students so that they are able to participate successfully in HE, with the role of the teacher being essential in this process (McKay and Devlin 2014; McLean et al. 2013; Watson 2013). Watson et al. (2009, p. 428) contend that educators should focus on demystifying the 'rules of the game', rather than assuming that difficulties in grasping these 'reflects individual, or even collective, deficit'. Teachers thus have the power to affect students’ experiences, and subsequently, their success in HE (McKay and Devlin 2014).

Others propose that valuing the capital that students bring to HE (Clegg 2011; Yosso 2005) by taking their personal histories, experiences and diversity into account (Garratt 2011), can provide a means of establishing inclusive learning and teaching practices. Understanding students’ histories and experiences is clearly required as a starting point in this process (Hockings et al. 2010), as this enables practitioners to establish an awareness of the diversity in their classrooms (Hockings et al. 2012). In doing this, students’ experiences and knowledge can act as a guiding force for designing activities, tools and techniques in the classroom for an inclusive learning experience (Hockings et al. 2012). In Hockings et al.’s (2010, p. 107) research, one of the main difficulties encountered with this approach was, understandably, a lack of time due to operating in ‘complex learning and teaching environments’, with increasingly larger numbers of students. Through interviews with students and teachers in two UK HEIs, however, the authors identified various elements of good practice, where teachers had found ways of understanding individual students’ knowledge, experiences and histories, and incorporated this into teaching activities to make this meaningful and engaging (Hockings et al. 2010; Hockings 2011). Notable examples of this included employing strategies to build knowledge of individual students over time in large groups, such as having students share facts about themselves with the class at the start of lectures, and teachers using breaks to speak with students individually. These are what Hockings (2011) refers to as ‘tailor-able strategies’, that do not require ‘personalised programmes of learning, tailored to individual students’ needs’, which would be clearly difficult to accomplish in learning environments where time and space for learning is constrained. Other techniques included adopting flexible student-centred teaching approaches, where students were able to apply their learning to existing knowledge and experiences, making this ‘relevant and meaningful to them as individuals’ (Hockings et al. 2010, p. 104).
Summary

Research has identified not only the importance of developing inclusive learning and teaching practices, but also strategies and approaches describing how these can be accomplished, even in an increasingly complex, mass HE system. This involves making explicit all of the currently implicit messages, tacit knowledge and discourses, in order to enable students to participate successfully in HE (McKay and Devlin 2014; Watson et al. 2009). It also means valuing the capital, resources, knowledge, and experiences that students bring (Hockings et al. 2012; Yosso 2005). In utilising strategies to develop understandings of students as individuals, and subsequently, the diversity amongst the student body, ILT practices can result in learning that is meaningful and engaging (Hockings 2011) without subscribing to a deficit perspective (Clegg 2011; Haggis 2006).

References


Enhancing inclusive learning and teaching in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Dr Andrea Bath

This commentary is written from my perspective as a Learning and Teaching Development Manager, working with the Faculty. I work in close partnership with key staff from across the Faculty to identify and set priorities, to shape strategy and most importantly to plan and take forward action to enhance learning and teaching.

At the University of Sheffield, Rachel van Duyvenbode from the School of English has set up the SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) programme. This is bringing together staff from across the institution in sessions that open up thinking about how and what we teach and to question whether, by becoming more aware of our own “blind spots” and privileges, we can take steps to create a more diverse and inclusive learning and teaching environment.

In the Faculty of Arts and Humanities a number of related pieces of work are in progress to accomplish the above. These consist of exploratory research into curriculum and the learning environment, the creation of new pathways into HE, and the development of tools to enable the reflection upon, and questioning of assumptions.

A piece of work was undertaken jointly by the Equality and Diversity Committee and the Learning and Teaching Committee and a report was produced (Bracey, August 2017) on diversity in the curriculum in the Faculty, to help understand the current picture. The research incorporated both qualitative and quantitative data based on student and staff perspectives drawn from a wide range of source material. It provided an insight into the Faculty staffing profile and how equality and diversity is currently being implemented in the curriculum and the ways in which students and staff could be further supported.

To improve the diversity of our student population we have created new pathways into our existing programmes from Foundation Years, provided by our Department for Lifelong Learning, or the University of Sheffield International College. We have also provided part-time routes.

An Equality Challenge Unit funded project is providing insight into the experiences of BME students (Miller, 2017) and identifies issues relating to the curriculum and the learning environment which we will need to address if we are to increase the diversity of the student body. These changes, coupled with higher numbers of students declaring learning support needs and mental
health issues have brought to the fore the need to respond to a varied cohort whose needs and backgrounds are not homogenous. We are therefore planning work on reviewing our transition arrangements and support for staff and students to understand how we can increase our inclusivity.

We are looking at how we can work with students and practically support staff to become aware of implicit assumptions and to make changes to their own practice that can address some of the issues in a tangible way. We have recently applied for funding for a project to develop and disseminate a "self-assessment tool" that empowers staff to think about inclusivity and diversity in their teaching practice and the learning environment that they provide for their students.

The tool would be online and provide signposting to existing resources both internal and external that staff could use in making changes to their teaching practice.
3.2. 

Student finance and budgeting

Greg Brown and Dr Rita Hordósy

Student finance, and the many overlapping and interconnected issues that stem from it, form a large and significant vein of research and evaluative work in WP. How students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are supported, and how they support themselves financially throughout their studies is a cornerstone of our sustained inquiry. This work is undertaken to ensure students in need are offered the support they require, and that this support continues to meet their needs. It has been implicitly assumed that financial support is an effective means of ensuring we both widen access to, and support our students effectively throughout the HE lifecycle, our work seeks to test these assertions.

WPReU have published a range of internal reports, peer-reviewed journal papers and research informed blogs and articles on a variety of student finance related topics. This runs alongside dissemination of our work at academic conferences, sector-led seminars and our own practitioner forums (see Appendix).

In this section and the sections below, we briefly outline both the general policy and literature landscape relating to student finance in England across the last two decades, before reporting on outcomes from both the yearly financial support evaluations, and student finance related findings from the STP2013 project. We conclude by highlighting those areas we see as most important moving forward, and how we will look to further develop our evidence base in this regard.

Changing policy context

The last two decades have brought major changes to the way higher education is funded in England: both in how tuition is paid and accounted for, and in how students are supported while they study. Below, we provide a quick overview of the major reforms:

1989 - 1996

- Contemporary reforms are put in motion with Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government freeze on maintenance grants, and the introduction of the first repayable student loans. Grants remain for the poorest students, with loans now available for all students.

- John Major commissions Lord Dearing to undertake an investigation into the funding of HE.

1997 - 2002

- The Dearing Report (1997) is published, recommending that in order for the UK to maintain its status as an economic hub, it must ensure its universities have sufficient funding, urging the government to ask students to contribute towards the cost of their degrees.
• The newly elected Labour government, acting on the recommendations of the report, introduce means tested tuition fees of £1000 for all students matriculating in Autumn 1998.

• Around a third of the poorest students did not pay as a result of the means tested stipulation.

• Maintenance loans are scrapped and income-contingent loans are introduced in their place.

2003-2005

• Despite being re-elected in 2001 with a manifesto that pledged not to increase tuition fees, and in spite of protest from the student movement and backbench Labour MPs, the 2003 white paper ‘The Future of Higher Education’ concludes that higher education institutions (HEIs) should be able to secure student contributions ranging from £0-£3000 per year of study.

• Student loans are increased to meet inflation and the rising cost of living.

• All HEIs decide to charge £3000 a year in tuition.

2006 - 2011

• Tuition fees of £3000 introduced by all HEI’s for students matriculating in Autumn 2006.

• Tuition fee loans are introduced.

• Maintenance grants are re-introduced.

• Universities are required to return an ‘Access Agreement’ that outlines how increased tuition is used to support widening access and participation activities if providers are to charge fees over £1000 and up to the £3000 maximum

• A further investigation into the funding and future of HE, the Browne report (2010) concludes that students should pay at least £21,000 for a 3 year undergraduate degree programme - claiming they should ‘pay more’ to ‘get more’.

