The Business of Widening Participation

The contention of this lively collection of essays is that WP has become part of the 'normal business' of HE providers during the past 25 years. This is a lively account of the drivers of WP since the Dearing Review and the implementation of the social justice policies since that time. There is extensive use of policy documents from Government bodies such as HEFCE and OFFA as well as the academic literature, enabling a focus on the sometimes discordant relationship between Government, still the primary funder of undergraduate HE in England and autonomous, but dependent, universities. This highly readable book will be of great interest and value to policy makers, practitioners, researchers and historians of widening participation as well as to the many thousands of graduates who have benefitted from opportunity not afforded to those who went before.

Professor Sir Les Ebdon CBE DL, Former Vice- Chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire and Former Director of Fair Access to Higher Education. Chair of NEON (the National Educational Opportunity Network)

This is an exciting, must-read, timely and thoughtful collation of historical and contemporary insights of what it means to increase participation in a neoliberal market system. A stellar cast of policy and academic voices make sense of the dynamics of markets, businesses, student choice and widening participation. The book is essential for those already working in English HE in policy or academic roles related to widening participation. Those in continental European systems and elsewhere who are wondering what the outcomes of shifts from public to market funded higher education might mean must look no further than this book to understand the impact on students and providers.

Professor Anna Mountford-Zimdars is academic Director of the Centre for Social Mobility at the University of Exeter

The Business of Widening Participation: Policy, Practice and Culture

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Abbreviations

Acronyms

AA	Access Agreement
APP	Access and Participation Plan
BAME	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
DAP	Degree Awarding Powers
FE	Further Education
FEC	Further Education College
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
HEP	Higher Education Provider
LEO	Longitudinal Education Outcomes
NCOP	National Collaborative Outreach Project
NNCO	National Network for Collaborative Outreach
PGR	Postgraduate Research
PGT	Postgraduate Taught
RAB	Resource Accounting Budget
SEND	Special educational needs and disability
TSWPO	Third Sector Widening Participation Organisation
UT	University Title
WP	Widening Participation

Organisations

EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
FACE	Forum for Access and Continuing Education
FEA	Fair Education Alliance
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
NEON	National Education Opportunities Network
NESTA	National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts
NNECL	National Network of Education for Care Leavers
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OfS	Office for Students
SMC	Social Mobility Commission
SPA	Supporting Professionalism in Admissions
TASO	Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education
UCAS	University and Colleges Admissions Service

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About the Editors

Colin McCaig is a Professor of Higher Education Policy at Sheffield Hallam University. He has written extensively on widening participation policy in the context of marketised higher education systems. He has 20 years' experience evaluating government-funded education programmes. Key recent publications include *The Marketisation of English Higher Education: A Policy Analysis of a Risk-based System* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018); *Equality and Differentiation in Marketised Higher Education: A New Level Playing Field?* (co-edited with Bowl and Hughes, Palgrave, 2018); *Who Are We Widening Participation For?* (BERA Research Intelligence No. 143, 2020); 'Higher Education, Widening Access and Market Failure: Towards a Dual Pricing Mechanism in England', *Social Science*, 2019 (with Nic Lightfoot).

Jon Rainford is an Associate Lecturer and Honorary Associate in Access, Open and Cross-curricular Innovation at The Open University and is an independent widening participation consultant. He has over 12 years experience of working with marginalised groups in education and completed his PhD at Staffordshire University in 2019 which focused on widening participation policy and practice. He has written numerous publications on widening access and has a particular interest in the way technology can be embedded in a post-pandemic world and the role creative methods can play in evaluation.

