EQUAL PRACTICES? A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WIDENING PARTICIPATION PRACTICES IN PRE AND POST-92 HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

JON RAINFORD

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement of Staffordshire University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 2019

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

There are many people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude in this thesis. Many of these I will probably fail to thank, but if I do, you know who you are. It is no surprise that many of these people are phenomenal women (to borrow a phrase from the great Maya Angelou). Firstly, to my supervisors Dr. Kim Slack and Dr. Mandy Duncan. Without the gentle encouragement and the constructive feedback, this thesis would not be half of what it is. I couldn't have asked for a better team. To Dr. Katy Vigurs, I have you to thank for getting me to Staffordshire in the first place and for encouraging me along this journey. To the Open University and its many tutors who helped me develop the skills that have made a part-time PhD manageable, especially Linda Corlett and Dr. Shaun McMann.

To the academics who have shaped my thinking, both those formally within the references but also those who I have met, emailed and tweeted over the past five years. Being part-time has meant forging my own network of support. To all of you that have talked me down from metaphorical cliffs or read bits of the thesis, I am ever in your debt. To Dr. Kirsty Morrin, for being supportive in those final stages when I needed a sounding board.

To the many widening participation practitioners that have supported me. Firstly, to Steve Kendall, I owe a debt of gratitude for giving me my first post at Bedfordshire. To all those who I worked in the 'A team' at Bedfordshire. To Gabi, Nikita, Roisin and Trevor, for several amazing years despite all the challenges. To all of the ambassadors and graduate fellows for keeping our sparks alight. To Sarah, for being an amazing work wife. To Tamanna, you taught me more than you will ever know, and you make me a better person every day; To Fran, for being my sanity for the latter stages of this thesis and to Harriet, for just being you.

To my colleagues at the Conservatoire. To have had the space and flexibility you have given me over the past three years, you have helped make this thesis a

reality. You have also taught me the important optimal balance of tea and coffee in the writing process.

To my first, and most critical proofreader, my Dad. We may not agree on politics, but those Sunday 'discussions' have helped me realise my critical voice more than any book or class could ever do. Even if I moved you an inch to the left, my work is done! To the first phenomenal woman in my life, my Mum. Not only for putting up with mine and Dad's discussions but for teaching me from the start that I could do anything I put my mind to and that women can be formidable. Not to forget the one who has put up with 'more studying' for the past five years and keeps me grounded every day. Yes, Adam, it is now finished!

Most of all to the practitioners I interviewed and who discussed my emerging findings with me. This thesis would not exist without you. To all the other practitioners working to ensure so many lives are changed thanks to the power of education. Between you, you can change the world, even though it might seem an uphill battle at times. Hopefully this thesis will aid you in this mission.

Tables

Figures

Thesis summary

This thesis explores the similarities and differences in widening participation outreach practices across pre-92 and post-92 institutions. Whilst widening participation sits under one national policy, individual institutions enact this in different ways. Using a comparative approach, it highlights the ways in which gaps between policy and practice manifest. Adopting a two-phase approach, the study is as follows. A critical discourse analysis of the 2016-17 access agreements across ten institutions (five pre-92 and five post-92) was conducted in order to explore the ways in which language was used and commonalities and differences in discourses deployed in policy by different types of institution. Phase two then explored some of the emerging themes with sixteen practitioners (eight working in post-92 institutions and eight in pre-92 institutions).

The findings identified a policy-practice gap in relation to a number of specific issues. These include: the role of marketisation in driving institutional agendas, who is framed as a 'potential' student, and the role understandings of aspiration play in interpreting national widening participation policy agendas. Additionally, this thesis develops a framework for understanding how individuals' personal and professional experiences can shape policy enactment in widening participation.

This thesis makes distinct contributions to knowledge through foregrounding those who work in widening participation outreach roles, a previously under researched group. Additionally, the findings in relation to aspiration and potential offer new insights to the field. It also makes a clear methodological contribution through its use of creative methods both in data collection using Drawing and Lego based approaches and in dissemination through the use of comics. Additionally, a theoretical contribution is made through considering the role of temporality in understanding policy and adopting a Critical Realist approach to exploring these issues. The thesis concludes with a number of practical recommendations for national policymakers, institutional decision makers and practitioners themselves.

Research informed comic

Chapter 1: Introduction

Widening participation in higher education is an important global issue (Atherton et al., 2016, UNESCO, 2017) and has been central to the political discourse in the United Kingdom for over fifty years (Stevens, 2004). Over this time, there has been much debate as to the purpose of higher education and who should benefit from it. There have also been questions around whether this work should be driven by a moral imperative to benefit individuals and society or based on the economic imperative to support an expanding market. The importance placed on widening participation and fair access has led to extensive research in this area. Previous research has often focused on students (e.g. Reay et al., 2010), academic staff (e.g. Stevenson et al., 2018b) or policymakers (e.g. Jones, 2017). Yet the practitioners who deliver pre-entry widening participation are an under researched group. Consequently, this study contributes to the literature on widening access by filling a distinct gap in empirical research by focusing on the practitioners that deliver pre-entry outreach activities and their relationship to policy. This thesis explores the similarities and differences in enactment of widening participation policies in different higher education institutions (HEIs). Comprising of a critical discourse analysis of ten 2016-17 access agreements (five pre-92 and five post-92 institutions) and sixteen in depth semi-structured interviews with practitioners (two pre-92 and five post-92 institutions), the study examines policy enactment in widening participation at both a structural level as captured in policy texts and at the level of the agents in enacting policy. Whilst all these institutions operate under the same national policies, it demonstrates that local enactment is shaped by not only institutional understandings of who and what higher education is for but also by practitioners' values and life histories. This thesis looks beyond metrics and targets and into complex realities of widening participation policy enactment.

This study is positioned within a critical paradigm. Critical social science should not be purely to uncover the hidden ideas which underpin practice, but to also

identify 'what things are not right as they are and why' (Sayer, 2011, p. 244). Two key areas of contention highlighted in this thesis are: the issue of targeting (Chapter Six) and the tensions in how aspirations are framed by policy compared to how they are enacted in practice (Chapter Eight). Overall, I argue that simply identifying differences in practices is insufficient and why these differences exist needs to be theorized in order to generate recommendations for more effective widening participation practices (Chapter Nine).

1.1 A study situated at a turning point

This study was conducted between 2014 and 2018 when higher education in England was in a state of flux. During the project, the *Higher Education and Research Act (2017)* was given Royal assent and regulation of access was moved from the Office for Fair Access to the newly formed Office for Students. This is one of the most significant changes to higher education since 1992 because there were substantive changes to the way issues of the access and success of under-represented groups were regulated, many of which were still being developed at the time of writing. These included for example moving to more nationally set targets and longer term planning cycles (Office for Students, 2018).

Change brings both challenges and opportunities. Positively, these changes have seen widening participation, or access and participation as it is now framed becoming more important than ever before and central to the acceptance of institutions on the register of higher education providers; the latest stage of an ever-increasing focus on issues related to access to and success in higher education, the history of which is charted in Chapter Two. The twenty years of government intervention since 1997 can arguably have been seen to be successful. In the 2016-17 academic year, 414,340 degrees were awarded (HESA, 2018) compared to 77,163 in 1990 (Bolton, 2012). One of the key moments in this history was when Tony Blair, the then Labour Prime Minister, pledged that 50% of young people should progress to higher education (Blair, 2006). By September 2017, 49%

of under 30s had benefitted from some advanced study[1] and this was evidence that the pledge had nearly been met (Adams, 2017). Despite these positive movements over the past twenty years, there are still vast inequalities in who progresses to higher education and where they progress to. These inequalities are shaped by geography, social class, race and disability amongst other things. Yet when individuals from under-represented backgrounds do gain access to higher education, their success within it is still not equal, even when prior attainment is controlled for (HEFCE, 2015a). Additionally, after students graduate, inequalities in outcome persist due to issues such as graduate schemes only being targeted at certain graduates of elite institutions (Bradley and Waller, 2018, Britton et al., 2016).

Inequalities may affect students before, during and after higher education and these three stages have been framed as a 'lifecycle' through previous policy (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014). More recent shifts in policy have seen increased interest in issues relating to success[2] once in higher education and progression into employment. Over time the discourse has moved from talking about widening participation, to widening access and success, and now more recently following the *Higher Education and Research Act (2017)* to access and participation. Policy is complex both in its formation and its enactment (Ball, 1993) and there are issues on both macro and micro levels that are important in developing understanding in this area.

The terms widening participation, fair access, and widening access and success have over time referred to both issues of access to and success in higher education. Whilst fair access has usually referred to issues surrounding admissions as in the Schwartz report (Department for Education and Skills, 2016), the term widening participation is highly contested and has multiple meanings (Burke, 2012) with a distinct shift when the 2014 national strategy outlined that 'Widening participation should encompass the whole student lifecycle' (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014, p. 3). The remit of access and success is too broad for one study and

---

[1] This includes English students 17 to 30 on higher education courses lasting six months or more

[2] Success as measured by progression from year 1 to 2 and good (1st or 2:1) degrees

therefore I have focused specifically on the pre-entry access and outreach work for two reasons. Firstly, this work still occupied a prominent position in most institutions when they highlighted their plans to widen access and success. Secondly, whilst success work is often embedded into day to day activity with current students, access and outreach tends to be separate and to be focused within specific institutional teams. This meant that practically, there was access to practitioners for whom this was their main role. This allowed the focus on policy enactment upon which the research questions relied. To gain similar access to practitioners involved in student success work would have been more complex.

Despite this extensive spend and institutions employing specific widening participation practitioners to deliver outreach, to date there is a dearth of research on this group, with only one previously published study (Wilkins and Burke, 2013) and an unpublished Master's thesis (Burchfiel, 2017). The journey from government policy to interventions on the ground is a complex one. It involves many levels of interpretation, often distinct from each other. This interpretation can be both collective and individual but at every stage the process involves people. These people all come with preconceptions, expectations and ideologies, which may be supportive of each other, or in tension with the other people involved in the policy translation and enactment processes. Therefore, understanding how and why policy shifts during enactment is vital. Whilst the focus of this study was limited to a small number of institutions, it brings into view a relatively under researched group; the practitioners that plan and deliver pre-entry widening participation work. Exploring in detail their personal life histories, their roles in the institutions they work in and their relationships with policy, I highlight some of the key issues that cause disjuncture between policy and practice.

1.2 The focus of the study

This study sought to explore the differences between pre-92 institutions (as exemplary of elite, selective higher education) and post-92 institutions (as exemplary of mass higher education). Whilst some researchers have argued that thinking of universities along these lines is reductionist (Greenbank, 2006a), other

more in depth analyses of institution types have shown that there are clear lines of differences based on factors such as research activity, teaching quality, academic selectivity and student demographics that support there being something different about institutions across the pre/post-92 divide (Boliver, 2015). Previous work in examining discourses in marketing materials has also shown clear distinctions along this line (Graham, 2012). Whilst therefore acknowledging diversity of institutions and a growing number of new alternative providers entering the sector (HEFCE, 2017a), this study places its focus firmly on the differences between pre-92 and post-92 institutions.

Within the study I focused on ten institutions in the first phase to understand the differential positioning of institutions, examining the discourses they use:

> Discourses are semiotic ways of construing aspects of the world (physical, social or mental) which can generally be identified with different positions or perspectives of different groups of social actors.

> (Fairclough, 2010, p. 232).

By analysing these discourses and the underlying values and assumptions, how these differed between institutions was able to be critiqued. The discourses within access agreements reified the ongoing interactions between different actors and were 'the reconciliation of competing ideas and interests, compromises and trade-offs' (Forrester and Garratt, 2016, p. 6). As such, they were useful as a point of comparison between institutions as a measure of intentions but offered a partial mediated picture of these. Policy only offers a partial picture of what goes on and one of the key concerns in designing the study was to capture the gap between 'words and deeds' (Ahmed, 2007, p. 590). To do this, I also focused on those practitioners who are delivering these pre-entry interventions. Initially I planned to focus on a sub sample of four institutions from phase one, however, this was not fully realised, and the sample was drawn from a wider number of institutions[3]. Sixteen practitioners were interviewed from seven different institutions (two pre-92 institutions and five post-92). The number of practitioners

---

[3] See section 4.6 (p.75)

I could interview was constrained by the limited scope of a part-time doctoral study. Whilst the sample was diverse, covering a wide range of career positions, experiences, institutional and geographical factors, it was still only a fraction of the sector as a whole. It also focused on urban sites in order to facilitate an approach that allowed for comparison of institutions within the same city. Triangulation of the emerging issues to explore resonance with the wider sector was therefore key. Following the data analysis, I distilled the key findings into the research informed comic (p. x-xi) and in June 2018 ran a session with eleven further practitioners at one of the biggest practitioner conferences in the UK, the National Educational Opportunities Network Summer Symposium, the discussions of which underpin the arguments in the thesis, especially in terms of the recommendations (Chapter Nine).