• The incoming Conservative - Liberal Democrat coalition expand upon these recommendations and conclude that the tuition fee cap should be increased to £9000 per year of study.

2012 - 2018

• Tuition fees of £9000 introduced by all HEI’s for student matriculating in Autumn 2012.

• The previously initiated teaching grants are cut for a number of subjects and disciplines.

• Tuition fee loans are raised, alongside the repayment threshold, 21,000 in 2012 through to 25,000 in 2018.

• Access agreement must be in place and approved by OFFA/OfS if providers are to charge fees over £6000 and up to the £9000 maximum.

• The National Scholarship Programme (discussed in greater detail later) is introduced and then scrapped from the 2015-16 academic year.

• Maintenance grants are once again abolished and replaced with increased income-contingent loan provision.
In 2017, the tuition cap is raised to £9,250, and is now variable to increase and decrease based on HEI’s Teaching Excellence Framework performance.

In February 2018 the Government announced a major funding review for post-18 education, and within that, promising to look at the fairness of the tuition fee and maintenance loan system as well as the repayment terms and conditions.

As a result of these changes, the construction of student budgets is becoming ever more complex. Next, we move onto discuss this in greater detail, detailing the main components of this budget: financial support (governmental and institutional), and its link with parental contribution and paid work.

The Student Budget

Government administered financial support

To finance the day to day expenditures associated with university study, the Student Loans Company (SLC) provides students with the opportunity to apply for a maintenance loan. Such loans are taken up by the vast majority of the eligible student population, with over 90% of full time English domiciled students matriculating in 2016 applying for some form of government administered maintenance support (Belfield et al. 2017). Such loan provision is paid back once graduates start earning above the repayment threshold, which moved from £21k to £25k per annum for English students in April 2018. The amount repaid each month is then staggered based on how much more than the threshold any given graduate earns, with any outstanding debts waived if not paid back within 30 years of graduation. Such loans can then be classed as private contributions towards the cost of university (Bolton 2015), and whilst publicly funded, accrue interest. The value of outstanding loans is set to reach an estimated £100 billion in 2018 (Bolton 2015), highlighting the vast sums of money involved in managing such provision.

The amount available to any given student is dependent on that student’s declared and evidenced household income. The more a student’s parent(s) or legal guardian earn, the smaller the loan they are entitled to claim, and vice versa. Students studying in London are entitled to an increased loan sum due to the cost of living in the city. This is complicated further with differences in definition of mature students between universities (21 and over) and the SLC (25 and over).

Since the wholesale move from grants to loans, there has been significant debate around the utility of such loans, and whether they do indeed offer students necessary liquidity in their current format (Bolton 2015; Callender and Jackson 2008; Hordósy 2015; Johnston and Barr 2013). However, this debate is unavoidably tied to the need to ensure debts upon graduation do not rise beyond the levels currently seen. The poorest students taking out the largest available maintenance loans are graduating with debts upward of £50k, when tuition loans are included (Belfield et al. 2017). As such, maintenance loans are a vital part of the vast majority of student budgets, but are viewed by students as coming at an increasing and considerable cost down the line, with ramifications for all aspects of WP focused work.

Institutionally administered financial support

Supplementing maintenance loans provided by the SLC are means-tested institutional financial support provision. Money used to provide this support is accounted for and forecast in the annual access agreement, though further and specific institutional support may be available in the form of other non-repayable support (e.g. Alumni scholarships). As highlighted earlier, such awards were originally seen as being vital and necessary to ensure the steady increase in the number of students
from low-participation (POLAR Q1 and 2) neighbourhoods continued in the wake of the tuition fee hike in 2012.

At the University of Sheffield, a range of non-repayable financial support provisions exist to support those students from low-income backgrounds. Most prominently, and assessed in line with a student’s SLC application, is the bursary and enhanced bursary. The bursary award is tiered, ranging from £500 to £1500 dependent on a student’s registered household income, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: 2018 bursary eligibility at TUoS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Income</th>
<th>Bursary Per Year of Study (starting in 2018)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>£0-£25,000k</td>
<td>£1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£25,001 - £30,000</td>
<td>£1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£30,001 - £40,000</td>
<td>£500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: TUoS ‘Sheffield Bursary Scheme’ (2018)

The maintenance support entitlement for care leavers, estranged students or those with caring responsibilities is not dependent on the parental income. Further, they are entitled to an enhanced bursary of £4500 per academic year, regardless of household income, (replacing the Bursary if they were otherwise eligible). This exemplifies one institution’s approach to supporting students from more deprived socio-economic backgrounds, something roughly replicated across the sector, with similar bursary schemes in place at most (though not all) institutions.

However, the funding available for such schemes is greatly stratified, and under increasing threat (McCaig 2014). McCaig (2014) demarcates a clear divergence in the money available to pre- and post-92 institutions in funding such financial support initiatives. Practically, the proportion of eligible students at each type of institution (more in a post-92, and less in a pre-92), ultimately dictates the size of the share in funding that each recipient student has access too. As such, thousands of students who would benefit from more generous bursary provision in lower tariff universities are left with less, while a minority at high-tariff institutions are given considerably more.

Further, and as has been discussed in other sections of this book, the effectiveness and impact of such provision has been increasingly called into question. As noted above, there has been little to no causal evidence that proves financial support widens access to HE, the initial aim of the increased spend (Bowes et al. 2016). The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) have been clear in their guidance, that spend at previous levels is unjustifiable, given the lack of evidence that currently exists. This has sparked an ever growing move away from the ‘financial support heavy’ access agreements we have seen in the last 5 years, with current and future agreements outlining a move to increasing spend on outreach, and student success and retention activity at the expense of financial support (OFFA 2015). Despite this, the utility of institutionally administered financial support endures, with a recent OFFA funded project team devising a quantitative toolkit to assess the impact of financial support on student retention and success (McCaig and Harrison et al. 2016), in the hope that a more concrete idea of its effectiveness can be uncovered.

In summation, below, we outline how these various forms of support come together to make up the greater student budget, highlighting that in many cases significant shortfalls persist. Figure 3 shows the levels of loans and grants by household income, as well as the institutional bursary eligibility for the 2016 cohort at the University of Sheffield. The assumed family contribution was calculated by taking the maximum maintenance loan and grant as the baseline.
The above graph outlines the means through which students from different socio-economic backgrounds can and are expected to make-up their student budget. The significance of the assumed familial contribution (discussed at greater length later in this section) raises a number of questions relating to both the amount offered via governmental maintenance support, and the means through which students are expected to make-up integral short falls. Most prominently, this relates to discussions of paid part-time work, both during term-time and across University breaks. Next we outline both the growing prevalence of paid student work, and the increasing body of scholarly work that has interrogated its impact and influence.
3.3.

Paid student work

Greg Brown and Dr Rita Hordósy

Across the UK, between August and October 2017, 559,000 full-time students aged 18-24 were engaged in paid, part-time employment - 32% of the overall demographic - with a further 16.4% actively seeking part-time work (ONS 2017). In the context of the last quarter century, Labour Force Survey (LFS) data from 1984-1992 outlines the growing proportion of full-time students aged 16-24 engaging in part-time work: from 22.8% in 1984 to 30% in 1992, through to 32% this past year (ONS 2017). Further, other surveys that take into account purely undergraduate university student populations, regardless of age suggest that close to half work whilst studying (Endsleigh 2012), with institution specific studies garnering a range of figures. Our latest institutional survey found that 37% of Home/EU domiciled undergraduate respondents (N=2060) were undertaking paid work during term-time (Brown 2018). In this brief section, we outline research to date, charting and examining why, for how long and what impact working during term-time has on students (for discussions of summer work see Hordósy 2015).