Ruth Squire is a researcher and former widening participation practitioner, with 15 years' experience in delivering and evaluating widening participation activity in higher education and the third sector. She has published articles on practitioner-led research, working-class student representation and on evaluation practices, and she has a particular interest in practitioner-led evaluation and policy enactment. Her current research focuses on the role of the third sector in widening participation policy and on networks and expertise in policymaking.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Case for a 'Business of Widening Participation'

Colin McCaig, Jon Rainford and Ruth Squire

Abstract

Widening participation (WP) has increasingly become part of the normal 'business' of English higher education (HE) providers during the last 25 years. WP entered the policy mainstream for the entire HE sector following the Dearing Review (NCIHE, 1997) and the election of a new Labour government wedded to notions of social justice but also concerned with 'lifelong learning' in the name of human capital growth. This book employs a dual usage of the term 'business' in relation to WP policy, practice and culture in the context of the marketised English HE system. The first, figurative, usage explores the ways in which WP has been drawn into institutional positionality as HE providers are encouraged to differentiate themselves in the market. The second, literal, usage explores the ways in which the business of WP has become 'business as normal' for the sector and institutions, increasingly intertwined with other activities and which play out variously, often in response to regulatory demands of the state. This introductory chapter first contextualises these developments with a brief overview of the evolution of the HE sector in England before proposing a multilevel model – the HE policy enactment staircase – as a way of thinking about how policy is made, enacted and implemented within the sector. This chapter then draws upon this model to acts as a structure for this book. It does this by moving from a macro-level exploration of ideological levels of policymaking, through National/Sectoral level right down to the issues at an institutional and operational levels. In doing so, this chapter creates a framework from which to understand how the various elements and levels of the business of WP play out within the English HE sector.

Keywords: Marketisation; higher education; widening participation; policy enactment; HE policy; fair access

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Introduction

Widening participation (WP) has increasingly become part of the normal 'business' of higher education (HE) providers during the last 25 years. Initially the concern of former Polytechnics, further education colleges (FECs) and Adult Education colleges wishing to expand access for social justice reasons, WP entered the policy mainstream for the entire English HE sector following the Dearing Review (NCIHE, 1997) and the election of a new Labour government wedded to notions of social justice but also concerned with 'lifelong learning' in the name of human capital growth. As such, WP policy can be seen as inherently tied up in the global, neoliberal development of HE systems, which that this plays out very differently according to the historical development of national systems (Bowl, in Bowl et al., 2018). This book speaks to the specifically English market context,[1] reflecting the presence of certain unique characteristics that impact WP policy and practice: the historical rationing of HE places; the legal autonomy of institutions, free from state control (but subject to increasing regulation for their undergraduate provision); the presence of an established prestige hierarchy; relatively high tuition fees; the encouragement of third sector organisations' (TSOs) involvement, particularly in the 'fair access' to selective institutions variant of WP; and successive governments wedded to market solutions and system expansion.

We make no apologies for employing the language of markets and business in relation to English HE; for all the competing narratives and earnest discussion of the 'meaning and purpose' of publicly funded HE, a clear-eyed analysis requires we bear in mind that all HE providers in the English system are defined as 'private' by UNESCO (see Chapter 9). There have been no public institutions offering HE (or further education (FE)) in England since 1992; at the same time – and again using the UNESCO definition – an unusually high proportion of HE in England is publicly funded in the sense that the state underwrites the student loans system – very few students actually pay fees to 'for-profit' providers for undergraduate qualifications (see Chapter 9 for a comparison of the role private HE (PHE) providers play in disparate national contexts). Nor do the vast majority of 'not-for-profit' Exempt or Registered Charities that make up the English sector (currently the Office for Students register has 418 providers) actually rely on public funding for all their activity. The National Audit Office notes that 'publicly funded teaching and research make a loss across the sector once the full economic costs of those activities are taken into account' (2022, p. 7). This is important to an understanding of the behaviour of institutions: in the final analysis, HE providers are businesses drawing income from a variety of non-public sources (such as international students, postgraduate students, professional qualifications at master's and doctoral levels, commercial research and knowledge exchange activities, consultancy work and business 'spin-off' activity'). As a result of their diversity of

[1]Following devolution after 1998, HE policy began to diverge across the nations of the United Kingdom, and while some features overlap and there is a cross-border element to the HE undergraduate market including some limited outreach, the regulatory framework and fee-related policy drivers are specific to England.

funding sources and presence in multiple markets, these institutions are not slave to public policy directives, and where they choose to follow policy directives, these have to be aligned to their own missions and in many cases be cross-subsidised by other activity. WP activity beyond the institutions' missions is largely a result of central government exhortation and persuasion: monitoring and regulatory oversight merely the price of market entry.