Whilst the focus of this study was on pre-entry widening participation, this is only one part of the puzzle. The success of individuals once they gain entry is a different matter and one which is beyond the scope of the thesis. A whole lifecycle approach has also shifted attention to 'getting them on' and getting them into a 'good' job (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014). In 2016-17, the total spend across all institutions on access and success was £750 million. Of the £351 million allocated to access, success and progression work , £149 million was specifically targeted to access and outreach measures (OFFA, 2015a). Therefore, many institutions were still focused primarily on the early parts of the lifecycle. Furthermore, despite framing widening access and success as a whole institutional issue, none of the practitioners interviewed mentioned issues surrounding institutional fit of the pre-entry students they work with. In fact, with the exception of Lucy (pre-92) who was in a success focused role, very few interacted with students once they were at their institution beyond the student ambassadors within their employ. Despite this, previous research has shown the importance of fitting in, highlighting a real tension between what it really means to widen access and success (e.g. Bathmaker et al., 2016). Part of this may come back to the peripheral nature of widening participation outreach work within institutions which leads to practitioners only focusing on 'getting them in', as opposed to 'getting them through' and 'getting them on'.

1.2.1 Why this? Why me? Why now?

My focus on this topic is not purely academic, I also come from the perspective of a practitioner. C. Wright Mills (1970) discusses about how private troubles can become public issues and this is exactly how this research came about. Having worked in the compulsory education sector for a number of years with a range of students from different backgrounds, I moved into a widening participation role in January 2014. Yet meeting colleagues from other universities made me realise there were different agendas, some not wholly based on social justice. This fuelled my curiosity to find out how forms of practice under the same national policy were so different in focus and why there was variability in interpretation by institutions. As Osler has argued that:

> Education policy is not merely a one-way process by which government dictates to teachers and educational administrators but involves the application, interpretation and sometimes subversion of policy goals.

> (Osler, 2013, p. 53)

Furthermore, the lively discussions I was having on a regular basis within my own team led me to question if this variability was determined by the institution or if practitioners' personal backgrounds played a role in policy enactment. My reflexive position is covered more extensively in Chapter Three but is outlined here in order to frame the conscious choice to often write in the first person in this thesis. Bourdieu talks of how he was 'inseparable from the work [he] was doing on the social world' (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 59). This resonated as this research comes from the perspective of an engaged practitioner who is embedded in the social world being researched and not as a detached outsider. Adopting a detached position would be in many ways impossible as even forgoing my employment as a practitioner, my tacit understandings of what it means to be a widening participation practitioner would endure. As Dean (2017) argued in his analysis of Bourdieu's writings on reflexivity, there is a danger of writing subjectively that the reader could only see the project through a lens of 'simple relativism'(p.43). This concern, whilst being valid, I believe is outweighed by the importance that

personal narrative plays in investigating and re-telling the stories of those who work and exist in similar spheres of employment. The confluence of these ways of thinking about research as being something within which the self is firmly situated has shaped my approach and the way in which the thesis is written with the 'I' of the researcher firmly embedded. To some readers this may seem to be a break with some forms of academic writing, however, to see this thesis without the 'I' as an embodied part is to only see a partial exposition of the project and is a position that is being increasingly echoed by other qualitative researchers (Lisiak et al., 2018). As the project has progressed, I have moved into a more detached, policy focused widening participation role, which has also shaped my understanding of the negotiations involved in what can and should be said in documents such as access agreements. I am not neutral, the recurring themes in my research diary questioning the morality of my own practices pay testament to this. Whilst the research is rigorous and critical, the concerns are not simply an empirical issue I investigated as a researcher but issues which are embedded within my every day professional life.

The context of this thesis was also central to its exposition. The project was first conceived in 2014 under the auspices of a coalition government in the second year of tuition fees tripling to £9000. Concern about the increased fees was often focused on the potential for them to dissuade those from low income families from pursuing higher education (Burke, 2012). Therefore, the *National Strategy for Access and Student Success* (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014) was a key policy to address these concerns. In contrast, the policy landscape was very different at the point of submission. A number of policy moments took place during the thesis, culminating in the *Higher Education and Research Act (2017)*. This period also saw the closure of Office for Fair Access and their remit being subsumed into the new Office for Students, a regulatory body with far more scope and influence. Access agreements are no more and as detailed in the guidance, the round of 2019-20 access and participation plans approved prior to the thesis submission were likely to be the last ones that resemble the now extinct access agreements upon which my analysis focused. All these caveats aside, the findings of this thesis have never been timelier. Whilst policy and government whim are cyclical, the process of

interpretation and enactment of policy is an enduring one. Therefore, the lens that this study places upon these processes continues to have relevance.

The focus on issues where the intentions of policy were not being realised is not to apportion blame but to hold institutions responsible (Young, 1990). My position is one of criticality and in adopting this position I hope that readers consider the resonance of the issues the study raises in their own contexts and that this might help them reimagine future policy and practices. Certainly, the key concern is that of consciousness raising and that:

> involves making the privileged aware of how their habitual actions, reactions, images and stereotypes contribute to oppression.
>
> (*ibid*.p.154).

To make clear, my own position that underlines the whole thesis is that increasing participation in higher education is a good thing; that a more highly educated society offers the potential for a more positive world. This is not the assumption that it is the right choice for everyone, or that attending university at eighteen is an optimal path, but that higher education can and does enrich lives and that no one should be prevented from accessing should they so wish. I also feel that higher education should adapt and accommodate a wider range of individuals and not simply expect assimilation into institutional norms. As this thesis will explore in greater depth, my position is a contested one especially in mainstream media (e.g. Mercieca, 2017, Timothy, 2017) but as Anne-Marie Canning (2017), Director of Social Mobility at Kings College London put so succinctly 'Just politely ask 'who shouldn't go?' when folks say too many people are going to university.'

1.3 Contribution to knowledge

This thesis makes a distinct contribution to knowledge in a number of areas. Its primary contribution relates to its focus. Previous studies have examined widening participation through texts such as access agreements (McCaig and Adnett, 2009, McCaig, 2015b), widening participation policies (Greenbank, 2006b)

and marketing materials (Graham, 2012); yet none have examined the relationship between policy and the practitioners who enact it. Notably, Harrison et al. (2015) conducted a survey of institutions to explore issues such as targeting and perceptions of success in widening participation although their focus was on senior managers, not practitioners. Jones (2017) also interviewed policymakers and senior managers in relation to institutional decision-making related to widening participation as opposed to the messiness of policy enactment at the coal face. Therefore, this study makes a distinct contribution to the literature by foregrounding practitioners voices in relation to institutional narratives[4].

There is also a wider contribution which relates to its findings. Within the thesis I critique the targeting of this work (Chapter Six) and examine how national areas of focus are translated into local practices, an issue up to now absent from the literature. In doing so I highlight some of the compromises and pragmatism that may have led to resources being focused on those who are easiest to reach or who are more likely to positively impact statistical targets as opposed to those in greatest need. This creates a distinct contribution in terms of recommendations for policymakers on how these issues might be addressed. In Chapter Seven, I propose a framework to theorising practice, deepening understanding of what shapes the ways in which practitioners enact, or do not enact policies. Furthermore, Chapter Eight also demonstrates how individual understandings of concepts, in this case aspiration, can shift the goals of policy as can the institutional interpretations of these terms shape practitioners' actions. This contribution to the literature on aspiration adds a voice on the topic that is absent from the perspective of the practitioners in contrast to the existing literature which often focuses primarily on young people (Hutchings and Archer, 2001, Archer and Yamashita, 2003, Allen and Hollingworth, 2013, Mendick et al., 2018)

This thesis also makes a distinct methodological contribution in relation to the use of creative methods, both in terms of data collection and discussion and dissemination of findings. Through the use of two contrasting creative methods

---

[4] In the context of this study institutional narratives have been framed as those enshrined within each institutions' access agreements.

with adults within an interview context I demonstrate the potential strengths and limitations of these methods (Chapter Four). The failure of drawing to engage the participants is a valuable contribution as it furthers the discussion of when and how creative methods can improve knowledge and when they may act as a barrier. In doing so I contribute to discussions on rethinking how we could better innovate with research methods. Through the production of a research informed comic (p. x & xi) as a result of the interview data which demonstrated practitioners' limited time to engage with policy and research findings, I have been able to engage a greater spread of practitioners with the interim findings in order to explore their resonance.

There is also a distinct theoretical contribution. Much research in this area is often ill theorised and focused primarily on practical concerns. Within this study I have drawn heavily on different theoretical frameworks, in particular exploring the role of temporality through applying the concept of morphogenesis (Archer, 1995) to policy enactment. Furthermore, I have contributed to the theoretical discussions surrounding the applicability of institutional habitus in higher education as opposed to schools where is has often been used, arguing that institutional doxa may be a more appropriate concept.

1.4 Research questions

The overarching focus of the study on comparing practices between institutional types was further refined into five research questions:

i. What differences are there in the discourses used within access agreements between pre and post-92 institutions in England?
ii. To what extent do access agreements mirror the experience and work carried out by widening participation practitioners?
iii. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of widening participation practitioners working within pre and post-92 institutions?
iv. What are the motivations and reasons that practitioners choose to undertake widening participation work?

v. How do practitioners reconcile institutional and national policy with their individual beliefs and values?

These questions were addressed throughout the thesis:

What differences are there in the discourses used within access agreements between pre and post-92 institutions in England?	To what extent do access agreements mirror the experience and work carried out by widening participation practitioners?	What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of widening participation practitioners working within pre and post-92 institutions?	What are the motivations and reasons that practitioners choose to undertake widening participation work?	How do practitioners reconcile institutional and national policy with their individual beliefs and values?
Chapter 5: How markets shape access	**Chapter 5:** How markets shape access	**Chapter 5:** How markets shape access		**Chapter 6:** Students with 'potential' or simply potential students?
Chapter 6: Students with 'potential' or simply potential students?	**Chapter 6:** Students with 'potential' or simply potential students?	**Chapter 6:** Students with 'potential' or simply potential students?	**Chapter 7:** From policies into practices	**Chapter 7:** From policies into practices
Chapter 8: Aspiration on whose terms?	**Chapter 7:** From policies into practices	**Chapter 7:** From policies into practices		**Chapter 8:** Aspiration on whose terms?
		Chapter 8: Aspiration on whose terms?		

fig 1.1- Structure of the thesis and research questions

1.5 Structure of the thesis

During the early stages of analysis, it became evident that the thesis spanned several very diverse areas of scholarship. Ranging from macro-level issues relating to the structures of the higher education system, to micro-level issues such as how practitioners interpreted policy terms such as 'raising aspirations'. As such, a traditional thesis structure with a single literature review was unsuitable. Thus, this thesis adopts a thematic approach, embedding the literature within four chapters relating to issues emerging from the data. The thesis is in three distinct sections; Chapters Two to Four address the policy landscape and the theoretical and methodological issues. Chapters Five through Eight adopted a thematic approach emerging from based the data analysis. Finally, Chapter Nine draws together the thematic chapters and moves from the empirical findings to policy and practice recommendations.

Chapter Two outlines the policy context for the study, focusing as the rest of the study does, on England and charting the history of higher education more generally and specifically widening participation over the last twenty years. Whilst briefly tackling the historical origins of widening participation, the main focus is on the emergence of the current widening participation landscape since the introduction of tuition fees. Following this, Chapter Three sets out the theoretical basis of the study and argues for the value of Critical Realism as a framework. Drawing on Margaret S. Archer (1995) and her Morphogenetic cycle I argue how issues of temporality are key to understanding the relationship between policy and practice. Chapter Four, addresses the methodological basis of the study. Adopting a number of visual methods both for data collection and dissemination, I argue for the value of these methods in engaging practitioners in the research process in a way that traditional semi-structured interviews and written reports alone could not.

Chapters Five through Eight explore the four key themes within the thesis. Each chapter following a similar structure: First examining the literature on the topic before focusing on the study data. Chapter Five, tackles the ways in which marketisation and other structural constraints shape practice. From this broad overview of structural issues, Chapter Six focuses on the specific issues of targeting and who is seen as a potential student for different types of institution. Chapter Seven then explores individual practitioners' roles in policy enactment, arguing that personal narratives shaped practice and that this resulted in different types of practitioners. Some being more or less complaint with institutional policy and others who are more or less focused on the individuals whom they work with. Chapter Eight, narrows the focus further to the specific issue of aspiration and here I argue how individuals' conceptualisations of a single issue, shaped by their own values and experiences can shape practice.

Finally, Chapter Nine draws together the key concerns and returns to the research questions to address answering the issues of 'so what?' and 'what next?'. As the interviews and the discussions of emergent findings with practitioners

highlighted, many of these issues are not unsurprising and are enduring in nature. I therefore problematise the status quo and conclude by considering how we might reimagine widening participation practices to ensure they are actually widening participation through recommendations not only for practitioners and their managers within institutions but for government and policymakers. The issues this thesis addresses are complex but in order to be able to tackle them, taking a more critical look at the ways in which policy becomes practice needs to be taken if they are to be fixed. This thesis provides one such critical view and my hope is that it will encourage both further studies with practitioners as who are central to effective policy enactment. Furthermore, that it will enable practitioners and policymakers to look at local issues from a more critical perspective and allow them to move beyond performative practices into more engaged ways of addressing issues related to the success of under-represented groups in higher education.