The main motivations for undertaking term-time work revolves around the need to bolster low incomes and plug the gaps in the student budget discussed in the previous section, a perennial student issue. Scholarly work offers empirical evidence of this, which has persisted since the initial move from grant to loan-based funding was initiated in the 1990’s (Ford et al 1995; Hall 2010; Lucas and Lammont 1998; Richardson et al. 2014). Beyond conceptualisations and motivations associated with student work, research literature has also sought - perhaps most importantly - to unpick the impact this work has on students across a number of indicators; broadly relating to student experience, well-being, and success. Callender (2008), for example, sought to quantify the impact of term-time employment on students’ academic attainment (marks and grades), while controlling for factors such as educational attainment on entry and number of hours worked. Part-time work appeared to have a detrimental effect on both a student’s final year marks and degree results - with the more hours worked, the greater the negative effect (see also Moreau and Leathwood 2006). In a similarly focussed study, Hovdhaugen (2015) found that employment status, and more importantly, the number of hours worked had a statistically significant impact on drop-out rates. These studies demarcate 15-20 hours per week as a clear cut off point, at which term-time work begins to have serious negative consequences on a student’s academic experience.

Other studies have found that undertaking excessive paid work whilst studying negatively impacts on a number of variables beyond academic outcomes (Carney et al. 2005; Curtis and Shani 2002; Richardson et al. 2014; Salamonson and Andrew 2006). Working excessive hours is seen to encroach on student’s lecture attendance and other academic contact time – an issue often overlooked by HEI’s who often appear to view their students as being devoid of employment pressures (see also WPREU’s 2017 financial support evaluation - Brown 2018).

However, research has outlined a number of positive outcomes associated with term-time work. Many of these outcomes point to the intrinsic general benefits of paid employment (instilling work ethic, offering focus) but also highlight skills development and networking opportunities crucial to securing employment post university (Billets and Ovens 2007; Richardson et al. 2014; Watts and Pickering 2000). Further, some studies have argued that term-time work was seen to offer ‘positive forms of stress’ (focussing productivity) and improving time management skills (Robotham 2012). It
is important to note, that such positive outcomes were only typical of students who worked below the recommended hours per week threshold set by their University.

As discussed above and throughout, much of this research points to an hour per week ‘tipping point’, at which term-time work starts to significantly impact on a student’s academic engagement, attainment and progression, with this threshold normally identified as being between 15-20 hours (Callender 2008; Carney et al. 2005; Curtis 2007; Hovdhaugen 2015; Robotham 2012). The impact of term-time work then appears heavily tied up with the context in which a student finds themselves, and indeed the type of work they undertake. This was a key finding in the most recent iteration of WPREU’s financial support and student finance evaluation (Brown 2018), which is discussed in greater detail in the next section. The impact of term-time work is then best understood as being hour, contract and domain contingent.

The literature outlined above has informed and relates directly to WPREU’s work on and around student finance. We hope that our work both adds to scholarly debates, whilst simultaneously informing policy and practice across the sector and at the University of Sheffield specifically. The constant changes in regulatory frameworks and macro-policy can have significant impacts on the micro; this is acutely evidenced in the make-up of students’ day-to-day budgets. Continued research and reflection are then vital to ensuring we can keep track of how students are able to afford the everyday expenses, and not just those large-scale costs associated with university study (such as tuition fees).
3.4. Yearly financial support evaluations

Greg Brown

WPREU undertake yearly evaluations of the University of Sheffield’s financial support provision - informing both institutional student support and the prospective access agreement spend. The University offers a range of financial support provision, from core bursaries tied to student household income taken from Student Finance England (SFE) data, to scholarships based on both academic merit and financial background, and hardship funds intended to support students in specific and more serious financial difficulty.

With the University spending substantial sums of money - TUoS committed to spending £8.2 million on its financial support provision in the academic year 2016/17 (TUoS 2016) - on such support, the evaluation of this spend is crucial to ensuring resources are appropriately administered, and opportunities to supporting those students who are most in need are not squandered. Further, our evaluations seek to surface student perceptions both of the support offered and how it connects and relates with other financial concerns and realities faced across the student lifecycle.

Here we outline the aims, methods and outcomes of the three financial support evaluations to date: 2015, undertaken by Kimberley Simms; 2016 undertaken by Dr Laura Lane; and 2017 undertaken by Greg Brown.

2015 Financial Support and NSP Evaluation Simms 2015a; Simms 2015b

2015 saw the undertaking of the first TUoS financial support evaluation. This was done in two parts, reflecting the implementation of the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) two years prior. The first report (report 1) focused on level 1 students in receipt of NSP funding, seeking to ascertain its impact (in conjunction with that of other TUoS provision) on students at Sheffield. The NSP was a national programme that sought to allay issues surrounding fair access that were anticipated after the trebling of tuition fees in 2012. Students with household incomes of £25,000 or less, with an Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score of 10,000 or less were awarded £6000 at the start of their first year; could be used as a tuition fee waiver, accommodation discount, or taken as cash. The key aims of this evaluation were:

1. To consider the extent to which the University of Sheffield’s financial support package influences recipient students’ decisions to attend the institution
2. To understand the factors students view as important when considering HE
3. To understand the financial arrangements of level 1 NSP recipients in paying for their tuition fees, accommodation and living costs.
The second report (report 2) focused on the University’s institution-specific financial support – chiefly bursaries and scholarships - for those undertaking level 2 and 3 study. The key aims of this evaluation strand were:

1. To understand more about the financial circumstances of current students
2. To determine how students combat financial worries
3. To measure the effectiveness of financial support in supporting students through their time at university

**Methods**

Across both reports, online surveys containing multiple choice and free text response questions were deployed to gather student perspectives of the NSP and the University’s financial support provision. Whilst report 1’s response rate was encouraging given the small population, the response to the survey invitation for report 2 was less so. The response rates and sample representation of the wider corresponding populations must be taken into account when making generalisations about the impact of financial support based on responses.

**Outcomes**

The first section in report 1’s findings related to the awareness and perception of the NSP. Over half of respondents were not aware of the NSP prior to submitting their UCAS application, suggesting it had little impact on students’ decisions to apply to university generally, confirming Bowes et al.’s (2016) work evaluating the scheme. Outlining how they used the NSP, the majority of respondents stated it was used to cover their living costs, with a smaller proportion using it to pay for their accommodation or tuition fees. Conversely, only 10% of respondents were not aware of the University’s bursary scheme prior to UCAS submission and commending their studies.

Field of study, institutional reputation, course structure and facilities were all amongst the most important factors for students when considering their application to the University of Sheffield. The provision of financial support also ranked highly however, sitting marginally below those outlined above in terms of assigned importance. Further, students were generally positive about the financial support they received from the University, with many suggesting that they did not see themselves attending or continuing to attend without this support.

Report 2, which looked more broadly at students financial circumstances and concerns, highlighted how pervasive financial worry was amongst the student population, with over three quarters of respondents noting they were concerned about their current financial situation. Indeed, around 20% of respondents indicated that they felt anxious or stressed as a result. Despite the large range of support and guidance available, less than 10% of respondents said they had approached the financial support team for help or advice, raising issues about the visibility of this support provision.

Student work also emerged as a major theme. While less than half of respondents worked during term-time, over half of those who were working indicated that they did so as they could not manage solely on the money they received in student loans. Whilst most students did not tend to work over the University’s advised 16 hours per week, there were some who reported working excessive hours (over 25). Time spent working was viewed by students to have significant impacts on their independent study time, and time spent participating in extracurricular activity, with those choosing not to work indicating that they feared term-time work would negatively impact their academic studies.
Both reports offered institution specific data in relation to both the impact of specific financial support programmes (NSP and bursaries), whilst surveying the wider student finance landscape at TUoS.

Further, a journal article in the Journal of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, based on the data gathered in this evaluation can be found online:


**2016 Student Finance Evaluation Lane 2016**

2016 saw a continuation and extension of the work carried out in 2015. As a result of the discontinuation of the NSP in the academic year 2015-16, the report dealt solely with the University of Sheffield funded support.

The aims of the study were as follows:

1. To evaluate the different forms of TUoS provided financial support for undergraduate students during the academic year 2015/16 in terms of their effectiveness in supporting students throughout their studies, and impact on students during their studies.

2. To understand more about the financial circumstances of current undergraduate students, including their financial concerns, perceptions of debt, experiences of part-time work and potential relationships with student well-being and the student experience.