The business of WP

This book employs a dual usage of the term 'business' in relation to WP policy, practice and culture in the context of the marketised English HE system. The first, ***figurative***, usage explores the ways in which WP has been drawn into institutional positionality as HE providers are encouraged to differentiate themselves in the market. This can play out in differentiated approaches to WP; 'fair access' for the selective institutions; 'aspiration-raising' outreach and ongoing student support for those enrolled for the recruiters. Particular emphasis is applied to the last 25 years during which time the state has taken a more interventionist role in WP policy delivered in a 'neoliberal' market context. Neoliberalism, as a global phenomenon, implies that governments employ market mechanisms in public policy contexts, suitably shaped or 'steered' to meet national policy aims, usually through the presence of funding incentives/disincentives (Agasistini & Catelano, 2006; Brown & Carasso, 2014; Ka Ho Mok, 1999; Lynch, 2006; Marginson, 2013). The second, ***literal***, usage explores the ways in which WP policy, framed as it is by the higher level decisions to marketise the system in order to drive expansion, is enacted by state actors, institutions and other bodies such as TSOs operating at different levels (conceptualised as the 'higher education policy enactment staircase', see below). WP for the benefit of individuals, society and institutions in an increasingly marketised environment often shapes the work that is done in different ways. Culture is also addressed in two ways: as a mediating factor between policy and practice and the impact of the policy and practice environment on cultures (e.g. of unrepresented communities) and therefore the potential of WP to create a more socially just society. Brought together for the first time, the figurative and literal meanings of the 'business of widening participation' give this volume a unique and holistic overview of how WP fits into the wider 'business of HE', combining as it does a critical policy analysis of decisions taken at the Executive/Ideological level with a surfacing of real and immediate tensions and alternative perspectives as policy is interpreted, implemented and operationalised by actors with varying degrees of agency.

Outline of this Book

Part 1. The role of WP policy in the development of the English competitive market

WP policy and its enactment have steadily become more central to the 'business' of HE, particularly in states that do not offer access to HE as a right for all

citizens. In such states – the UK, Australia, New Zealand and the United States are prominent examples – the state's interest in WP has taken the form of policy interventions to increase applications and enrolments from under-represented or 'non-traditional' groups, often including funding incentives for institutions (to cover the additional costs of educating them) and, in some cases, the threatened withdrawal of state funding for poor performance against stated outcomes. Such state-institution funding relationships can be categorised as 'resource dependency' (Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1976) and are often used as examples of 'performance-based funding' (PBF) (Harvey et al., 2018; Hearn, 2015). Employing a multilevel model of policymaking, this book will emphasise that, in the specific example of the English HE market, beyond the original 'high-policy' positions that the system needed expanding (present even before the 1963 Robbins Report) and the introduction of an overtly marketised system in the late 1980s to drive that expansion in a more socially just manner (which we term the 'dual imperative'), much of the policy development in England has in fact relied less on financial (dis)incentives than on exhortations that HE providers establish and project a WP framing (Fairclough, 1993; Foucault, 1980) in order to support their wider market positionality. In this sense, even those institutions that are not dependent on WP resources from the state are obliged to engage with WP as a policy arena (Jongbloed & Vossensteyn, 2016; McCaig, 2018) even when doing so makes no material difference to their position in the prestige hierarchy.