Chapter 2: Contextualising the study

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the history of widening participation policy and practice, highlighting the most prominent issues that affected higher education in the 2016-17 academic year upon which this study is based and examining the origins of the role of the widening participation practitioner and their role in policy enactment. Whilst it provides a policy framework, specific areas relating to the thematic issues of the study are further discussed in the relevant chapters. Many of the changes to higher education over this time have been highly controversial and ideological; none more so than the shift in its funding from the taxpayer to individual students. Yet even with the current system, the taxpayer is likely to bear the brunt of the significant cost of unpaid loans.

Increasing both access to and success in higher education has become a growing concern over the last fifty years. Debates have raged over who should get access and more importantly who should pay; quite often centered on the argument of whether higher education is a private or public good (Marginson, 2011). Furthermore, the completion of this study coincided with the *Higher Education and Research Act (2017)* being given Royal assent, which created a step change in the treatment of widening participation within policy. Regulation of issues related to access and success moved from OFFA into the Office for Students (OfS). In doing so, the focus began to shift to a more risk based approach concerned primarily on outcomes (Office for Students, 2018). In many ways, for example, in relation to access agreements which will no longer be produced, this has made some of the content of the study dated. The findings of this study still have implications in this new world and possible changes to policy and practice are highlighted in Chapter Nine.

2.1.1 Scope

This chapter briefly outlines the origins of the current higher education system in England followed by a detailed examination of the key policy moments since 1997; the period which has most dramatically shaped current widening participation practices (Burke, 2012, Greenbank, 2006a, Thompson, 2017). Once the preserve of those few going into prestigious professions such as medicine, higher education is now seen as something that is essential to achieving a 'successful' career trajectory and university participation is increasingly conflated with the country's economic successes (Stevens, 2004). The purpose of higher education is an ideological position and one which is contested and on which various policy actors have differing views. These divergent views have shaped the changing policy focuses over the course of time which have increasingly tended to focus on higher education's role in developing human capital (McCaig, 2018).

In-depth accounts of the historical lineage of widening participation and English higher education policy demonstrate that the period from 1997 to 2017 played a crucial role in shaping the current landscape of widening participation (Greenbank, 2006a, McCaig, 2018). This chapter focuses on how access agreements have shaped the work done under the auspices of widening participation and how the role of the widening participation practitioner has come into existence. To examine widening participation specifically, it is first necessary to situate this in the wider landscape of higher education.

2.2 Origins and development of widening participation

The desire to widen participation has been part of both institutional missions and national policy for many years and has also been one of fierce debate. This combined with the huge number of policy changes in the last twenty years have impacted upon the practices that this study explores.

The most significant events were:

Year	
1944	Education Act
1963	The Committee on Higher Education Report (Robbins Report)
1988	Education Reform Act
1992	Further and Higher Education Act
1997	The National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education (Dearing Report)
1998	Tuition fees introduced at £1000 per year
2003	The Future of Higher Education White paper
2004	Higher Education Act 2004
2004	Office for Fair Access formed
2004	Schwartz report on Fair Admissions to Higher Education
2006	Tuition fees increased to £3000 per year
2010	Browne Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance
2011	Students at the Heart of the System White paper
2012	Tuition fees increase to a maximum of £9000 per year
2013	Removal of Student Number Cap
2014	National Strategy for Access and Student Success

table 2.1 – key higher education policy moments from 1944-2014

2.2.1 Early expansion (1944-1963)

Expansion of higher education began in the 1800s and by the first World War, several of today's most well-known universities had received their charters. The 1944 *Education Act* was the first turning point in the shift towards widening participation in higher education when governmental policy began a move from framing universities as an elite enterprise for a select few to a desirable aspiration for the masses (*Education Act*, 1944). In 1950, only 17,337 first degrees were awarded[5] (Bolton, 2012) and less than two per cent of those of college age went to university. The requirement for degrees in careers we now see as graduate professions, such as teaching and nursing, was uncommon (Stevens, 2004). A number of sequential committees and their reports in the late 1950s and early 1960s deepened this shift in thinking, from university being the preserve of an

---

[5] Compared to 414,340 in 2016/17 (HESA, 2018)

elite to something more inclusive and of central importance to the country (Stevens, 2004).

Whilst government policy has heavily shaped widening participation, work to facilitate access to and support students from deprived backgrounds has been central to many universities missions through work with local communities and mechanisms such as scholarships and bursaries. Yet it was the publication in 1963 of the Committee on Higher Education report, known more commonly as the Robbins report that began to enshrine some of the key elements of widening participation into governmental policy (The Committee on Higher Education, 1963).

2.2.2 Robbins report (1963-1991)

The scope of Robbins was to examine the nature of full-time higher education provision[6] and its long-term development to meet the country's needs. This report framed issues of who gains access to higher education as being of concern due to the increased demand and desire from individuals. The principle set out in this report, later known as the Robbins Principle, was that:

> courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so.

> (The Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 8)

This report's recommendations fueled a rapid expansion of higher education in the 1960s and 1970s and also informed much of the following 50 years of policy, leading to an expansion of the sector and doubling the number of universities in the United Kingdom from 22 to 45. Robbins' ambition was to raise the percentage of school leavers entering higher education from eight to 17 per cent by 1980 (Burke, 2012). However, there were critics of this approach who highlighted the potential detrimental impact on academic standards (e.g. Somerset County

---

[6] although the final report did also cover part-time study

Herald, 1963). Alongside these changes to universities was a rapid growth in provision of higher education within polytechnics. These institutions were formed through the mergers of technical colleges, arts colleges and educational colleges as part of the then Labour government's rationalisation of the public sector (Stevens, 2004). By 1980, the number of first-degrees awarded had risen to 68,150, nearly four times greater than in 1950 (Bolton, 2012). This growth also meant that by 1985, more than half of full-time students were being taught in polytechnics (Greenbank, 2006a, McCaig, 2018)

Expansion during the period of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government saw a conflation of human capital for industry with the supply of graduates. This was enshrined in policy through a series of White papers in the late 1980s and the *Education Reform Act* deepened this move further (*Education Reform Act*, 1988). This shift towards higher education as an economic imperative fueled the beginnings of the movement from a grant-based student finance system to one placing the responsibility for higher education finance to individual students; an ideological issue that shaped debates in the late 90s onwards.

2.2.3 Removing the binary divide (1992-1996)

Expansion continued in 1992 when the *Further and Higher Education Act* catalysed significant changes to the funding and administration of higher education in England and Wales by allowing the thirty-five previously designated polytechnics to gain university status and creating the higher education funding councils, including one for England, HEFCE (*Further and Higher Education Act*, 1992). This change increased the number of universities in England to 88 and opened up capacity for places, resulting in exponential growth in the number of first-degrees being awarded from 77,163 in 1990 to 243,246 by 2000 (Bolton 2012). This expansion took place under a Conservative government which was heavily driven by neoliberal ideologies and as such ideas of market competition shaped this new system (Greenbank, 2006a). The move was not uncontroversial with concerns about how this might devalue degrees and how this expansion could be funded being central to the debates (Warnock, 1996). Therefore in 1996, with cross party support, a Conservative government initiated the National Committee of Inquiry

into Higher Education to consider the future of higher education over the next 20 years. This cross party support was important, as was the agreement that issues of university funding and fees would not form part of the 1997 election campaigns (Stevens, 2004). It was the findings of this inquiry and a change in government to a New Labour majority administration in 1997 that arguably created the climate which shaped the widening participation landscape of today.

2.2.4 A learning society? (1997-2004)

The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education led by Lord Dearing reported its findings in 1997 in *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (the Dearing report). This examined higher education in forensic detail to:

> …make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years.
> (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997, p. 3)

Widening participation was a key theme of the inquiry and a special report on widening participation was also commissioned (Robertson and Hillman, 1997). Whilst the Dearing report placed widening participation at the centre of national policy, it was the incoming New Labour government and a manifesto focus on education that drove the significant impact of the report's recommendations upon policy. There was often confusion surrounding the central aims of the policies. Furthermore, individuals involved in the process interpreting policies based these interpretations on their own assumptions of who higher education should serve and what its purpose in society was (Doyle and Griffin, 2012). This led to the emergence of a deficit positioning of disadvantaged students within the Dearing report (Greenbank, 2006a) which problematised that it:

> …is harder to predict is how successful the education system for pupils up to the age of 16 will be in raising the attainments and aspirations of those from lower socio-economic groups so that a greater proportion of them will seek higher education.

This assumption that those from lower socio-economic groups need support to have aspirations for higher education is a position that endures within policy today and an issue to which Chapter Eight returns in detail. In parallel during this period other work was also going on to explore the role of widening participation in further education (Kennedy, 1997) highlighting the significance of this period within the evolution of widening participation policy.

Whilst higher education institutions (HEIs) have always reached out to potential applicants and their local communities, following the Dearing report this became more strategic. From 1999 institutions were required to produce statements outlining their work to widen participation to be submitted to the funding council. These statements evolved into strategies and action plans to cover the period between 2001 to 2004. This institutional strategic planning dovetailed with national initiatives. The national Aimhigher programme that emerged following the Dearing report was also concerned with access to higher education. Aimhigher consisted of two initiatives: *Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge*, was funded by the Department for Education and Skills and tasked with raising aspiration and awareness of higher education for 14-19 year olds in specific geographical areas (also targeted by another area based initiative, Excellence in Cities) (Emmerson et al., 2006). In contrast, *Aimhigher: Partnerships for progression* was funded by the Learning and Skills Council and focused on addressing similar issues through regional higher and further education partnerships (Burke, 2012).

The political focus on widening participation continued and at the 2001 Labour party conference, New Labour declared a goal of fifty percent of young people aged eighteen entering Higher Education by 2010 (Stevens, 2004). This was a controversial pledge and the static growth in applicants that year fueled commentators to question this perceived demand for higher education (Hodges, 2001). Through the subsequent policy mechanisms leading up to the 2004 *Higher Education Act*, the links between this desire for expansion and the need to widen access, combined with concerns that tuition fees would deter those from

disadvantaged backgrounds, formed the basis of the initiatives that were to shape the next seven years.

The *Future of Higher Education* White paper was a key policy moment of this period (Department for Education and Skills, 2003), reaffirming the commitment to 50 percent of 18-30 year olds participating in higher education. However, this was mainly framed as being realised through 'two-year work-focused foundation degrees' (p.7). Charles Clarke (then Labour Secretary of State for Education and Skills') also set out two of the premises of widening participation. Firstly, that those from less advantaged backgrounds still felt higher education as beyond their reach and that their aspirations needed raising. Secondly, that asking students to partially fund their tuition must not become a barrier to those from the poorest backgrounds. This framing around cost was even more acute due to the associated recommendation of introducing variable tuition fees (which began in 2006-7 and were permitted to be up to £3000 per year), a controversial proposal met by national protests from students (Pyke, 2003). This increase in fees also sought to establish a market driven by value and differential costs to students as a signifier of quality (McCaig, 2018). The *Higher Education Act* that followed placed into statute that there would be a Director of Fair Access to Higher Education whose role it was to 'promote and safeguard fair access to higher education' (*Higher Education Act*, 2004, p. 16) The Act also set out the requirement for institutions in England to create plans (later known as access agreements) which include provision for the promotion of 'equality of opportunity in connection with access to higher education' (p.17).

2.2.5 Aiming higher (2004-2011)

The *Higher Education Act (2004)* catalysed a step change within widening participation. The need to raise aspirations to address fair access previously mooted in the Dearing report became enshrined in policy. As a result of this, *Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge* and *Aimhigher: Partnerships for progression* were merged into a single programme to take the positive experiences of collaboration between universities, schools and colleges and create a 'coherent national outreach programme' (Chowdry et al., 2013, p. 70). As McCaig et al. (2006) highlighted,

whilst framed as a national programme, it actually focused on local and regional issues . Policy and funding were nationally driven, but this work was locally interpreted and enacted at a regional level. Activities delivered included mentoring, summer schools and taster days, much of which provided a template for the outreach work that endures in institutions long after Aimhigher finished. The scheme was subject to a national evaluation and the final report noted that '[…]Aimhigher has been the primary facilitator, especially in post-1992 universities and in further education colleges (FECs)' of activities to widen participation (Bowers-Brown et al., 2016, p. p.ii). The primary focus of interventions delivered under Aimhigher was very much at a practical level and was less theoretically informed than many of the widening participation projects carried out today (Thompson, 2017). This focus generated clear differences in how different types of institutions engaged with specific cohort groups under this programme. It created a divide where pre-92 institutions tended to focus on school age participants and viewed it in addition to other outreach work they were already doing, allowing greater autonomy in terms of geographical reach and what type of work was delivered. In contrast, post-92 institutions saw the Aimhigher initiative as their main pre-entry access work due to limited funding for other outreach work (Bowers-Brown et al. (2016).

Aimhigher only existed until 2008 in this form, (a period of just four years) and between 2008-2011 it was scaled back, first at the national level and then at a regional level due to budgetary pressures following the 2008 financial crisis (Harrison, 2017). Part of the reason for Aimhigher's untimely demise was the lack of evidence of its impact (Gorard et al., 2006). This critique of insufficient evidence fueled the future focus on tracking and evaluation that endures today. This lack of evidence and opposition from the incoming Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government to the scheme was in contrast to the value placed on this work by young people, teachers and their communities (Harrison, 2012b, Harrison and Hatt, 2012, Baxter et al., 2007).