**Methods**

The study took a mixed methods approach, based on recommendations outlined in report 2 from the previous year. As with the previous year, a large-scale survey was deployed to gather the perspectives of home-fee paying undergraduate students, which was then triangulated via a series of semi-structured interviews that sought to bring context to the survey outcomes.

455 survey respondents indicated that they would be willing to take part in a follow-up interview. From this group, maximum variation purposive sampling was used to make sure the perspectives of students from across the three levels of focus and varied financial circumstance were gathered. This resulted in the completion of 11 interviews.

**Outcomes**

Reflecting the wide-ranging nature of the report, the outcomes moved from discussing the impact of financial support, through to managing financial concerns via term-time work, and student’s future plans.

Echoing the previous year, survey responses highlighted that the bursary scheme was visible to prospective students prior to application, with nearly half of respondents suggesting that it had
some influence on their decision to apply. However, the impacts of financial support appeared much more significant across all target groups in supporting student retention, well-being, and improving the student experience. Improvements to the wider student experience took the form of support for participation in extracurricular engagement, and facilitation of academic engagement.

Perceptions and concerns surrounding debt were also evident. Whilst over half of the survey respondents indicated that they had taken on as much debt as they would have expected, this appeared to accumulate over the student lifecycle, with nearly a third of level 2+ students taking on more debt than expected. Students did not appear resigned to their debt, but instead exhibited frustration, stress and concern at the situations they found themselves in (c.f. Harrison et al. 2015). Over four fifths of respondents were concerned about their debt, with over half indicating this concern had an impact on their studies.

With this in mind, students were seen to be taking steps to manage their financial concerns, with almost 9 out of 10 respondents indicating that they consciously budgeted. Students were also seen to seek out other revenue streams, with a third of respondents indicating they had a paid term-time job. Whilst the majority of students were working less than 20 hours per week, there was still a significant number of students working above the recommended 16 hours per week threshold, with some working over 20 hours per week whilst studying full-time.

Motivations and reasons for working during term-time were complex and multifaceted, however, the most popular reason cited was in order to pay for basic essentials. The impacts of term-time work were similarly complex, leading students to spend less time relaxing, seeing family and studying independently. As previous WPReU research has pointed out, there appears to be a connection between robust and well maintained social networks and academic confidence and success (Hordósy 2016).

Respondents were also asked about their future plans. Almost one fifth of level 2+ respondents were definitely planning on moving into postgraduate study, whilst one third were planning on finding full-time employment. Above and beyond considerations of existing debt, nearly four fifths of respondents indicated that availability of financial support for postgraduate tuition fees was the most significant factor in plans for future study.

A large proportion of respondents felt the University’s financial provision was working well and expressed particular contentment at eligibility being automatically assigned upon registration. Respondents did however have a number of recommendations for improvement, with notable themes including: overcoming the stigma of gaining support through improved communication, revisiting eligibility, especially for those students on the margins of bursary entitlement, and altering timing of payments to spread them out further.

For members of staff at the University of Sheffield, the full report can be found here (you must be logged into MUSE): sites.google.com/a/sheffield.ac.uk/wp-resources

2017 Financial Support Evaluation Brown 2018

The 2017 evaluation marked a departure from the broader stroke evaluations of the previous two years, taking a specific look at how term-time work related to financial support provision and the academic experience - issues that had been touched upon in the previous iteration. As a result, the aims of the research were as follows:
1. To evaluate the University of Sheffield’s financial provision, outlining how students value and utilise the support.

2. To gain a greater understanding of student’s term-time work profiles, examining where, when and for how long students at Sheffield work while studying full-time.

3. To explore the interrelationships between financial support, term-time work and academic experience at the University of Sheffield.

**Methods**

As in 2016, the research took a mixed methods approach, undertaken in two phases. The first phase consisted of a large-scale survey (non-level specific), which sought to collect home fee paying (UK/EU) undergraduate student’s perceptions of financial support, term-time work and its impact on academic engagement and experience. The online survey was sent to all registered home (UK/EU) students with 15,387 students being contacted in total. This returned 2060 responses - of which 2039 were eligible to complete the survey - providing a 13% response rate.

This was followed up by in-depth, semi-structured student interviews, exploring the themes of the survey in more detail. Twenty-one students were contacted in total, with 11 students being interviewed.

**Outcomes**

Outcomes were grouped into three main and overlapping themes; the funding of studies and utilisation of financial support, financial support and term-time work, and cumulative impacts on the academic experience.

The survey highlighted significant differences in how students funded their accommodation and general living costs. Those in receipt of financial support (half the sample) indicated they received significantly less familial assistance (particularly in paying for accommodation) when compared with their peers not in receipt of financial support. This outlined the appropriately targeted nature of the financial support provision, and further highlighted the expectations about significant parental contribution underpinning the wider student finance system. Consequently, we saw those in receipt of TuoS support use it to cover unavoidable costs such as rent and general living expenses, bolstering their maintenance loans and mitigating the need to rely on private credit.

Further, and leading from 2016’s findings, financial support was seen to help support students engage with ‘value-added’ activity, such as joining clubs and societies, and volunteering. Facilitation of greater academic engagement was also noted, with students finding more time to attend office hours and speak with academic staff as a result of the additional income.

37% (703) of respondents worked during term-time, a similar rate to that in the previous year’s survey. When comparing those in receipt of financial support with those who were not, we see little difference in the uptake of term-time work. However, and crucially, we do see the influence of financial support in shaping student’s conceptualisations of and motivations for taking on such work. Students in receipt of financial support highlighted how the provision had allowed them to work less hours (46%), to take jobs that fitted around their studies (35%) and provided opportunities to broaden their search for suitable and complementary term-time work, rather than having to rush into the first paid opportunity they could find.

Of those in work, 57% were on zero-hours contracts, with hours and times fluctuating from week to week. The impacts of such contracts proved to be highly contingent on where a student worked.
For those working on-campus (81% of those surveyed were on a zero-hours contract), such an arrangement was seen to work well, as students were able to choose the hours they worked and fit them around their studies. For those working off campus however (48% of whom were on zero-hours contracts), this contractual arrangement did not benefit them in the same way.

This divergence between on and off campus work was an interesting set of 'ideal types', useful when discussing conducive and non-conducive term-time work arrangements. Those working on campus were seen to work fewer hours, through the day and working week, for better pay, with employers who were intrinsically more sympathetic towards their academic commitments. Conversely, those working off campus were seen to work longer hours, for minimum remuneration, at unsociable hours and for employers who were more inflexible, and less sympathetic towards their academic commitments. The relationship between financial support, term-time work take-up, and the associated on/off campus distinction could be seen to have combined impact upon the wider academic experience, as discussed above.

This exploratory work around impacts on the academic experience has then developed a number of useful theories as to how these three issues relate and coincide. Next year’s evaluation will look to test these theories, taking a controlled observational approach, as in the quasi-experimental approach outlined in the OFFA evaluation toolkit.

A further development in the latest evaluation is the move to ensure the outcomes are disseminated laterally within the institution, with colleagues in those teams most closely associated with the issues addressed (Financial Support Team and Careers Service) being asked to comment on the report, and such comments then being integrated. This will continue into future evaluations, consulting with stakeholders as often as is possible to ensure our evaluative work is informed by practitioner perspectives and their tacit and experiential knowledge of the domain.
3.5.

The changes in student budgets: results from the Sheffield Student 2013 longitudinal tracking project

Dr Rita Hordósy

The outcomes of the Sheffield Student 2013 tracking project (STP2013) have been both complementary and reinforcing to the work discussed above, as a joint paper utilising the first-year data and the 2015 evaluation showed (Crockford et al. 2015). In this section, we argue that the patterns explored and outlined via the quantitative evaluation data gained in-depth contextualisation through the lived experience captured in the STP2013 interviews. Further, the outcomes of this longitudinal study informed changes in the financial support evaluation both in terms of content and focus (such as increasing focus on the distribution of part-time work), as well as the methods employed (using more qualitative evidence in the most recent iteration).