WP as business as usual for the state

In the United Kingdom and later, post-devolution, England, access to HE has been traditionally rationed by social class (Archer, 2003, 2007; Reay et al., 2005; Mangan et al., 2010). Given the predominant 'personality development' residential model of university attendance in the United Kingdom (Gellert, 1991, 1993), access to HE was effectively restricted to those families with the ability to (financially and culturally) support their offspring living away from home for several months at a time. The challenge, then, became how to expand from such a rationed system to a system that could incorporate (and serve the needs of) 'non-traditional students' in ever-increasing numbers?

Part of the response was to create a market in HE, offering both choice to the potential student and competition between providers for student numbers. During the early and mid-1980s, secure Conservative governments – influenced by new right ideological thought – were encouraging the use of market principles for the allocation of public resources in the name of greater accountability and efficiency in state-funded services. This was an example of new public management theory in practice (the use of private sector practices in the public sector of the economy, Hood, 1995) in the name of national economic competitiveness, employing 'human capital' economic theories to counter emerging globalisation. Human capital conceptually describes the econometric link between education and employment; in the UK context, its usage is rooted in the changing basis of industrial demand for labour, the comparative decline of the UK economy and the growing inequality of incomes evident since the late 1960s

(Glennerster & Hills, 1998). It should be reiterated, of course, that the state's interest in making the HE system more accountable and efficient, not least in providing for an improvement in the maximisation of the nation's human capital, was reflected in the Robbins Report and indeed would become ever more important in the context of the systemic growth it recommended (HM Government, 1963). These manifestations implied a need for governments to centralise powers over the education system, first in order to reduce the amount of inter-party political dispute about the means and ends of the system. The public sector of HE, formally established from 1965 (the Polytechnics, HE institutions without their own degree-awarding powers and Colleges of HE), was controlled by local authorities (LAs) with their own political agendas, and second to maximise economic outcomes in the face of international competition.

The university system itself, while funded by the state since the formation of the Universities Grants Committee (UGC) in 1919, has always been formally autonomous (Further and Higher Education Act, 1992; Higher Education Research Act (HERA), 2017). It consists of Exempt Charities that have been able to resist state attempts to dictate what they taught and who they taught (through control over admissions policy) unless those state directions (usually in the form of funding incentives) aligned with their own goals (Adrich & Pfeffer, 1976). While the system was expanded in the immediate post-World War II (WWII) period with the establishment of Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs), only after the establishment of 30 Polytechnics under LA control from 1965 did the state have the ability to grow the system in the way recommended by Robbin's 1963 report (HM Government, 1963) and shape the nature of provision, for example, to meet national and regional labour market needs (Glennerster & Hills, 1998).

This is a key moment in the developing WP story because only as participation increased did it necessarily widen socially – requiring not only a wider and thus more diverse subset of society to be educated to higher levels but a wider range of subject disciplines and occupations coming into HE's orbit (e.g. teachers, social workers, computer scientists) which in turn widened the range of sites in which HE happened. New disciplines often required students to engage with work-placements or work-place learning opportunities. Such developments also implied an expansion of part-time study and provision offered in local areas, often via Adult Continuing Education centres and General FECs. Expansion, in this context, necessarily widened the system, and those parts of the sector that were expanding also had to become adept at attracting and supporting 'non-traditional' students. The roots of WP to under-represented groups – as both part of the 'figurative' and 'literal' senses of the day-to-day business of HE institutions – can only be understood in this context of expansion from a rationed system to a mass system (Jongbloed & Vossensteyn, 2016; Trow, 1973, 1984).