2.2.6 Schwartz Report into fair admissions

Whilst Aimhigher was tasked with fixing a perceived issue around aspirations, a separate review into admissions was commissioned by the New Labour government in 2003 (Department for Education and Skills, 2016). The need for a review was catalysed a student who despite obtaining the requisite grades, failed to be admitted to Oxford University in 2000. This brought into question whether addressing aspiration and finance alone solves the issues surrounding access for students from non-traditional backgrounds (Whitty et al., 2015). Whilst the report did not identify discrimination in entry practices, it recommended more holistic consideration of students, not only on grades but also on life experience and potential. This recommendation was not well received in some places with commentators claiming this was another form of class warfare (Kaletsky, 2003) and the potential to muddy a system previously based on objective grades was highlighted as problematic (Stevens, 2004). This contextualization of admissions underpins many 16-18 pre-entry schemes in selective universities which work to build an evidential picture of potential resulting in a lower entry offer. Whilst contextualization widens the formal academic requirements, it is somewhat problematic as only those who can access pre-entry programmes (often requiring multiple campus visits or being narrowly targeted based on geography) can benefit[7].

2.2.7 Re-Institutionalising widening participation (2012 onwards)

Despite the demise of Aimhigher, issues of access to higher education endured and the likelihood of enrollment in higher education was still shaped by social class inequalities (Boliver, 2011). Whilst rates of participation have increased, data shows that relative gaps in participation have remained constant (UCAS, 2017). Furthermore, the types of universities attended became more stratified with selective universities dominated by middle-class entrants (Reay et al., 2005). This was supported by Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013), analysis that demonstrated some Russell Group universities became less socially representative between 2002-03 and 2011-12.

---

[7] See Chapter Six (p.127)

Removal of Aimhigher funding meant that in most cases widening participation became the sole responsibility of individual institutions creating a tension between widening access to higher education that is right for individuals whilst also competing to attract students to the institutions delivering the outreach (Bowl and Hughes, 2014). Whilst Aimhigher also experienced tensions, the removal of student number caps has led to increased competition between previously oversubscribed institutions. Some relics of Aimhigher remained, maintaining networks co-funded by their members such as AccessHE, Aimhigher West Midlands and Higher Education Progression Partnership (HEPP).

In 2010 the publication of the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, better known as the Browne report (Browne, 2010) signaled a step change in funding for higher education. In order to adequately finance the growing sector, it recommended shifting the responsibility of funding for higher education from the state to students (Harrison, 2017). This controversial shift was seen as a symbolic moment for many where 'education became no longer a right but a commodity to be bought and sold' (McDonnell, 2010). In doing so, it chose a mechanism which allowed student choice to be central to where the funding went, looking for expansion of the sector where there was demand from suitably qualified applicants. It also re-emphasised the commitment of competition being a key feature of the sector, envisioning price and teaching quality as the two main drivers of student choice, and seeing this as a way of driving quality (Browne, 2010). The report proposed a variable rate tuition fee system with no cap. The report was published at a time of a Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition government, which could not gain mutual party agreement to support pre-election manifesto promises surrounding tuition fees; the Liberal Democrats having stood on a manifesto that pledged to abolish them. The resultant government policy was that the fee cap would not be completely removed but would be raised to £9000 per year from the 2012-13 per academic year. This was met by protests far greater than those seen in 2003 (Ibrahim, 2011). Many Liberal Democrat voters also saw this as a betrayal of manifesto promises, resulting in protests during Nick Clegg, the Deputy Prime minister's campaigning during the

2015 general election (Midgley, 2015) and the subsequent loss of his Sheffield Hallam seat (Steel, 2015).

This move was also intended to create a market where the highest fees signaled top universities (Bathmaker, 2015). However, most universities opted to charge the maximum allowable fee thus not creating the anticipated market. The failure of a differential fees policy meant other markers of distinction were needed to differentiate institutions. McCaig (2015a) argued that differentiation could be vertical and produce a hierarchy; for example, based on staff: student ratios, entry requirements or research performance ordering institutions in a league table. In contrast, it can also be horizontal, based on diversity of mission or the type of education offered. With horizontal differentiation all institutions are framed as on a level playing field but offering different provision appealing to different target groups.

The *Students at the Heart of the System* White paper that followed, outlined that student choice would be a driver of the system and the competitive market was opened up through loosening student number controls, initially for students with AAB or above grades at A-level (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011), later followed in 2013-14 by the full removal of the Student Number Controls for all institutions. As well as increasing choice, there was a concurrent focus on improving the student experience with student feedback given a prominent role. The introduction of the National Students Survey (NSS) and the increased value placed upon it became tied up in the use of these metrics within league tables and assessing performance in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). However its use in TEF its not without its critics as it is questioned whether student satisfaction is related to teaching quality (Gunn, 2018). Alongside this focus on feedback, there was also a drive for increased pre-entry information to facilitate more informed student choice. Ultimately, this choice was framed as being related to higher education as primarily a driver for social mobility and the White paper proposed additional resources to support OFFA in the regulation of access agreements in addition to a national scholarship scheme to provide additional financial support to students from low-income backgrounds.

The increase in funding and investment in OFFA led to the *National Strategy for Access and Student Success* (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014). This set out a vision drawing together access to and success within higher education, creating a whole student lifecycle approach. More rapid change to entry rates of under-represented groups and improvements to the post-entry success of these groups was also a focus of the strategy, however the environment within which this was expected was one marked by complexity. The increase in tuition fees as a primary source of institutional funding, the need to compete in an increasingly marketised field and placing the onus on individual institutions to do work to widen participation meant that national policies resulted in many local tensions (Bowl and Hughes, 2014, McCaig, 2015b). There was a competing need to recruit students and to ensure that young people were given the support to access higher education provision most suitable for their own individual ambitions. These ambitions often not relating to those framed as desirable institutions or policy makers. As Mavelli (2014) argued, although widening participation policy has been framed through both economic and social justice lenses, the economic imperative has taken over as a primary purpose of higher education within policy. This economic focus also seems to continue to drive the focus on raising aspirations towards top universities, or top jobs, not for their intrinsic value but for the ability for young people to meet their potential, which seems to be framed in terms of the greatest economic outcomes possible for both the individual and the national economy (Milburn, 2009, Loveday, 2014, Platt and Parsons, 2017, Slack, 2003, Spohrer, 2016). Despite improving the economic success of individuals having a distinct role in social justice, this focus fails to acknowledge that economic success is only one facet of developing a 'good life'.

2.2.8 A new era for collaboration?

Whilst this study focuses on institutional widening participation, this exists in parallel with national collaborative projects. This approach to collaborative outreach first mentioned in the *National Strategy for Access and Student Success* (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014) led to the £22 million National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) scheme; 34 local networks and four national

networks connecting 200 universities and Further Education Colleges (HEFCE, 2017c). Following the demise of Aimhigher, some of these networks had continued to exist through local funding models before applying for NNCO funding and this meant that out of the 34 NNCOs, 16 predated the NNCO project and many had their origins as previous Aimhigher consortia (Stevenson et al., 2017).

The aim of the NNCO was to create a single point of contact for schools (SPoCs) to help them connect to university and college outreach activities with the explicit goal of encouraging young people into higher education. This was designed to feed into existing outreach provision and to offer general advice for progression into higher education to all young people (HEFCE, 2018b). Whilst the project was only funded for two years, the majority of the networks successfully bid for funding under the subsequent National Collaborative Outreach Programme. Unlike Aimhigher, NNCOs worked on a model involving a lead institution which created tensions in some cases in the ability to serve the needs of all network partners. This tension of being employed by a lead institution meant that some SPoCs felt a pressure to focus on the outreach activity of the institution where they were employed (Stevenson et al., 2017). However, the evaluation of the scheme demonstrated a greater level of school engagement in widening participation due to the additional resource invested into making those connections. This is important in relation to this study as the period of the NNCO overlapped with the time of writing the 2016-17 access agreements analysed and the period immediately prior to the interview phase of data collection. Therefore, the challenges and opportunities that this collaboration created are reflected to a certain extent in the data.

The National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) that followed shifted the focus to specific geographic areas. These were based on low levels of higher education participation when Key Stage 4 attainment is taken into account and individual electoral wards were identified by HEFCE. Initially funded for two years with £30 million in 2016-17 and £60 million in 2017-18, progress dependent, this funding was planned to continue until 2020 (HEFCE, 2017b). The coverage of

the target wards varied across the country but overlapped with many existing areas where individual institutions had previously focused their work. This availability of funding for specific work in certain target wards and the reductions in central government funding for institutional widening participation work with the demise of the Student Opportunity Fund created a catalyst for some institutions to reconsider how they funded specific work as explored further in Chapter Five. In those institutions with limited budgets, this meant considering how these new forms of collaborative funding allowed them to refocus existing work to extend their capacity.

2.3 The current landscape of widening participation

The fieldwork was conducted in a time of rapid political change; a referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union in 2016, a subsequent snap general election in 2017, and the thesis was submitted as the UK was preparing to formally exit the EU. During the early stages of the study there was also extensive higher education policy change including a Green (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2015) and White paper (Department of Business Innovation and Skills, 2016) covering higher education and during the fieldwork the 2017 *Higher Education and Research Act (2017)* was being debated within parliament. In the latter stages of this study, the Office for Fair Access, which had regulated access for the past thirteen years was disbanded and its work moved into the newly founded Office for Students (OfS). This change was significant and predicated on an increasing marketisation of the field with stimulating competition being a primary concern of the regulatory framework. It also marked a shift to a focus on risk based regulation of a far greater number of providers more heavily framed on measurement through data driven metrics (Office for Students, 2018).

Alongside this study, policy from OFFA evolved with an increasing focus on evaluation of interventions especially where institutions had committed large amounts to financial support for students. The fast-moving nature of higher education policy, also meant many of the positions adopted within the access agreements this study analysed (written in 2015 to cover the academic year 2016-

17) have since been superseded in policy. However, the speed of change in practices and attitudes on the ground has an element of lag and thus whilst policy may have moved on, in many cases practice still has some way to go to catch up.

The shift to the OfS has been one characterised by a sea change in rhetoric. Whilst it was too early to tell the full impact, the use of 'risk based regulation' is telling (Office for Students, 2018). The setting of targets for widening participation and the format of access and participation plans[8] will look significantly different for the 2020-21 planning cycle. Placing the widening access and success agenda at the centre of the OfS means that it is becoming increasingly hard for institutions not to place an increased emphasis on this work. However, as this study demonstrates what was said and laid out in plans is not always what was enacted on the ground.

2.4 Why widen participation?

The history of higher education in England foregrounds multiple reasons for widening participation; a moral imperative, an economic imperative and a policy imperative. In their analysis of the 2003 White paper, Jones and Thomas (2005) critiqued the 'insufficiently clear conceptualization of widening participation' (p.616). This is an enduring critique again highlighted in analyses of Aimhigher (Doyle and Griffin, 2012, Harrison, 2012b) and which will continue to plague higher education for as long as there are competing demands of individual and economic needs. This has been confounded by a lack of agreement on whether the barriers to accessing higher education are down to the individual or structural factors. Furthermore, the positions of policy actors and their personal concerns have shaped how widening participation is interpreted and the importance placed upon it and thus have resulted in divergent enactments of a single national policy.

Work to widen access to higher education predates policy demands in this area and can be seen by institutions to be part of their moral duty. Many universities

---

[8] The document that has superseded access agreements

have historically offered scholarships to students in need. However, the massification of higher education has also created an economic imperative for widening participation as institutions need to recruit sufficient students to remain viable. This shift from primarily block grant funding institutions to increasing reliance on student fees has made this more acute. Furthermore, ideologies are important to consider. Pre-92 institutions are often oversubscribed and have high academic entry requirements and thus widening access is focused on those from under-represented groups who already excel academically. This contrasts with many post-92 institutions that look to ways to create pathways and curricula that are accessible to a wider base of potential students, seeing their role in education as offering opportunities to their local communities.

In many institutions, these issues have created tensions, especially in institutions where recruitment is an issue. The *National Strategy for Access and Student Success* (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014) framed widening participation in terms of ensuring that all young people had access to higher education that is suited to them; the policy imperative. This may not, in some cases, be the institution which engages with that young person pre-entry and this creates a tension between the goal of widening participation for that institution and ensuring the young person ends up with the most suitable outcome for them. Additionally, the policy imperative for widening participation should not be underestimated. In order to charge the maximum tuition fees, institutions must have engaged with this agenda. Despite these three imperatives for widening participation, whether this is the right thing to do has been contested with critics of the agenda arguing that the widening participation devalues degrees, that many of the degrees are not academically sound and that graduates supply is outweighing demand (Taylor et al., 2009).