We will now turn to outlining the key findings from the Sheffield Student 2013 tracking project (Clark et al. 2017; Crockford et al. 2015; Hordósy 2015, & 2016). As this project was prompted by the wide-ranging policy changes to the student loan system in 2012, one of the key foci of the project was to understand the diverse experiences of students in financing their university studies. In doing so, we oversampled the poorest 10% of UK-domiciled, full-time undergraduate students based on their fee waiver eligibility (NSP) in order to compare their experiences to those who did not receive such support, through repeated interviews.

The makeup of the student budget

The student budget is not uniform, there is a significant diversity across the board in the amount of money students are in control of, as well as the level and type of expenditures they face. The experiences of financing undergraduate studies are diverse due to the differences across the student cohort, with age, family status and background, disposable income and savings, and spending habits intersecting.

The amount of maintenance support a student receives will not be stable across the three years of study; assuming that changes in household income will immediately trickle down to the student,
SLC recalculates their eligibility on a yearly basis. This could mean substantial changes in the student budget, with the student receiving more or less support than in previous years. This chain-reaction has an impact on the need to take up part-time work, the use or need for savings, as well as reliance on private credit. As the re-calculation is based on tax-years, students will only be notified of changes shortly before starting the new academic year, leaving little room to seek alternative income streams outside term-time.

The financial pressures deriving from the maintenance loan and grant system are evident: the maximum available in loans and grants for 2013/2014 is £7,177, well below the NUS’ expenditure calculation for course and living costs of roughly £13,000, excluding tuition fees (NUS 2013). The maintenance support system assumes that families are willing and capable of financially providing for students up to the age of 25, rather than using the age at which universities prescribe students as being ‘mature’, which is 21. Through this, the loan system perpetuates the welfare structures of semi-independence introduced in the 1980s with ‘young people’ being defined as those under the age of 25 (Furlong and Cartmel 1997, 2007). Contemporaneously, this is manifested in the lower wage floor prescribed for those under 25 through the National Living Wage (NLW).

The payments from SLC come in three instalments across September, January and April. However, this timescale does not resemble any other period of an individual’s life. The timings and amount provided in each instalment are not enough to provide for students in the summer months, regardless of any potential lack of family support or alternative income. The SLC timescale is then seen to create multiple pressure points, with money not available when large expenditures are due, such as rent and accommodation deposits.

**Institutional and familial support**

In 2013, home full-time undergraduate entrants at the University of Sheffield may have received one or more of the following: an annual bursary dependant on their declared household income, extra first year support such as the institutional tuition fee waiver with a cash option, and / or the City Scholarship (Hordósy 2015). When looking at the entire 2013 cohort, 62.1% of students did not receive any financial support from the institution in their first year, 31% received less than £2000 in cash as financial support, and only 6.9% of students gained more than £2000 in total cash on top of their grants and loans. It is worth noting that only ‘one in four students get more than £20 a week as financial support’ across the whole cohort (Hordósy 2015, p. 12).

Reinforcing Bowes et al.’s (2016) findings, first year interviewees appeared confused about financial support provision, in regard to both terminology and eligibility criteria. Most knew what amount they received, rather than the name of, or reason for the support (Hordósy 2015). Students who actively searched and obtained information about the financial support available prior to entry tended to be those who had limited institutional choice by circumstance; mature students settled in Sheffield for example. For them, this information acted as a ‘make or break’ feasibility test, with the outcome determining whether they were able to attend HE or not.

Over the course of their studies, the notion of being eligible for extra funding, such as fee waivers and bursaries, became normalised. Students started linking this financial support to feeling valued by the institution; whereas in the first-year eligibility is interpreted as a judgement on their circumstances that marks them as different, by the second year, it becomes an enablement for a better student experience, similar to the findings of Harrison et al.’s (2007) work.

This enablement happens in multiple different ways. First, it allows poorer students to keep their part-time work hours to a minimum with timetables better suited to their studies, thus having sufficient time for their academic work, reiterating findings of West et al. (2006). Second, with the help of the extra funds, they can afford a better student experience than initially anticipated; this
involves opting for better-suited accommodation, being able to purchase course materials and books, taking part in extracurricular activities, as well as taking on work experience and internships in their final year. Third, it alleviates stress by allowing students to accumulate some savings and create a financial safety net that they may otherwise have lacked.

Beyond the front-loaded financial support of fee waivers and the City Scholarship\(^1\), recipient students receive yearly bursaries from the University on top of their grants and loans; these funds become crucial parts of their student budget. As one participant, Kim suggested, the bursary enabled her to have a student experience that is comparable to her wealthier friends. In addition to the statutory bursaries, the University offers students further opportunity bursaries and scholarships subject to application. Claudia used one of these bursaries to travel to a summer-school, which she could not have afforded without such support. This summer school was in the field Claudia intends to work, allowing her to start building a profile and network. Given the importance of extracurricular engagement in future employability contests (see for example Bathmaker et al. 2013; Purcell et al. 2013; Tomlinson 2007), students who do not have connections or the capacity to take unpaid internships are at a substantial disadvantage when looking for graduate jobs.

Two-thirds of first year students did not have any financial support from the University, meaning their families were assumed to have the means to cover a large part of their budget; this marks the majority of students at this institution (Hordósy 2015). The most common form of familial support was paying for students’ single biggest expenditure, the cost of accommodation in each year of their studies, something mirrored in the findings of West et al. (2015). As West et al. (2015) point out, such contribution might not be easy and straightforward for middle-class families either, let alone in the cases of students who are estranged from their families or come from a care background (Blake 2015; Bland 2015; Harrison 2018). Furthermore, on the basis of potentially large shifts in household income, the resulting revision of loan amount (discussed in Part 3.2) assumes a direct trickle-down of finances, the lack of which potentially cause a substantial shortfall in support and financial difficulties. Having this largest expenditure covered, the maintenance loan (and grant) is freed up for the student to budget from. Additional to the maintenance support as the basis for their student budget, most better-off students gain extra money from their family on top of this. Strong parental involvement is evident in budgeting, either by taking the loan from the student and sending them monthly instalments, or via regular advice on spending.

**Balancing the budget: Complexity and change**

Students who cannot draw on regular familial support were seen to make ends meet from the maintenance loan. To cut down on accommodation costs some students opted for cheaper private halls in their first year, with some living at home throughout their entire degree, isolating them from the type of student life experienced by many of their peers, and overtly advertised by the institution itself. Students who had the highest level of university-provided financial support throughout their first year were aware that they could not fall back on their parents for additional support, or even a one-off substantial sum if they encountered any specific difficulty. It is predominantly the mismatches between the expense and loan timelines, as well as potential differences between assumed and actual parental contribution, that result in financial pressure points for the poorest students. In the most severe cases the added stress of trying to juggle multiple duties led two participants, Lauren and Katy to develop physical and mental health issues, which resulted in their missing weeks of university, echoing the findings from other studies on financial distress (Jessop et al. 2005; Richardson et al. 2017).

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1. Students from deprived post-codes in the Sheffield City Region gained a one-off cash payment as a scholarship.
Throughout the three-interview cycle, more and more students said that they were involved in part-time work. While students who had part-time jobs were in a minority in the first year, by the third year, only a quarter did not have some form of paid employment either during term-time or throughout the summer holidays (Hordósy 2016). There was large diversity in how strenuous the jobs students took on throughout the three years were, which was consistent with the findings of Humphrey (2006) and Purcell and Elias (2010). Most students switch between different work opportunities both within and outside the university throughout and between the academic years. The short-term and changeable nature of these part-time commitments, taken up for a semester or over subsequent holidays, allows students to ensure they can balance academic and work commitments. Part-time jobs within the university, as well as those modes of employment taken with the support of the university or student job shop, were seen to be better suited to fit around students’ timetable when compared with jobs in retail and catering outside the institution’s control or remit, similar to the findings of the financial support evaluation (Brown & Hordósy 2017; Hordósy et al. Forthcoming; NUS 2011).

**Adding to the budget: Part-time work**

We saw that students who work throughout the academic terms were at higher risk of missing lectures or having less time for revision than those who only took work during holiday periods. Moreover, having a weekday job that fit into an afternoon resulted in less disruption than having longer shifts over weekends; in the latter case, there is little time left to relax and catch-up on university work.