Noticeably, the creation of a state sector in what thus became, from 1965, a binary system effectively protected the existing 40 universities from any pressure to reform, even as a series of reports pointed out the dearth of, e.g. women and disabled people, in the system (HM Government, 1963; Labour Party, 1963). Behind the intellectual 'pay-wall' of formal autonomy and the desire to maintain

their reputation for excellence (manifested by high entry requirements for those from preferred schools and colleges), such universities were able to represent the presumed benefits of 'meritocracy' (which assumes ability can be objectively recognised and selected for) while the Polytechnics and other Colleges of HE (for arts, teacher training, etc.) dealt with the prosaic business of increasing the nation's human capital in the face of international competition. Ironically, while the selective separation of secondary schooling was being gradually dismantled (comprehensive education was encouraged as an alternative to the '11+' by Department for Education (DfE) Command 10/65), the same Labour government 'were happy to shift of the point of selective differentiation by merit to age 18' (McCaig, 2000, p. 125), while simultaneously portraying the Polytechnics and Open University (launched in 1969) as policy sites of equal opportunities and democratic renewal (Kogan, 1971).

WP as business as usual for institutions

From the outset, then, the two halves of the binary system exhibited very different approaches to WP. For universities, the main focus was voluntarist, often reflecting the humanist interests of individual academics, the sense that the advantaged were 'giving a bit back' in the spirit of *nobless oblige* – but never the core business which remained selecting only those with the highest entry grades. For the established universities, it was easy to overlook imbalances in the social composition of suitably qualified applicants; addressing those was always secondary to maintaining their autonomy to ensure the preservation of the meritocracy. For the public sector Polytechnics and Colleges of HE, WP became a central rationale for recruitment and expansion, which they increasingly engaged in after the Conservative government reduced the unit of resource in 1988. WP in the public sector also impacted the nature of provision, serving different elements of the changing labour market (e.g. developing vocational curricula and work-based learning programmes; Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), 2006), and pioneered student support for those from more diverse (and usually less academically qualified) backgrounds, long before the state began to take an interest (Society for Research into Higher Education, 1983; Whitbread, 1979). Following the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), state involvement mainly came from the Higher Education Funding Councils (one each for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) but also the (regional) Learning and Skills Councils. The Act abolished the binary divide and allowed Polytechnics and Colleges of HE to become – if they wished – universities, free of the state and theoretically free to compete with the existing universities for student numbers, or, more realistically, offer alternative – and thus a wider range of – provision to that offered by the traditional sector.

As noted above, the market reforms introduced by the Conservative government after 1987 and the growing interventionism of the funding councils initially encouraged expansion and diversification. In the earliest post-binary phase, the English funding council in particular celebrated the diversity of the new unitary system (HEFCE, 1994, 2000) which by the mid-1990s comprised around

100 universities in England and another 30 specialist institutions of HE, all with their own degree-awarding powers and formal autonomy. Interventions designed to encourage WP in the form of various funding schemes offered by HEFCE that HE institutions could bid for, e.g. to encourage disabled and other underrepresented cohorts, became a feature of the HE sector throughout the 1990s and an increasing element of funding income for those institutions – now termed post-1992 universities – that took on the vast majority of 'non-traditional' students. Building on this, the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997), which recommended the introduction of (partial) tuition fees paid by students to fund expansion, also addressed how the sector could be encouraged to widen participation in line with the 'social justice' agenda of the incoming Labour government (illustrating the consensus around WP and Lifelong Learning, this – like the Robbins Report in the 1960s – had been commissioned by the Conservatives in office). Thereafter, the state took an increasingly interventionist approach that obliged all higher education institutions (HEIs) to look seriously at inequalities of access and in turn exposed quite different approaches to WP among different institution types (Bowl & Hughes, 2013; Graham, 2013; HEFCE, 2006; McCaig, 2015).

The initial section of this book focuses on policy development, and in recognition that policy happens at each stage of the business of WP from the central state to the designers of individual outreach activities (as detailed in Fig. 1), the policy section proceeds to discuss the distribution of decision-making responsibilities and processes at each stage.