2.5 Regulating access

Access has not been regulated through controlling admissions as this was seen to be the remit of individual universities, but through making university funding contingent on work to widen access being approved through regulation (Whitty et al., 2015). The first widening participation statements were required in 1999 and

from 2001-2004 widening participation strategies had to be provided to the funding council. Following the *Higher Education Act (2004)*, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was created to act as a regulatory body to ensure that 'the introduction of higher tuition fees in 2006-7 did not deter people from entering higher education for financial reasons' and that 'universities and colleges were committed to increasing participation in higher education from under-represented groups' (OFFA, n.d). The first access agreements were written for the 2006-7 academic year which was the first-year tuition fees of up to £3000 were levied by HEIs. The number of access agreements the Office approved annually increased over time and in 2016-17, 183 universities and colleges submitted access agreements (OFFA, 2015a) compared to 120 in 2006-7 (OFFA, 2005). This was due to the growth of the sector in terms of new universities, alternative providers and Further Education colleges that now submit access agreements.

The *Higher Education Act (2004)* created the role of Director of Fair Access to Higher Education to identify and advise on good practice in relation to access to higher education and to 'promote and safeguard fair access to higher education' (2004 p.16). The Act set out that institutional plans would be approved by the director and the director was given the power to refuse approval of the plans and thus prevent the levying of fees above the basic limit and to direct HEFCE or the Teacher Training Agency to impose financial requirements on the institution. These sanctions were never used and whilst in 2016-17 103 institutions were required to revise their agreements, all were formally approved following this revision process (OFFA, 2015a). In 2015-16, only 33 institutions were required to revise the agreements, demonstrating an increase in the rigor of the approval process over time (OFFA, 2014).This study focused on the agreements written covering the 2016-17 academic year, however there were only two subsequent submissions. The final access agreements covering the academic year 2018-19 were written in 2017. From 2019-20 onwards, Access and Participation Plans are substantively different with a greater emphasis on the whole student lifecycle and a greater reliance on the use of evidence by institutions to determine the direction of their plans (Office for Students, 2018).

2.6 Who 'does' widening participation?

The move towards policies that focus on the student lifecycle have shifted institutional focus from outreach and pre-entry activities to also consider success within and beyond university. Whilst the greatest expenditure in the sector in 2016-17 was on financial support (£399 million) (OFFA, 2015a), the majority of spend on activities related to pre-entry access (£149.3 million). However student success work spend has increased from £72.5 million in 2012-13 to £148 million in 2016-17. This post entry work has gained even more focus since the inception of the Office for Students and issues around retention and variation in degree outcomes for different groups became a more prominent concern (Office for Students, 2018).

2.6.1 What does a widening participation practitioner do?

The number of staff working within pre-entry widening participation in higher education is undocumented, but with 183 institutions highlighting pre-entry work in access agreements, a sizeable number of individuals is needed to deliver this. The pressure from OFFA also encouraged a shift for those institutions who recruit well from disadvantaged groups to shift their spend from access to success work. In contrast, institutions with low numbers of students from these groups were encouraged to place greater emphasis on access (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014). This has resulted in disparities in the labour force needed by different types of HEIs as discussed in Chapter Seven. There are two main networks for widening participation practitioners in the UK, the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) and the Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE), both of whom hold annual conferences with several hundred attendees. Delegate lists[9], from these conferences contain a huge diversity of job titles and roles including WP Officers, Partnership coordinators, Project coordinators, Schools and College Liaison and Evaluation Officers.

Within this study, four of the research questions were concerned with the role of widening participation practitioners in policy enactment. Practitioners who work

---

[9] For example the 2016 and 2018 NEON Summer Symposia where I presented part of this project.

to widen participation in higher education are chronically under researched. The only significant published study at the conception of this project was Wilkins and Burke (2013) who interviewed seven practitioners working in seven different institutions. This limited sample precluded analysis separating institutional factors and personal beliefs. Other studies have looked at the relationships between staff and widening participation. For example Stevenson et al. (2010) looked at staff attitudes to widening participation in one institution however this was not focused on those specifically employed in widening participation roles. Other research has tended to focus on those in senior management positions (e.g. Butcher et al., 2012) . To my knowledge the only other study of practitioners was a masters dissertation examining ten practitioners, their backgrounds and their use of theory in practice (Burchfiel, 2017).

2.7 Enacting policy

Whilst widening participation policy enactment is under researched, similar issues are evident in school policy research (e.g. Ball et al., 2012). Policy is not just implemented by one individual in an institution, it is subject to different levels of enactment. Like widening participation practitioners, there is also a gap between those who set policies and teacher enactment. This gap often involves several levels of translation from the national to school level. Much of this translation is done at more senior levels such as by ministers, civil servants, head teachers and senior management teams. It is therefore unsurprising that this is where much policy research focuses. The effectiveness of the outcomes of policies is reliant on teachers' commitment to enacting these agendas. Ball and colleagues (2012) examined the role of policy within teachers' working practices and this work was used to also think about the relationship between widening participation practitioners and policy. Ball and colleagues conceptualised policy as a process involving choices and creativity and highlighted the messiness of doing policy. Furthermore, teachers were framed as both doing policy and having policy done to them. Much the same could be said of widening participation practitioners as understanding and translating complex agendas into work that is effective is central to their work.

2.7.1 The implementation staircase

To conceptualise the translation of policy across levels of interpretation, this study has drawn on the 'implementation staircase' (Reynolds and Saunders 1987 cf. Trowler, 2014, p. 15) and adapted it by highlighting the potential actors involved in each stage of widening participation policy development and relevant examples of policy documents. This also resonates with Supovitz and Weinbaum's (2008) concept of iterative refraction used to inform Ball and colleagues study. For Supovitz and Weinbaum, each level of implementation involves intentional changes to make sense of the policies.

The implementation staircase allows widening participation policy to be examined due to the distinct levels within the structures of policy enactment that exist within the higher education sector. One of the central critiques by Ball and colleagues (2012) leveled at school policy studies is that they often treat institutions as the same with little acknowledgement of the complexity of the communities and sociocultural environments within which they exist. The implementation staircase therefore allows for different shifts as each level shaped by local context both without and within institutions. Whilst widening participation is subject to fewer policies than schools, there are still multiple competing agendas involved in policy enactment. In contrast to schools, universities operate in a more extensively marketised environment, commonly competing not only on a local but national and international basis and thus adding another degree of complexity as how they interpret policy can impact their position within markets (Chapter Five).
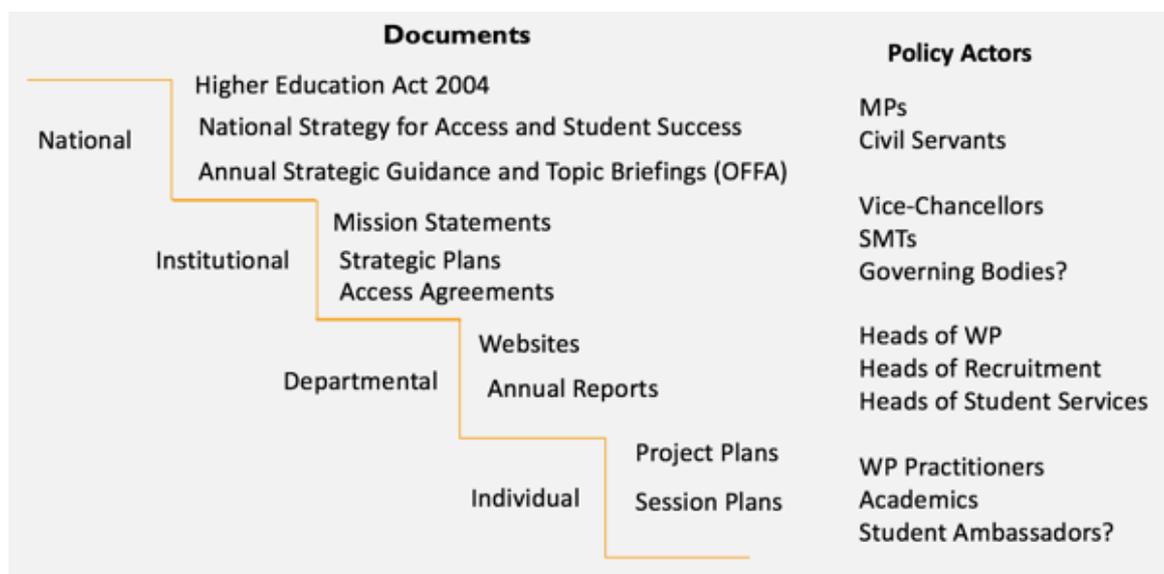
? = actors may be involved in the process but to varying degrees in different institutions

fig 2.1 – Policy implementation staircase (adapted from Reynold and Saunders, 1987 cf. Trowler, 2014 p.15)

Ball and colleagues' (2012) also highlighted how individuals shaped their interaction with policy through their own experiences; notably, the way newly qualified teachers interacted differently to their longer serving counterparts who have experienced previous iterations of policies. This experience often led longer serving teachers to be more sceptical of new policy initiatives, especially where similar past policy had not previously had a positive impact on practice. They highlighted four specific dimensions:

Situated contexts	Locale, school histories, intakes
Professional cultures	Values, teacher commitments and experiences, 'policy management' in schools
Material contexts	Staffing, budget, buildings, technology, infrastructure
External contexts	Degree and quality of Local Authority support, pressure and expectations from broader policy, legal requirements

table 2.2 – Contextual dimensions of policy enactment (adapted from Ball et al., 2012 p.21)

Therefore, this study also focused on understanding the past personal and professional experiences of the participants. Whilst practices are shaped by institutional agendas to a certain extent all practitioners possess a reflexive

capacity; something that will be explored further within Chapter Seven. Whilst this chapter outlined the external context, Chapter Four also foregrounds the local context of each institution. These contextual dimensions interact with the thematic analysis of the data and as such form the basis of the substantive chapters of the thesis.

Ball and colleagues (2012) make an important distinction in terms of interpretation and translation of policy. The interpretation of national policy relating to widening participation in many cases takes place at a distance from those practitioners on the coal face and they are solely involved in the translation of local policy into practices. In the context of universities, interpretation is treated as an 'institutional political process' (p.45) that transforms national policy into an institutionalised form. This is the process of creating the access agreements. In contrast, translation of policy is treated as a 'third space' between policy and practice and highlights the role of meetings, plans, events and talks. In the context of schools, Ball and colleagues' position this as an internal process. Within widening participation there may also be an external dimension where the involvement of staff in networks beyond their institutions may shape this translation. Within smaller teams, this could also involve drawing on expertise from professional networks to supplement their skills and knowledge.

2.8 Summary

This chapter outlined the origins of the current higher education landscape, focusing on those issues relating to widening participation and some of the tensions and 'messiness' under pinning why we should widen participation. At a national level there are tensions between the needs of individuals and the economy, the funding mechanisms that enable widening participation work and the way in which institutions are regulated. At an institutional level, the tensions are between institutional missions and survival in a marketised environment. I also situated the role of practitioners in enacting policy. Whilst empirical research on widening participation practitioners has been limited, and a key impetus for the study, drawing on school policy research highlighted how similar processes

may also apply in the context of this study. Furthermore, conceptualising this policy shift through the implementation staircase (Reynolds and Saunders 1987 cf. Trowler, 2014) highlighted the numerous levels of possible deviation in interpretation and enactment, addressing Ball and colleagues (2012) critique of the failure of policy studies to be able to capture complexity. Chapter Three builds on this with the addition of Margaret S. Archer (1995) morphogenetic approach to theorise how these shifts result in shifts between policies and practices.

Chapter 3: Theoretical and reflexive positions

3.1 Introduction

This study examined the relationship between policy and practice. Policies act as structures within which practitioners can act as agents, therefore arguments relating to the relationships between structure and agency form the basis of the theoretical framework. Through a critical realist framework I argue how the morphogenetic approach (Archer, 1995) is an effective way to conceptualise the relationship between policy and practice in widening participation. Power is also central to conceptualising this relationship and this chapter theorises how power can be understood within the context of the study. Furthermore, I argue that institutional doxa (Davey, 2012) helps theorise how institutions shape practices. Equality was also a key consideration within policy enactment which is explored as part of the theoretical framework. Additionally, as a practitioner researcher, reflexivity was a core consideration. As Sayer has argued:

> We are ethical beings, not in the sense that we necessarily always behave ethically, but that as we grow up, we come to evaluate behaviour according to some ideas of what is good or acceptable.

(2011, p. 143)

Only through self-reflection was it possible to locate where this sense of what is good or acceptable has originated. As the thesis drew upon the participants' biographies to situate their experience of practice, it would have been inappropriate not to first undertake the same analysis on myself. It is with this reflection that this chapter concludes.

3.2 Theoretical approach

This study was predicated on a policy sociology approach (Ball, 1993) which involved analysing issues at both micro and macro levels . Much educational research has adopted Bourdieusian approaches (e.g. Reay et al., 2010, Abrahams and Ingram, 2013, Davey, 2012, Loveday, 2014) The primary reason for not following in this vein of scholarship is the lack of affordance Bourdieu gives to agency in the consideration of individuals' action. Critical realist approaches have increasingly been used to address this concern (e.g. Baker, 2018, Case, 2015, Dyke et al., 2012). Additionally, Esmond and Wood (2017) drew on a similar framing to that adopted within this thesis to explore the constrained agency of teachers, choosing to do so as it captured both the capacity for agency and the enduring role of structures in shaping action.