Student work appeared to have two main aims. Firstly, it added to the budget offering greater leverage to save for bigger expenditures, or to provide some form of safety net to fall back on. For better-off students gaining some extra money was seen as providing a fraction of financial independence. Secondly, paid part-time work mixed with unpaid extracurricular activity enables students to gain generic, as well as specific, work experience; the narrative of building a CV became increasingly apparent across the interview cycle, with this being a pressing concern during the third year.

Further, as seen in the financial support evaluation discussed in Part 3.4, we also found that students who work well above the recommended 16 hours a week needed help finding alternative income in order to sustain themselves, and/or find better suited part-time work (see Purcell and Elias 2010) beyond being told that their university work would suffer if they do not cut back on their hours, as suggested by Humphrey (2006).

Upon arrival at university, the vast majority of students talked about drawing on their savings, either from what they’d earned prior to arriving at university, during a gap year, or from their own family budget. As the savings from earlier years dwindle and the mismatches of the income and expenses timeline become more pressing, students often began to draw more on their overdrafts. Interest free overdrafts with annually increasing levels of credit provide up to £3000 by the third academic year (MSE 2016). Students who are worried about using overdrafts refer to them as ‘real’ debt, predominantly due to short time-frame of repayment with interest, and the fact that they have ownership over using it or not. Similar choice is not available over the use of the tuition fee loans or maintenance support.
3.6. Conclusion: Bringing it all together

Greg Brown and Dr Rita Hordósy

WPREU’s financial support evaluations, and broader research on student budgets and finance, have grown in scale year on year, reaching more and more students, further refining our understanding of how financial support aids students - and moreover - how it relates to wider student finance concerns.

Across the Sheffield Student 2013 research and the various evaluations of financial support, the University’s financial support provision has been consistently seen to support those students who receive it, students who would likely otherwise have struggled to make up the shortfalls in the student finance system. Whilst being visible only to some students as they made HE decisions and entered the University (with some respondents highlighting its importance as a factor in choosing to study at Sheffield), WPREU’s work to date provide evidence for, and stresses the crucial and primary role financial support plays in supporting positive academic engagement and the student experience in general.

The evaluations have also inevitably lead to the exploration of those themes associated with student budgeting, and student finance more generally. Debt, and students’ perceptions of their debt, have been prominent in outcome reports, and have informed key recommendations. Further, and particularly in the latest evaluation, students’ relationships with term-time work has been highlighted as a key factor in their conceptualisation of student finance, and the student budget. Term-time work’s impact on the academic experience is an area of specific ongoing interest.

Beyond internal reports on student budgets and the first-year financial support paper based on the STP2013, further academic papers have been published (Crockford et al. 2015; Hordósy 2015, 2016), looking at, for instance, how the second cohort of undergraduates paying the post-2012 tuition fees start to understand and negotiate the process of indebtedness (Clark et al. 2017). Further papers look at the diversity of student budgets (Hordósy and Clark Forthcoming); at part-time work and the issues that excessive hours cause regarding academic outcomes (Hordósy et al. Forthcoming); and how the poorest students used, understood, and experienced the financial support made available to them.2

As highlighted above, moving forward, we envisage continued process evaluations: mapping how provision and services are set out and expected to work, and then gathering data on how students perceive and engage with these services, specifically financial support, as well as other related finance and term-time work/careers services; running alongside causal testing and exploration - testing theories of why and how the provision sparks change in students and what outcomes this delivers. Within a constantly-changing external environment and accompanied by pressure from regulators and central government to evidence the impact of financial provisions, causally-focused

2. These papers are available via the project website: sheffield.ac.uk/apse/wp/stp2013
evaluations are the only means in which we can evidence the direct impact of financial support on students’ success and retention, and more broadly, their academic experience.

References


Hordósy, R. and Clark, T. (Forthcoming) Student budgets and widening participation: Comparative experiences of finance in low and higher income undergraduates at a Northern Red Brick University. *Social Policy and Administration*


Simms, K. (2015b) Outcomes of the financial support survey for level 2 and 3 learners. Sheffield: Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit


Comment

Institutional change in the face of research and evaluation outcomes

Catherine McKeown

This book provides significant insight into the challenges our students are facing during and after their studies. The evaluation findings are extremely useful, crucially this helps us understand how students use our services and gives us a steer on how we can improve and enhance support.

With 9 out of 10 students taking steps to manage their money, we are clearly on the right lines in terms of investing in resources to help students and the funds we provide to enable them to reduce their hours of paid work and focus on their studies or enhance their university experience, continues to be a critical service.

It is really encouraging to read that collaboration across the University is important to ensure students are not disadvantaged by taking on paid work, particularly when they take on part-time employment within the University. Departments should be reasonably flexible when their students need to work, ensuring this does not become a barrier to progression.

This is the first time we have real data and information about our own students’ experience of working while studying. It is truly enlightening and highlights the complex relationship between affording to study, part time working and effects on student experience. I would like to thank those students who took part and WPREU for carrying out this research that will guide us as we develop our services.
Part 4. Looking to the future
4.1

What next and where are we going?

Dr Julian Crockford

In the preceding pages we have described the point at which WPREU’s work on researching and evaluating widening participation issues has come (very temporarily) to rest, to allow us to take stock of the journey so far. As we have noted a number of times above, given the wide range and complexity of issues around widening participation, fair access, inclusive learning and teaching, equality and diversity and fair progression, our perspective at this stage can, of necessity, be only partial and fragmentary.

As is often observed (e.g. OFFA 2017; Ebdon 2018), we have made significant progress as a sector in increasing the overall numbers of previously under-represented or disadvantaged students into higher education, but significant disparities remain. Indeed, the closing of the gap between the proportion of most advantaged and more disadvantaged students going to university stalled in 2016 for the first time in a number of years (Weale and Barr 2018). So, there is still much more to be done.

Similarly, there continue to be significant disparities in the degree outcomes of different students (even when prior attainment is taken into account), this is particularly the case for black minority ethnic (BME) and non-BME students (OFFA 2017; HEFCE 2015a). Moreover, we also know that disadvantage follows students into the labour market (Thomas and Jones 2007; HEFCE 2015b; Bridge Group 2016) and postgraduate study (Sutton Trust 2010; Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson 2013). As we’ve noted at various points in this book, policy makers have, quite rightly, continued to increase the size of the goal posts during the five years of WPREU’s existence, and the whole student journey is now entirely in scope for efforts to create equity of opportunity and social mobility.

This constantly expanding agenda has made WPREU’s task more complicated, but at the same time has also helped clarify our direction of travel. As our work has progressed over the last few years, we have had to increasingly recognise the complex systemic nature and inherently contextual nature of the widening participation work that HEIs do. We have been forced to acknowledge that there are no simple answers or solutions, at root, in one direction, we are talking about personal development; individuals developing the skills, awareness, expectations or knowledge that they need to progress onto the next step of their pathway into, through and out of higher education. And this recognition is a unifying focus, drawing our various projects and outcomes together. Even as we acknowledge the differences between specific cohorts of students, their individual contexts, we can recognise the importance of their development in navigating towards the fulfilment of their potential.

This need for individual development, however, should be located in the broader structural changes that are also required. As the sector’s focus has increasingly shifted onto the close linkages and relationships between access, success and progression, we have found ourselves increasingly adopting a holistic approach to student success. As such, we welcomed OFFA’s whole institution
approach guidance (Thomas 2017), which highlighted the importance of embedding social mobility across all parts of the university, and acknowledged the many different institutional functions required to support student success. From this perspective, it seems increasingly important for WPREU’s future work to build on the outcomes of the Student Sheffield 2013 project, the evaluation of financial support, and research into the impact of entering the University with ‘equivalent’ qualifications. We need to bring to bear some of the thinking we’ve already done around evaluating and researching WP outreach onto a deeper consideration of student success and progression and develop new approaches and lines of enquiry.