State WP intervention in context of the developing market: the multilevel policy process

This volume employs a multilevel understanding to policymaking, which recognises that policy is made, enacted and implemented at different levels within the sector, involving actors with varying degrees of agency and spheres of influence. In our understanding, the 'Business of Widening Participation' can only be fully contextualised in recognition of the relationship between policy actors and their 'room for manoeuvre', and the structure of our chapterisation reflects the stepped layering of the policy processes. This proceeds from the 'higher level' executive policy decision through policy enactment at intermediary stages and policy implementation on the ground. This policy model (Fig. 1) is adapted from Reynolds and Saunders (1987, cf. Trowler, 2014, p. 15) implementation staircase and builds upon a previous adaptation of this model which reformed it focused upon the wide range of actors concerned with the business of WP (Rainford, 2019, 2021).

The highest step on the HE policy enactment staircase is the **Executive/ Ideological level** and occurs when governments (in the form of Prime Ministers, Chancellors of the Exchequer and Secretaries of State) take decisions to respond to external factors by selecting from available ideas about how to use their power to respond and (where necessary) make legislative changes to alter policy and thus meet their national goals. In the case of the development of WP in the English HE system, as we shall see in Chapter 2 (McCaig and Squire), the original locus

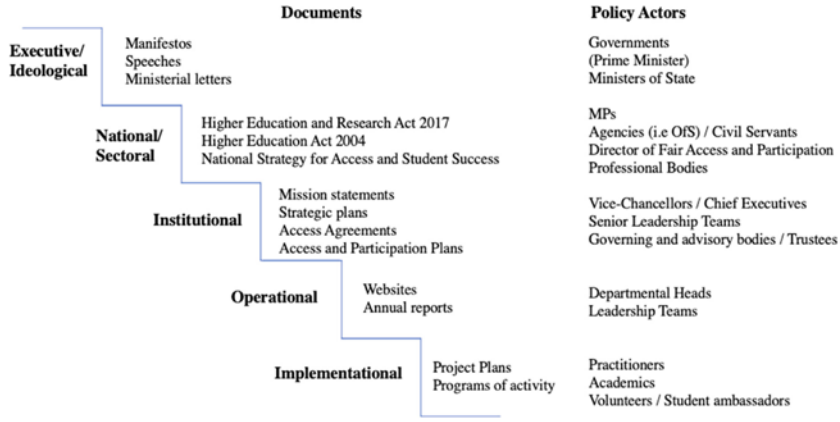

Fig. 1. The HE Policy Enactment Staircase Developed From Rainford (2019) and adapted from Reynolds and Saunders (1987, as cited in Trowler, 2014, p. 15).

of the Executive policy decision was the perceived need to expand the system in response to global competition. Ideologically, this was informed by human capital theory, the idea that states can only prosper by maximising the capacity of their citizens to compete in terms of higher level skills. The Robbins Report (HM Government, 1963) both reflected this ideological position and acted as the catalyst for expansion but also took the opportunity to look forward to one of the natural and beneficial concomitants of expansion, the drawing into the HE sphere of people from a much wider range of social backgrounds. The presence of a social justice rationale for expansion was important for the wider policy consensus, and in this respect, Robbins largely echoed the critique of Labour's earlier Taylor Report (Labour Party, 1963).

The second key locus of change was the more explicitly ideological (and certainly non-consensual) decision made in the late 1980s to introduce market mechanisms to stimulate expansion; these included the adoption of 'new public management' theories, involving the injection of managerial nous and business practices into the opaque running of the sclerotic and change-resistant university system, long seen as a barrier to the kind of structural reform that would actuate expansion, an understanding of which led to the original establishment of the Polytechnics by a Labour government in the 1960s. Two decades on, the grand marketisation plan for HE (part of much wider political programme that impacted virtually all public services and led to the privatisation of dozens of public utilities), culminating in the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), envisaged the now former Polytechnics as a new cadre of autonomous universities that would stimulate competition for the old and further drive the diversity of institutions and students attending the expanding system. While in this volume we situate the 1997 Dearing Review report (NCIHE, 1997) as the launching off point for state-mandated WP as a grand executive policy experiment, where WP becomes a 'business', it is important to keep in mind not only the gestation of the concept and the discourses and arguments