Critical Realism accounts for the role of structures and gives sufficient consideration to the agency of individuals. As Archer and colleagues summarise, Critical Realism is:

> a meta-theoretical position: a reflexive philosophical stance concerned with providing a philosophically informed account of science and social science which can in turn inform our empirical investigations.

(Archer et al., 2016)

Whilst the project was framed within a critical realist meta-theory, the approach to theory on a more micro-level was inductive, using the observations and data to guide the theories used to make sense of the data (Bryman, 2008). This chapter addresses the use of the morphogenetic cycle (Archer, 1995) and institutional doxa (Davey, 2012) but later the implementation staircase (introduced in Chapter Two) and theories of policy enactment are layered upon these in Chapters Five to Eight . The adoption of a critical realist meta-theory impacted on potential theories that can be drawn upon. Therefore, this section will briefly explicate the ontological and epistemological assumptions that have shaped this research project.

Ontology is a focus on 'questions about what things are and their being-in-the-world' (Potter, 2006, p. 79). For critical realists, this is the assumption that things in the world exist independently of our knowledge of them and focuses on issues of causation, agency and structure (Archer et al., 2016). This study adopted this ontological position as I argue that policies and ideologies shape action even when individual actors are not aware of them. Other approaches such as social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1967) fail to fully account for the existence of things outside individuals' knowledge of them. Whilst critical realists share the common ontological assumption that social reality exists separate to our knowledge of it,

> there is not one unitary framework, set of beliefs, methodology or dogma that unites critical realists as a whole.

(Archer et al., 2016)

Critical realists have drawn heavily on Roy Bhaskar's *Realist Theory of Science* (Bhaskar, 1975). Within this Bhaskar postulates that the realist position puts itself in opposition to both classical empiricism which forms the basis for positivist approaches in science, and transcendental idealism which is associated with strongly interpretivist approaches. For Bhaskar, transcendental realism provides a more useful philosophical position as:

> It regards the objects of knowledge as the structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena; and the knowledge as produced in the social activity of science. These objects are neither phenomena (empiricism) nor human constructs imposed upon the phenomena (idealism), but real structures which endure and operate independently of our knowledge, our experience and the conditions which allow us access to them.

(*ibid*, p.15)

This study draws heavily on the work of Margaret S. Archer and as such discussion of the philosophical basis of the study originates from her extensive theorising. Archer argues that:

ontologically, 'structure' and 'agency' are seen as distinct strata of reality, as the bearers of quite different properties and powers.

(Archer, 2003, p. 4)

This is what she terms 'analytical dualism (Archer, 1995, p. 15), a position where structures predate actions and actions that can change structures happen once the structure already exists. This is a cyclical process as no structure exists without action, however previous structures only shape future action, they do not determine it. Analytical dualism is only possible due to the temporally distinct nature that Archer has argued for. Her position is that structure and agency are both 'emergent strata of social reality' *(ibid*, p.60) and as such this structure-agency dualism cannot be transcended due to their mutually constitutive nature but they can be thought of as analytically distinct. When considered in the context of a study, this leads to an approach driven by an ontological assumption that the structures that guide practice may need to be examined as distinct from the agents who enact practices.

The wide acknowledgement of the 'structure and agency problem' used as part of the argument put forward by Archer (1995) means no exact definitions of structure or agency are given by her. Whilst this is problematic as there is a lack of clarity in how she defines the two, drawing on definitions from wider sociological literature, structures were defined as 'sets of mutually sustaining schemas and resources that empower or constrain social action and tend to be reproduced by that social action.' (Sewell 1992 p.19). Whilst structures may not be physical in nature, they have physical manifestations in the form of rules, policies and other physical artefacts. For this study, government can be seen as a structure that shapes social action within higher education. One way in which structures relevant to this study manifest themselves is through legislation and acts of parliament. The university itself is also a structure whose physical manifestation exists in policy documents amongst other things. Therefore, knowledge of these structures can be gained through analysing policy documents. Furthermore, to be constrained by structures, an individual does not necessarily need to be aware of

them. Structure has an existence that is independent of individual perceptions of them and is a central reason for the adoption of a critical realist approach.

Whilst there are a number of definitions of agency, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) framed it as:

> a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).

(p.963)

This framing of agency as temporally bound is one which is compatible with Archer's morphogenetic approach. The consideration of this within the theoretical framework is important as widening participation practitioners work within constraints set by the policies and institutions that frame their work. These predate current practice and thus are temporally distinct.

Epistemology is the 'study of the nature of knowledge - what counts as valid knowledge' (Potter, 2006, p. 79). Critical Realism is predicated on the assumption that there is an external reality that can be observed but unlike empirical realism, that this external reality is one of the structures that exist autonomously of our knowledge of them (Bhaskar, 1975, Bryman, 2008, Mason, 2018). More specifically, within Critical Realism there is an underlying assumption that the world can only be understood through examining the structures within it that shape actions, events and discourses. Therefore, this assumes that there are structures that can be observed. Whilst many of the ways in which structures exist are unobservable, policies can be observed and compared. Within this study, access agreements are being used for precisely this purpose. As Mason highlights 'the researcher looks for causes, or underlying mechanisms, and may also be interested in perceptions and interpretations because these are seen as part of the real world' (Mason, 2018, p. 9). Like structures, agency exists autonomously from individual's perceptions of it, however researching lived experiences is the best way of understanding it (Denzin, 2001). For this reason, the research adopted an interpretivist

epistemological position as perceptions and interpretations of individuals underpinned the main research questions focused on differences in practices and how and why these occur. Adopting a theoretical framework that accounts for the existence of structures outside of individuals perceptions of them also allowed for an exploration of how practitioners viewed these structures and felt constrained by them.

Focusing on the structure-agency question within a study of institutions and policy enactment, the role of power needed to be considered. Power is a contested concept and various theorists have explored power as a concept, however not all are compatible with a critical realist ontology. As Lukes outlines:

> Power is one of those concepts which is ineradicably value-dependent. By this I mean that both its very definition and any given use of it, once defined, are inextricably tied to a given set of (probably unacknowledged) value assumptions which predetermine the range of its empirical application.

<div align="right">(Lukes, 1974, p. 26)</div>

Stephen Lukes (1974) conceptualisation of power was drawn upon as he argued that previous conceptualisations of power had been overly individualistic and failed to adequately account for the role of structure, something that is closely linked to the critical realist approach this study has used and to which this chapter now turns.

3.2.1 Mapping a morphogenetic approach onto agents and institutions

The question of causation and the interplay between structures and agents is central to addressing the study's research questions[10]. In order to understand the relationship between the practitioners as agents and the institutions they worked in as forms of structure, the morphogenetic approach (Archer, 1995) was used to

---

[10] p.11

theorise the relationship between the development of institutional policies at a structural level and the role of practitioners in structural elaboration or structural reproduction.

T_1 Structural Conditioning

T_2 Socio-cultural T_3
        interaction

Structural elaboration (morphogenesis)
T_4
Structural reproduction (morphostasis)
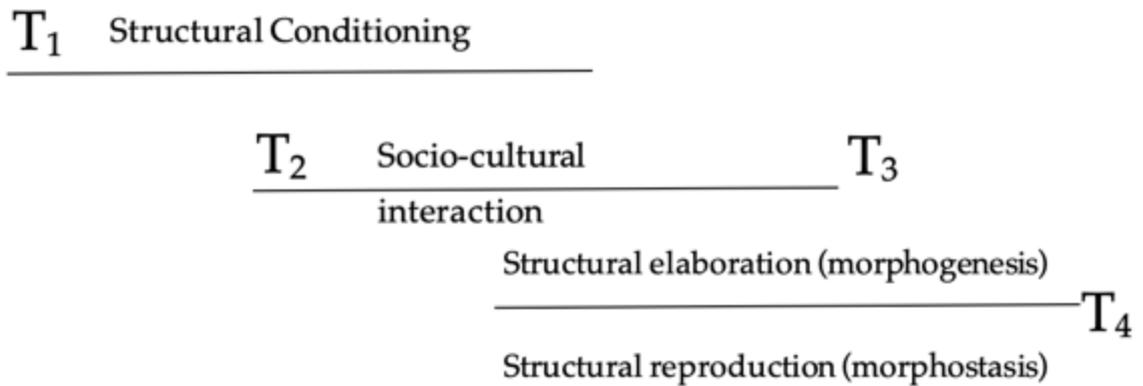
fig.3.1 The basic morphogenetic cycle (adapted from Archer, 1995 p.157)

The morphogenetic cycle allowed for the consideration of structure and agency as distinct temporally independent entities. Whilst structures may not be directly viewable, we can have knowledge of them through documents and descriptions of individuals experiences of them. However, our knowledge of these structures is not what brings them into being as in the arguments of social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1967), but knowledge merely allows us to be aware of their existence. Temporal distance between there structure as embedded in documents and agents is also important. Access agreements were written over a year prior to the practices they shaped, therefore adopting a theoretical framework that allowed for this temporal distinction was important. This temporal approach was also transferrable to understanding the relationship between national policy as a form of structure and institutions as agents operating within it.

Unpacking Archer's basic morphogenetic cycle allowed the notion of analytical dualism to be considered in the context of this study. If each institution exemplifies a structure within which widening participation practitioners act as agents, through these agents' actions and their interactions with the structure, the structures may remain the same (morphostasis) or may change (morphogenesis). This means that whilst practices occurring at T_4 can be varied, they will not

necessarily impact on the institutional positioning (T_1). For the institution itself to be changed, a socio-cultural interaction needs to take place between T_2 and T_3. Through exploring the interplay between these we can understand social outcomes (Archer, 2010).

An alternative model that was considered and also allows for duality of structure and agency is Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1986). Unlike Archer, Giddens argues that structure cannot exist separate of action and is only ever a product of practices. Whilst Giddens' theory allows for the independent examination of structure and agency, it has limitations. Giddens fails to fully account for temporality (Archer, 1995) so this does not allow for the fact that access agreements and widening participation practices are temporally distinct and that actors involved in developing policy are not always those enacting that policy. Conflating the two fails to capture the nature of the relationship between structures and action. Additionally, Giddens (1979) focuses on the need for routine action to activate social structures (such as rules and policies) (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Therefore, I argue in the same manner as Archer that Giddens conflates structure and agency to the point where neither can be analysed. Structures, as framed in policy, endure even when agents tasked with implementing those policies do not activate them. Furthermore Giddens (1979) failed to acknowledge the role of individuals in changing structure. Archer accounts for this and this is why her concept of morphogenesis was adopted.

3.2.2 Theorising structures and institutions

If differences in institutional approaches to widening participation are considered in terms of this morphogenetic cycle, it can be seen how what happens at the level of socio-cultural interaction is key to understanding the degree to which national policy is reflected in local approaches. If we consider national policy agendas being created at T_1, and T_4 being exemplary of their creation of access agreements, when national policy is considered and adopted between T_2 and T_3 that causes a shift in institutional policy towards national agendas (morphogenesis) or a maintenance of the status quo through inaction (morphostasis). This can be examined this in terms of Maguire et al. (2014) framework of policy enactment in

secondary schools. Maguire et al. identified four key issues for implementation: context, competing policies, interpretation and resources. In the context of this study: context and polices were exemplary of structures at T_1 and interpretation and resources were representative of the factors that shape what takes place between T_2 and T_3. Returning to the issue of power, Lukes (1974) proposed that power can be conceptualised in three-dimensions: the role of behaviour in making decisions (the first dimension), conflicts that prevent power being exercised (the second dimension) and conflicts of interests between the interests of those who exercise power and the real interests of those whom power is exercised (the third dimension). All of these can be seen to shape this implementation process.

Combining the morphogenetic cycle with the implementation staircase introduced in Chapter Two (fig 2.1), each level could be conceptualised as an independent morphogenetic cycle. The adoption of policy (Chapter Two) is not a mechanistic one, but one which is shaped by the actions of agents. Whilst these agents (i.e. policy makers and senior management in institutions) are not the focus of this study, previous research offers an insight into these actors (Graham, 2011, Jones, 2014, Morgan-Klein and Murphy, 2014). What is important here is that as Sayer, who also works within a critical realist framework argues:

> Social structures and rules themselves can institutionalise moral norms about entitlements, responsibilities and appropriate behaviours; as such they can still be the object of ethical evaluation.

> (Sayer, 2011, p. 7)

It is therefore important to consider the conditions that may result in morphostasis or morphogenesis in relation to policy. Chapter Five examines these mechanisms in more depth and identifies how the conditions between T_2 and T_3 in an institution can result in divergent conceptions of widening participation with the three-dimensions of power again playing a key role.

Whilst I have argued that Bourdieu's work is limited in its ability to account for individual reflexivity, the concept of doxa resonates with the ways in which practices are shaped within institutions. Furthermore, I argue that doxa as a concept is also compatible with a critical realist framework due to its ability to afford agency to individual's reflexive actions. However, before moving to a theorisation of institutional doxa it is worth first exploring a related concept that was considered as a possible way of theorising practices.