Implicit in the previous pages, but also a constant, is the tension within WP discourses between reliance on deficit models of disadvantage and a recognition that HEIs have a responsibility for ensuring they are broad and open enough to valorise the wide-ranging experiences and knowledges a diverse student body brings (Yosso 2005). From this perspective it is incumbent on universities to recognise and adapt to the diversity of their student population, rather than expecting all students to conform to an assumed norm.

This brings us back to the first section of the book and reminds us that when we talk about widening participation, we are talking about diversity and difference, about students with a wide range of backgrounds, experiences and identities. Here as elsewhere, WPREU’s work is starting to reveal to us how complex and dynamic this diversity can be. But this recognition also feeds backwards into our work on outreach evaluation, pointing to the need to ensure our activities are relevant and speak to a diversity of potential students, not just the ones crudely sketched by the conventional indicators we use to identify our ‘targets’.

For the reasons sketched above, WPREU are working to identify the points of connection between our various projects and outcomes, in the hope and expectation that bringing together findings from a number of different areas can add value to all of them. We also hope that in combination they might help illuminate and broaden our understanding of the multiple ways in which the University’s WP, student success and progression activities help support students and potential students to reach their full potential.

Here’s to the next five years!

References


Appendix.

Dissemination of WPREU outcomes
Please note: Currently many of these publications are available to an internal University of Sheffield audience only. Where reports are available to a wider external audience (via the link provided) this is indicated.


This literature review provides an insight into the transition and academic experiences of students taking BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) qualifications as they prepare for, and enter higher education. In order to provide a detailed picture of the range of issues that such students may face, this review is structured to reflect the stages of the transition process into higher education.


The phrase ‘ethnicity attainment gap’ refers to the difference between the proportion of White UK-domiciled students who are awarded a 1st or 2:1, and the proportion of UK-domiciled Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students who are awarded the same degrees. This paper provides an overview of the key areas of research concerning differential degree attainment for BME students. It explores some of the key issues that students from BME backgrounds face in higher education, and looks at ongoing work from other higher education institutions (HEIs) to address these issues and to narrow the attainment gap.

This qualitative research, part of a HEFCE-funded project, explored the transition and student experience of students with BTEC qualifications as they entered a research-intensive university. A cross-sectional approach was used to capture a range of student and staff perspectives across the whole student journey.


IMPACT was launched in November 2017, a pilot targeting year 7 and 8 pupils from partner schools in the Sheffield City Region (SCR). The Pre-16 Widening Participation and Outreach team worked together with WPREU to ensure that the design and delivery of the IMPACT programme was informed by a robust evidence base.
2012 saw a change in the landscape of the funding arrangements of undergraduate programmes in Higher Education in England and Wales. This new fee regime sees students taking out state-sponsored loans to cover the full cost of their tuition. One implication of these changes that has been much discussed, but is yet to be assessed, is how these changes in funding could lead to changes in the expectations, attitudes and experiences of incoming students toward their University education. At the same time, there has also been much concern relating to the impact that these new funding arrangements will have on lower income groups. This paper draws on focus group data (n=34) collected at a research-intensive English university from undergraduate students about their first-year experiences in 2012. However, rather than identifying particularly novel experiences of the first year, analysis revealed some familiar arenas of concern: academic, social, and financial.


This report forms part of an ongoing body of work by the Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit into understanding patterns in differential degree awards for different groups of students. In particular, it partly follows on from the BME Attainment Gap Project Report (2016), which presented the results of a mixed-methods study by two University of Sheffield graduate interns (Stephanie Powell and Aunam Quyoum)

This report provides an overview of the situation of first year undergraduate students at the University of Sheffield in 2013/2014. Using data from 40 interviews as well as the student record, the report gives an overview of how students finance their studies; manage their money and their expectations about subsequent years. The report has two main sections:

1. **Income**: analysis of the role of different income sources (e.g. loans, financial support from family, prior savings, financial support from the university, private credit as well as employment)

2. **Expenditure and money management**: analysis of students’ opinions of accommodation costs, living expenses, money spent on socialising and more broadly on their studies; a discussion of how students view their own money management skills and their success in budgeting


Building on the report on financing the first year at the University of Sheffield, this document provides an overview of the second year outcomes (Hordósy 2015, Crockford et al. 2015). Using the methodological advantages of a longitudinal design, the changes between the two years are pointed out as well. The main topics presented are, similarly to the previous year’s outcomes:

1. **Income**: This section analyses students’ accounts of where their money comes from, how they view their dependency on tuition fee loans and/or family support and how they talk about the financial support they receive. The section points to the main differences from the first-year experiences and attitudes to the income side of the student budget.

2. **Expenditure**: This section provides an overview of what students spend money on when being at the university, including housing, living costs, expenditure on their studies as well as socialising.

3. **Money management and the future**: This section deals with the ways students manage their budget and make ends meet, focusing more specifically on those who are considered to be from a widening participation background. The section points to the students’ thinking around their future pathway and the financial implications of their plans.
Priede, C. (2017) Tracking the progress of Department of Lifelong Learning Foundation Year Students through the University of Sheffield: Year 1. Sheffield: The Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit / The Department of Lifelong Learning.

This report outlines the rationale for and methods used in an analysis of the progress and experiences of students from the Department for Lifelong Learning’s degrees with foundation year as they progress from the foundation year into their degree programme.


This report explores and evaluates the impact of The University of Sheffield’s SOAMS (Sheffield’s Outreach and Access to Medicine Scheme) on participants who went on to study at the University. The report provides a more comprehensive picture of the student experience than was previously available.


This evaluation, of an introductory module designed to support the transition of students from diverse academic backgrounds into culture, expectations and requirements of higher education level study, was based in a regular sequence of interviews with students, whose prior experience was based in study for Access Diploma or BTEC qualifications.

This article critically examines how undergraduate students in a red brick university in the North of England have experienced the threefold rise in tuition fees since 2012, with particular attention on how they have begun to understand and negotiate the process of indebtedness. Drawing on a corpus of 118 interviews conducted with a group of 40 undergraduates across their whole student lifecycle, analysis is directed toward examining how students have variously sought to respond to the policy, reconcile the debt with their decision to study at university and, begin to negotiate a life of everyday indebtedness. The findings are located in the context of wider neoliberal policy trends that have continued to emphasise ‘cost-sharing’ as a mechanism for increased investment within the higher education sector generally, and individual fiscal responsibility specifically. Given the lack of any other viable career pathways for both lower and higher income students, they had to accept indebtedness as inevitable and take what comfort they could from the discourses of ‘foregone gain’ that they had been presented with. Evidently, and as the students in our sample well recognised, whether those discourses actually reflect the future remains to be seen. There is also no evidence within our data that students anticipated the subsequent changes to the repayment terms and conditions – a fact that is likely to compound feelings of economic powerlessness and constrain their capacity for financial agency yet further.


English higher education institutions are required to spend a proportion of their additional fee income on activities to widen participation, and this is overseen by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). In the past decade universities have invested the largest proportion of their widening participation spending in financial support for students. However, recent OFFA guidance encourages institutions to rebalance their spending away from financial support towards other outreach and success measures. Some universities have responded by pointing out the contribution of financial support to improving the student experience, contributing to students’ success in higher education and beyond. Using two sets of institution-specific data, this paper looks at the relationship between student financial support, part-time work and the academic components of the student experience at the University of Sheffield, a ‘northern redbrick university’. After pointing to the financial shortfall implied in the student support system, the paper describes how the need to take term-time jobs to pay basic living expenses is unevenly distributed across the student cohort, as is the impact of such work itself. While for many students a part-time job provides opportunities to gain relevant work experience or to save additional funds to broaden their future experience, for others who need to work to cover living costs, it can also have significant implications for their ability to engage in the value-added, self-directed elements of their studies and therefore, potentially, on their final outcomes.