Within recent debates in education, institutional habitus has been put forward as a concept for understanding how structural forces shape the actions of individuals within it. Diane Reay (1998) makes a compelling case for the role of an institutional habitus in shaping university choices made by young people in secondary schools. Other researchers such as Nicola Ingram (2009) have also operationalized this concept within their work. Within *Practical Reason*, Bourdieu conceptualizes habitus as 'generative principles of distinct and different practices - what the worker eats, and especially how he eats it' (Bourdieu, 1998 [2001], p. 8). He elaborates this by stating they are also classificatory schemes, principles of classification, principles of vision and division, different tastes. It could be argued that in many ways the actions of widening participation practitioners could be seen to be shaped by habitus.

There are two reasons why I argue institutional habitus is not appropriate to theorise this study. Firstly Reay (1998) and Ingram (2009) are focused on schools.. Whilst, as an educational institution I would agree there is often much commonality between a school and a university, there is one factor that is very different, that of scale. Within a large organisation, a notion of habitus appears to assume too strong an association between individuals in a heterogeneous community. Whilst there is the capacity for this in widening participation teams, the work done by practitioners is often highly autonomous and thus despite spaces within which collective conversations may shape work, there is still an individual capacity to act reflexively. Secondly, from an ontological perspective, habitus seems to be overly deterministic of action and does not allow sufficient scope for individual reflexivity that Archer (2007b) argues for and that I believe

underpins human action. I would argue that doxa may be a more appropriate concept to draw upon. In his critique of institutional habitus, Atkinson (2011) highlights the lack of consideration for those teachers or lecturers who struggle against a school's vision. For me, this is only half the issue. In a large organisation, the capacity for those at the bottom of institutional hierarchies to drive change is often limited, even if they have more in-depth knowledge about a policy area, therefore institutional doxa is more appropriate in this context.

Davey (2012) used the concept of institutional doxa to explore how university choices in a fee paying sixth form are shaped. She talks of doxa creating a 'taste for particular educational choices' (p.511). Doxa can be seen as a taken for granted sense of what is done, transcending individuals. In this case, this allows for transgressions of individual practitioners or departments contra to institutional missions but without altering the taken for granted sense of what matters. Therefore, when practices are shaped by principles but have little role in shaping these principles then it should not be considered as an institutional habitus but as institutional doxa. This allows for the consideration of the reflexive action of agents enacting policy. I am not necessarily arguing against the existence of an institutional habitus; certainly in previous studies of schools it seems to offer a useful frame of analysis (Ingram, 2009, Reay, 1998). However, in the context of large HEIs it is not be an appropriate concept to use due to their diffuse nature and the weaker social relations that exist within them. Returning again to Lukes (1974) conceptualisation of power, doxa can influence behaviours (the first dimension) and has the potential to generate conflicts between an institution's doxic positions and individuals' personal positions where there is discord between the two (the third dimension).

To further explore this theoretical point, I return to the definition of habitus as 'generative principles of distinct and different practices' (Bourdieu, 1998 [2001], p. 8). It is this use of generative that is central to choosing doxa over habitus, for there is little evidence that the practitioners are shaping the principles that are guiding them. Part of Burke, Emmerich and Ingram's defence of the concept of institutional habitus rests on the argument that 'habituses are permeable and

responsive to what is going on around them' (Burke et al., 2013, p. 26) and I would argue that in the case of widening participation policy, that is often *imposed upon* opposed to *responsive to* the work taking place within an institution. Doxa being framed as 'a particular point of view, the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view' (Bourdieu, 1998 [2001], p. 57) resonated more closely with the ways in which ideological positions of the institution appeared to be manifest in access agreements. Therefore, the defining force in these agreements was not through institutional habitus as a set of norms and dispositions but by taken-for granted, unquestioned truths attestable to an institutional doxa. Bourdieu (1990 [2014]) also highlighted how doxa shapes experience by attuning individuals to associate the same meaning with the same sign. I argue that the symbolism of A-level grades as a marker of potential was a key example of how institutional doxa, especially in elite institutions, shaped who is seen as a suitable student for their institution (Chapter Six).

3.2.3 Theorising agents and actions

Whilst structures can shape action, considering them as analytically distinct allows agents to be considered to possess different properties. Through this analytical dualism, previous action can shape structures, but these structures do not fully constrain future action (Archer, 2003). In more recent work, Archer has argued that habitus (Bourdieu, 2010 [1984]) as a concept has become less viable with the changes to an increasingly capitalist society (Archer, 2010). This approach is a very different one from a Bourdieusian perspective that is often operationalised in studies relating to education (e.g. Archer et al., 2003, Ingram, 2018, Reay et al., 2005). Bourdieu argues that social structures predate the individual and reflexive action only takes place in moments of crisis (Bourdieu, 1989, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1992). This assumes therefore that individuals are 'predisposed towards certain ways of behaving' (Reay, 2004, p. 433). Other critiques of Bourdieu's work on habitus argue that there too little emphasis on agency but this may have been a product of the time given that since his writings, society has become decreasingly arranged by traditional family and community ties (Sweetman, 2003). In contrast, Archer positions individuals as reflexive agents. Archer states that:

> The subjective powers of reflexivity mediate the role that objective structural or cultural powers play in influencing social action and are thus indispensable to explaining social outcomes.
>
> (Archer, 2007b, p. 5)

Here she argued that individuals can resist structural and cultural powers and are thus not determined by circumstance to the extent which is assumed by Bourdieu's notion of habitus. This deterministic reading has been argued against and the generative role of habitus emphasised by Burke et al. (2013) who argued for a responsiveness of habitus to external factors. Yet I argue that the agency of individuals still seems to be given too little weight. Similarly, Archer (2007b) argued that even in his writings about reflexivity, Bourdieu privileged structure over agency and did not afford them equal roles; a position this study would support through the roles institutions and individuals both play in shaping practices and was the rationale for using this as the basis for the theoretical framework. This also aligned with the conceptualisation of policy as an influencer, as opposed to a determinant of action (Ball, 1993). There are similarities between Archer's and Bourdieu's positions and work has been done by some scholars to reconcile the two (e.g. Adams, 2006, Sayer, 2010). Having previously worked with Bourdieu early in her career, Archer argues against this reconciliation and that her position is less deterministic than Bourdieu's. She still positions individuals as being agents whose actions are shaped in part by constraints and enablements. Explaining this, she states that:

> Only because people envisage particular courses of action can one speak of their constraint or enablement, and only because they may pursue the same course of action from different social contexts can one talk of them being differentially constrained and enabled.
>
> (Archer, 2003, p. 4)

In the context of this study, the constraints and enablements can be conceptualised as two-fold; those created by the institutional structures and those originating from personal histories. To draw on the work of another theorist working within a critical realist framework, Andrew Sayer, argues that:

…social structures and norms in which we live shape how we behave towards one another, and provide positions from which we interact, strongly influencing what we can do and the kinds of people we become, but they do not fully determine actions.

(Sayer, 2011, p. 7)

Therefore, the theoretical position assumed within this thesis was that agents possess or can develop reflexivity. They can decide whether or not to adopt institutional norms or to resist their adoption. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) have argued that agency exists even within habitual action, but this action is unreflective. I do not necessarily support this position and instead argue that action can be constrained in a way that removes agency, thus resulting in morphostasis as opposed to morphostasis being evidence of unreflective habitual actions.

Alternative approaches, such as rational choice theory, fail to acknowledge this capacity, turning individuals into rational beings that have a limited capacity to make their own decisions (Sayer, 2011). Bourdieu's notion of habitus offers a similarly limited capacity for individuals to act based on their own concerns. Whilst I acknowledge the generative qualities of habitus, Archer's centralising of agency is more appropriate in theorising varied practices within the same institutions. This is not to say that individuals are not constrained by objective circumstances but that not all action is heavily shaped by an individual's habitus as Bourdieu contends. Archer's emphasis on the role played by agentic reflexivity is more valuable in the context of this study for making sense of the policy-practice relationship. As Reay has argued, a problem within the concept of habitus is the focus on 'pre-reflexive dimensions of action' (Reay, 2004, p. 437). Bourdieu argues that reflexivity is a property that only exists for certain individuals and is restricted to times of crises (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This position has limitations in understanding human action and therefore a theoretical approach that afforded the capacity for reflexive action was important for this study to adopt.

Within the interview data, there was sufficient variation in the narratives of the practitioners to suggest that institutional positions were not accepted uncritically and that there was the capacity for resistance. Therefore I argue that institutional doxa is a productive way of understanding how values and assumptions influence but do not completely determine practices. Furthermore, Lukes (1974) three-dimensional model of power also enabled consideration of both where power shaped behaviour and resulted in non-behaviours. Drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed, I argue that this power can be seen in the 'gap between words and deeds, between what the organisations say they will do, or what they are committed to doing, and what they are doing' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 107). By giving weight to both observable and latent conflict of interests these issues could be foregrounded as the conflict between ideologies of the institutions and individuals were able to be understood. This allowed for the possibility of resistance of individuals against power; a position which is compatible with the notion of individual reflexivity.

3.2.4 Summary

This section positioned this thesis within a critical realist meta-theory and drew on the work of Margaret S. Archer (Archer, 1995, Archer, 2003, Archer, 2007b) and her morphogenetic approach . Considering structure and agency to be temporally distinct emergent properties of social systems I argued that this theoretical framework allows for the exploration of policy and practice as distinctly interrelated; analytically distinct without falling into the traps of conflation that other theoretical approaches are subject to. Through this analytically dualistic approach, I also argued how institutions can be understood through the concept of institutional doxa. Outlining the centrality of power to understanding the policy-practice relationship the chapter outlined how Lukes (1974) three-dimensional model of power can be productively interwoven with this theoretical approach. Within widening participation policy, there are a number of competing interests: interests at a national level (which as seen in Chapter Two can be contested between differing political ideologies), interests at a local level (driven by institutional values and addressed in Chapters Five and Six) and interests at an individual's level (as explored in Chapters Seven and Eight).It is on these bases that the study is predicated and this informed the methodological approach

outlined in Chapter Four. In addition to more general theoretical considerations, the role that understandings of equality play in the relationship between policy and practice is also important to consider.

3.3 Equality

The work of practitioners and policies under examination are predicated in improving equality. The centrality of needing to acknowledge practitioner's reflexive positions brought to bear the need to actively consider equality in this theoretical framework. Whilst practitioners and policymakers may share common experiences and backgrounds, they will not necessarily have the same understandings of equality. Equality is a contested concept but is concerned with two or more individuals and their relationship to one or more qualities (Gosepath, 2011). One quality could be considered as the ability for individuals to realise their future ambitions. There are numerous philosophical positions in relation to equality and this section focuses on some of those most relevant to the policy context. Widening participation is underpinned by notions of equality that are to some extent egalitarian. Egalitarians believe that individuals should have the ability to flourish in life to the best of their abilities and the worse off someone is, the more support that is needed to enable them to flourish (Temkin, 2000).

The value of equality as a primary goal is contested. One point of contestation is whether equality is intrinsically valuable in and of itself or if its value is extrinsic; that is as part of greater concerns such as respect and dignity (Temkin, 2000). For those who subscribe to the premise of intrinsic equality, this means that equality is seen as an ideal, even when it provides no additional benefit for individuals. In its most radical form, intrinsic egalitarianism is premised on the idea that equality is always the optimal outcome. Temkin (2000) critiqued this through deploying the levelling-down objection. He postulates that with a population that is half-blind and half-sighted, no good would come out of making everyone blind. Whilst this is a compelling argument, it takes the notion of egalitarianism to an extreme. In the case of issues more related to this thesis such as access to education and employment, I argue that just focusing on improving the circumstances of the

most disadvantaged without thinking about the equality between groups perpetuates the main issues of inequality and leads to an increasingly divided society.

The *National Strategy for Access and Student Success* states: 'everyone with the potential to benefit from higher education should have equal opportunity to do so' (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014, p. 3). This notion of equality of opportunity is one of extrinsic equality tied up with ideas of individuals being able to achieve levels of dignity and respect commensurate with their own innate qualities through facilitating access to the positional goods associated with participation in higher education. These positional goods include the degree itself and associated gains in social and cultural capital. This in many ways aligns with the position of luck egalitarianism. This position promotes the ideal that mitigation against factors of circumstance beyond the individual's control that limit human flourishing should be the primary concern in order to reach a fair moral position (Anderson, 1999). For luck egalitarians, success or failure should not be determined by the cards you are dealt in life but by individual factors, such as intelligence or deliberate action on the part of the individual thus placing the onus of success on them. At its core however is also the notion that some individuals are more superior than others based on innate qualities. In this context this is denoted by the idea of 'potential', the focus of Chapter Six. A belief in innate qualities Anderson (1999) argued is, at odds with the central ethos of egalitarianism, that all individuals are equal and is one to which I also subscribe.

In Chapter Six I argue why this vision of equality in the context of widening participation which focuses its attention at an individual level is flawed. Here, I set out what the alternatives might be. In contrast to equality of opportunity is the notion of an equality of outcome. This is based on a more intrinsic egalitarian view, the value of equality for its own sake and where the playing field is levelled as opposed to simply supporting the most disadvantaged to do better. Both politicians and academics have regarded the equality of outcomes idea as symptomatic of a politics of envy (Phillips, 2004) and it can be seen as a flawed concept at the level of individuals. However, as Phillips convincingly argues,

when considered at a group level, equality of outcome is a valid position when looking at the relative success of groups based on characteristics such as gender, social class and race. The equality of outcome position can be seen to align with the notion of democratic equality (Anderson, 1999). Democratic equality is predicated on the idea that individuals should be equally able to realise their own talents to all be equals within society and pursue their own conceptions of a good life. The argument being that everyone should be able to flourish regardless of any innate qualities an individual may possess that human societies deem superior. On this premise by enabling individuals to flourish we should see less inequality between groups.