The last decade has seen a substantial growth in the amount of money invested by Higher Education Institutions in efforts to widen participation in degree level study. At the same time, guidance to universities by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) has increasingly emphasised the need for robust evaluation of outreach interventions, particularly since the increase of variable tuition fees in 2012. The current policy focus on evaluation is underwritten by an increasingly explicit emphasis on return on investment (ROI) as a key success measure and this has implications for how the evaluation of outreach activities is positioned in policy and guidance discourses. This emphasis on ROI rests on two related assumptions; firstly, that evaluation can establish robust causal relationships between outreach interventions and their outcomes, and secondly, that these outcomes can be straightforwardly defined and measured. These assumptions have significant implications they have for evaluation practice.

Hordósy, Rita & Clark, Tom (Forthcoming) Beyond the Compulsory: a Critical Exploration of the Experiences of Extracurricular Activity and Employability in a Northern Red Brick University. Research in Post-Compulsory Education

There has been an increasing emphasis placed on the skills and attributes that university students develop whilst studying for their degree. These ‘narratives of employability’ often construct extracurricular activity (ECA) as an essential part of gaining post-graduation employment. However, these future-oriented drivers of engagement often neglect the role ECAs have within contemporary student life-worlds, particularly with respect to lower income students. Drawing on a three-year longitudinal study that tracked a cohort of 40 undergraduates throughout their student lifecycle, this paper examines how students in a Northern English Red Brick University understood the purposes of ECA, and how they chose to engage with it. The results suggest ECA appears to be somewhat stratified in terms of timeliness of engagement and motivation to participate. By extension, the paper argues that those recent attempts to measure and use ECA to narrate future ‘global’ employability, are likely to reproduce well-established inequalities. As such, any further pressure to engage with ECAs solely in terms of employability could result in the further marginalisation of lower income students.

Hordósy, R. and Clark, T. (Forthcoming) Student budgets and widening participation: Comparative experiences of finance in low and higher income undergraduates at a Northern Red Brick University. Social Policy and Administration

Drawing on a thematic analysis of longitudinal qualitative data \( n_{\text{total}} = 118 \), this paper takes a ‘whole student lifecycle’ approach to examine how lower and higher income students at an English Northern Red Brick University variously attempted to manage their individual budgets. It explores how students reconcile their income - in the form of loans, grants and bursaries - with the cost of living. Four arenas of interest are described: planning, budgeting, and managing ‘the student loan'; disruptions to financial planning; the role of familial support; and, strategies of augmenting the budget. In detailing the micro-level constraints on the individual budgets of lower and higher income undergraduates, the paper highlights the importance of non-repayable grants and bursaries in helping to sustain meaningful participation in higher tariff, more selective, HEIs. It also supports an emerging body of literature that suggests that the continuing amendments to the system of funding Higher Education in England are unlikely to address inequality of access, participation, and outcome.
WPREU Bulletins

Since mid-2015, WPREU has published periodic bulletins sent out to staff and subscribers. These give an overview of the ongoing work of the unit in addition to guest pieces, horizon scanning, sector updates and links to WP articles in the HE and national press.

An up to date archive of issues, along with details on how to subscribe can be found at wpreu.group.shef.ac.uk
Blog posts

**Greg Brown - 17 November 2017**
*Why Evaluate Blog Series (goo.gl/fvHYho)*

Across WP, the need to conduct appropriate and robust evaluations of our work is increasingly pressing. The growing calls to find out ‘what works’ is one that can lead to evaluation becoming preoccupied with finding the silver bullet; the unifying intervention that works no matter the context. As we all know, mapping and reporting on the impact of outreach work, and increasingly, programs tasked with increasing retention and facilitating successful transition through and out of HE for WP groups, is not a straightforward task.

**Julian Crockford - 17 November 2017**
*Why Evaluate Blog Series (goo.gl/r9sqi7)*

For me, evaluation represents a way of thinking about practice; it can make us think about what we do, why we do it, what we're hoping to achieve and, perhaps most importantly, it encourages us to be clear in our thinking about how what we do achieves what we're aiming for. Spending time reflecting on these issues also helps us clarify the methodological underpinnings of our practice and enables us to formulate a ‘theory of change’ that explicitly describes how we think (or expect) our intervention will work.

**Julian Crockford - WonkHE - 14 November 2017**
*Of Magic Bullets and Black Boxes – the role of evaluation in WP outreach (goo.gl/V38hpG)*

Those of us engaged in evaluating university widening participation interventions were likely to be both cheered and disappointed by the publication in October of a report by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) on the institutional evaluation of access agreement activity. Cheered because we now have a whole publication making a case for the importance of what we do, and disappointed because the report exposes the lack of progress we have made as a sector in effectively evaluating the impact of our widening participation efforts.

**Rita Hordósy and Greg Brown - The Conversation - 13 November 2017**
*The student finance system needs shaking up – for the sake of poorer students (goo.gl/cxYXYp)*

Students from the poorest households in England now graduate with the highest levels of debt. On average the poorest 40% of students owe around £57,000 after three years of study, compared with an average of £43,000 for students from the richest third of families. Our recent research found that coupled with higher debts for the poorest students, the inequalities in the funding system are directly impacting students’ day-to-day budgeting, which is creating a number of issues. We found more students also turn to term-time work over the course of their studies. Our latest institutional survey suggests 37% of undergraduates work while they study full-time.

**Rita Hordósy and Tom Clark - WonkHE - 9 October 2017**
*“Frugality” won’t solve systemic student finance problems (goo.gl/VabVHD)*

The Conservative Party’s continued focus on student loan repayment ‘terms and conditions’ is likely to have a very small impact on middle-earning graduates in the short to mid term, and the highest earners in the long term. However, none of the proposed changes will tackle the pressing problem
of day to day budgeting, or the inequity in a financial support system in which students from the poorest families end up borrowing substantially more than their wealthier counterparts. A review and a rethink is long overdue.

Rita Hordósy, Tom Clark and Dan Vickers - BERA Blog - 6 October 2015
Academic transitions into higher education and negotiating change (goo.gl/j9A5u8)

Due to the diversity of student lives – where they are coming from and where they are going to – transitions can take many different shapes, forms and timings: not all are necessary or essential, and not all are positive from our institutional point of view. Therefore, we are beginning to take the view that models of university-led assimilation, accommodation, or alignment may not be suitable in themselves to understand – and better support – the diversity of student transitions that encompass the ‘student experience’, especially in the context of widening participation and higher student numbers. Indeed, the point of the 2013 Sheffield Student 2013 project is to begin to map these points of transition, describe what form they might take and where they occur, and explore how we can develop the tools necessary for them to navigate the transitions that students want to make.
Conference presentations

WPREU has been active in disseminating the results from the evaluation and research outcomes both within and outside the institution. Here we list our talks at academic conferences, widening participation practitioner meetings and our WP Forums.

Understanding diverse and multiple transitions


Baker, Z. and Miller, M. (2017) Inclusive learning and teaching: Findings from the Equivalent Qualifications project (HEFCE), and Increasing the Proportion of BME Students in Arts and Humanities (WPREU/ECU). Presented at the WPREU Forum, The University of Sheffield.

Crockford, J., Hordósy, R. Lane, L. and Woodcock, L. (2016) ‘Twice as hard to get your marks’: Multiple perspectives on academic transition(s) in higher education. Presented at the BERA Annual Conference, The University of Leeds.


Hordósy, R. and Clark, T. (2017) ‘They teach it better because it’s something they’re really interested in’: Undergraduate experiences of research at a Northern Red Brick University. Presented at the SRHE Annual Conference, Newport.


Hordósy, R. (2015) Student experience at the University of Sheffield: How do students reflect on their own skills and competences during the first year of university studies? Presented at the Learning and Teaching Conference, The University of Sheffield.

**Complex and changing student budgets**


Hordósy, R. (2016) ‘My parents can’t support me financially so I have to work to put myself through uni’: Financial transitions in Higher Education Post-2012. Presented at the WPREEU Forum, The University of Sheffield.


Hordósy, R. (2014) Students’ understanding of their place in a marketised higher education system. Presented at the BSA Education Study Group Conference, Sheffield Hallam University.
Research and evaluation designs and methods


Supporting diverse learners in HE


Widening Participation


Widening Participation
Research and Evaluation Unit

Dr Julian Crockford, Dr Zoe Baker, Greg Brown,
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