Not everyone is likely to subscribe to an egalitarian position, especially when achieving equality might involve needing to disadvantage those in a more privileged position, and in fact some more moderate egalitarians may not subscribe to this view either. One position that might be adopted by those uncomfortable with reducing the position of the privileged but in supporting those from less advantaged backgrounds might be one of prioritarianism. Prioritarianism is based on the idea of solely focusing on improving the circumstances of the least advantaged as a means of equality. This position is not concerned with the position of the well-off and in fact it 'licenses vast increases in inequality, if necessary for improving – however slightly – the worse off' (Temkin, 2000, p. 130).

Understandings of equality are complex and personal, and these views are not discrete. Individuals can adopt a more moderate or radical position in relation to them. It is, therefore, important to consider that in the production of policies such as access agreements and in the development of interventions, different conceptions of equality may be held by those involved in the policy process and these may be in tension with each other. I return later to these ideas in order to highlight how these different positions on equality could be the source of some of the tensions that have emerged from the data between policy and practice.

3.4 Researching as a practitioner

> All the moments of my history, and in particular the various choices I have made in matters of research, may appear as reduced to their sociological necessity, that is to say, in that respect, justified, and, in any case, much more rational or even reasoned and reasonable than they were in reality, rather than as if they had emerged from a project conscious of itself from the outset.

> (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 2)

Whilst the overarching theoretical position of this study does not adopt a Bourdieusian approach, much can still be drawn from his extensive work on researching and understanding inequalities. As Bourdieu (2004) outlined within the text *Sketch for a self-analysis*, his own reflexive positioning is key to more fully understanding his research. Denzin has also argued that 'the qualitative researcher is not an objective, politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study of the social world (Denzin, 2001, p. 10). The issue of researcher reflexivity has been dealt with by different theorists in multiple ways. Past acknowledgements of reflexivity, have often taken a reductive approach limited to making clear a researchers own demographic characteristics (Dean, 2017). My own approach in relation to reflexivity situated the study within my own life history. It was important for me to do so, as it was my own experiences that brought me to this study as something that matters sufficiently to be the focus of an extended research project. C. Wright Mills (1970) postulates that 'the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society'(p.12). This aligns with the position I adopted in this research, exploring both the practices and biographies of my participants. In doing so, I felt it was unethical to not first understand how my own biography may have shaped the questions being asked and the understandings of the central issues of this study. As Sayer (2011) has argued 'We do not wake up one morning and decide that we are committed to a political party or jazz or a certain person. It takes time and repeated involvement, and learning' (p.125). Within the interviews upon which much of this study is based, I began by asking the participants to tell

me about their educational and family background and how they came to work in widening participation and adopting the same framework seemed an appropriate framing for my own narrative.

Beginning this project, I had been working in widening participation at the University of Bedfordshire for just under six months after three years as a secondary school teacher. My personal interest was firmly framed through a lens of social justice. I had seen many young people from challenging personal circumstances within my classroom but felt that the limitations of formal curricula constrained the impact I could have on their life chances. As C. Wright Mills suggests, 'to formulate issues and troubles, we must ask what values are cherished yet threatened, and what values are cherished and supported, by the characterising trends of our period' (Mills, 1970, p. 17). Penny Jane Burke's monograph *The right to higher education* draws on Jane Miller's work on 'the autobiography of the question' (Burke, 2012, p. 77) which resonated with this same notion. This concept places importance on the researchers own positioning and experiences in relation to the questions they ask.

3.4.1 Questioning myself

> Not inhabiting a norm (or not quite to inhabit a norm) can be experienced as not dwelling so easily where you reside. You might be asked questions; you might be made to feel questionable, so that you come to feel that you do not belong in places you live, the places you experience as home; you might turn up and not be allowed in or find it too uncomfortable to stay.

(Ahmed, 2017, p. 115)

The critical incident that first led me to the overarching question of this thesis was an uncomfortable one. It was made uncomfortable by having to confront a world that did not seem like the one within which I was embedded. I had been working in widening participation for just a few weeks in a post-92 university when I found myself at a conference of practitioners who worked within widening participation and recruitment. I sat and listened to a colleague within an elite

university describe what she felt widening participation was and it jarred. I was physically uncomfortable, because what she was describing was not something which to me felt socially just. She was describing working with a subset of highly academically able students who were seen as the exceptions in their schools and who needed to be emancipated from their roots. For me, the job was about helping students to make the right life choices for them and to work with all young people to make a more positive future possible for them. What puzzled me was why there were these such different views and positions held by two people employed in ostensibly the same role, working towards the aims of one national policy? In order to answer this question, I felt that I needed to work out how I came to my own point of view.

Researching inequality from a position of relative privilege requires further consideration. Roxanne Gay highlights her own challenges of accepting her privilege. She argues that 'you need to understand the extent of your privilege, the consequences of your privilege, and remain aware that people who are different from you move through and experience the world in ways you know nothing about' (Gay cf. Dean, 2017, p. 120). My origins are distinctly middle class, born in Buckinghamshire to two doctors; one who worked in the NHS and one in the RAF. My parents, however, both came from working class backgrounds, lived in council housing and both were the first in their respective families to attend higher education. My maternal grandparents both worked in the Post Office until my grandmother stopped work to become a housewife. My paternal grandfather worked within the RAF during the war as an aircraft engineer, later moving to British Aerospace and my paternal grandmother worked in the post office later working in finance for the local council.

As a child living in Buckinghamshire which still operates a grammar school system, I sat my twelve plus[11] and attended a grammar school where I took my GCSEs and A-levels. Doing well in my GCSEs, I was encouraged to focus on Science subjects, despite a desire to do Media Studies. This finally led to a

---

[11] Within Buckinghamshire until the late 1990s, progression from Middle schools took place at 12, at the end of Year 7.

compromise of sorts and opting for A-levels in Biology, Chemistry, Geography and Geology. Being one of the youngest in the year, I knew I was not ready to go straight to university and through a passion for scuba diving decided to take a year out to work and travel, gaining a scuba diving instructor qualification and working abroad for the year. This was my first extended period away from home and it was at this time I realised that work was not purely something you did to earn money but could offer a great sense of enjoyment and purpose. During this period, I also developed my interests in photography, building up a portfolio of work. Whilst my A-levels were distinctly focused on traditional academic subjects, my creative passions still existed on the periphery. Following my year of work, I began my university career at Plymouth University studying Marine Biology. By the end of the first semester, however, I realised that despite high grades, Science was not something I was passionate about and transferred at the end of my first year to Plymouth College of Art and Design to study for a foundation degree in Multimedia Design. Upon graduation I began a career in sales and marketing firstly in the IT industry. In many ways this job, whilst economically lucrative left the same feeling of lack of fulfilment found during my initial university study. I retrained briefly as a personal trainer before returning to a marketing role in a small start-up in the entertainment industry. This new role coincided with the 2008 recession and due to the collapse of the company led to redundancy and a period of unemployment. At somewhat of a cross roads, it caused me to re-evaluate what I wanted from life. Upon graduation, the economic realities of pay had in many ways overtaken doing something that mattered to me. It was at this point I chose to complete my degree level studies with the Open University (OU) and due to a lack of design courses, opted to study the social sciences. Alongside this, I gained employment as a teaching assistant in a special school. The experience of the recession also awakened my own political sensibilities, increasing my awareness of inequality and the damage it was causing society. Following the completion of my degree, I trained as a teacher undertaking my PGCE at the University of Bedfordshire and subsequently taught at a large secondary school in Milton Keynes for three years. During this time, I also completed a masters level study in social sciences again with the OU. This fractured early career trajectory is something which has clearly impacted upon my

own thinking in relation to what a successful career path looks like. At the point of sudden unemployment following an economically successful period, I was faced with much time and need for reflection upon what mattered to me. Within the years I worked as a teacher, I further developed a sense of what was important and the administrative and political constraints on the role eventually led to my search for the next step on my career trajectory and finding my first role in widening participation almost by accident. When I saw a role in widening participation advertised, I realised it took a lot of what I loved about teaching but without some of the administrative and curriculum constraints that had frustrated me.

My work in widening participation began in January 2014 at the University of Bedfordshire. During the course of this study I moved from working in a large post-92 institution into a small specialist arts provider. I have also moved from a role which was very much on the coal face and involved in operational delivery to one in which I am much more focused on strategic developments relating to widening participation. My current role has involved writing the institution's access agreement and co-ordinating the annual monitoring process, which has in many ways deepened my understanding of the relationship between policy and practice. Additionally, I have been an active member in many cross-institutional widening participation networks and the discussions with colleagues from across the sector have very much informed my understanding of the complexity of widening participation as it presents across the sector.

3.4.2 Why things matter to people

The things that matter to me have been shaped by my own experiences and by the model of equality to which I subscribe. My own position can be seen to be certainly strongly egalitarian; that there is an innate value in equality. My viewpoint is not prioritarian and I do not agree that simply improving the lot of the least advantaged will lead to a better society. The luck egalitarian position has merits, but the idea of some individuals being more deserving of success due to innate characteristics is not one I subscribe to and thus I would most closely align myself with a position of democratic equality. For me reducing inequality in

society is more important than raising up some individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who are seen to be more deserving. There is a discord between my personal view of equality and the one that shapes much policy in this area. Working for many years with a variety of young people in multiple contexts has shaped the value I place on each finding the path that will help them develop the life that they want to lead. My own employment history to some extent also highlights the value I place in fulfilment of work over monetary rewards. I am, however, in no doubt that this position is not shared or able to be shared by everyone, but it matters in the context of this study. My own assumptions of what is good and what is right are based on my own moral ethos. People's position in the world is an evaluative one whose success is based on their evaluation of whether things are good and bad based on their own positionality (Sayer, 2011). Therefore, developing an understanding of not just practices but practitioners' own experiences, both personal and professional was central to the data collection approach within this study.

3.5 Summary

This chapter has outlined the theoretical framework within which this research is situated, arguing that adopting a critical realist approach allowed for consideration of structures and agents as two analytically distinct entities as emergent strata of social reality; affording them different properties and giving agents the capacity for reflexive action. The morphogenetic approach was adopted in order to account for the temporality of policy and practice and their interrelation, central to the methodological approach in this research. Additionally, I outlined my own position as a reflexive practitioner researcher arguing that I needed to situate myself within this research in order to understand the relationship between participants' narratives and practices.

Chapter 4: Methods

4.1 Introduction

In order to explore the differences in widening participation practices, this study adopted an approach that would dig beneath policy narratives. Previous research has extensively explored the content of access agreements (McCaig, 2015b, McCaig and Adnett, 2009) and institutional websites (Graham, 2012) but there is limited work on how this widening participation policy translates into practice. Research has focused on policy actors, those in management positions (Graham, 2011, Harrison et al., 2015, Jones, 2014) , and more holistic explorations of staff perspectives (Stevenson et al., 2010) yet only one study has explicitly focused on widening participation practitioners (Wilkins and Burke, 2013). That study focused on seven practitioners in seven different contexts, therefore was unable to explore the nuanced and heterogeneous range of experiences and voices within institutions, a gap this study addresses. Within this chapter the aims and research questions of the study are first outlined and situated within a methodological approach. Issues surrounding sample selection and context on each sample site are then addressed. Finally, the methods adopted for each phase of the project, are discussed, reflecting on pilot studies for each phase and the modifications made as a result.

4.2 Research aims

The aim of this research was to develop a better understanding of widening participation practices and variations within widening participation teams and between institutions. Enactment of policy is messy (Ball et al., 2012, Ball, 1990, Ball, 1993) and therefore this research focused on examining both policy and practices using a two-phase approach. This facilitated exploration of what was framed as important within institutional policies on widening participation and then examined how these framings resonate with the experiences of practitioners, developing a deeper understanding of the space between policy construction and policy enactment. The first phase focused on the 2016-17 access agreements of ten

institutions as a form of publicly available and comparable policy documents. The second phase consisted of sixteen in-depth semi-structured interviews in both pre-92 and post-92 institutions to develop data on the nuances of practice.

4.3 Research questions

i. What differences are there in the discourses used within access agreements between pre and post-92 institutions in England?

ii. To what extent do access agreements mirror the experience and work carried out by widening participation practitioners?

iii. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of widening participation practitioners working within pre and post-92 institutions?

iv. What are the motivations and reasons that practitioners choose to undertake widening participation work?

v. How do practitioners reconcile institutional and national policy with their individual beliefs and values?

4.4 Methods of investigation

In this study I wanted to delve beneath the rhetoric of policy and the repeated use of vacuous discourses to understand the realities of policy enactment in widening participation. This meant understanding both what was said as well as how and why it was said within policy texts. I also sought to explore practitioners' understandings of concepts such as aspiration and what they considered typical students they work with in order to go beyond institutional rhetoric. To claim that practitioners, are homogenous in their motivations and practices removes agency from practice and is antithetical to my theoretical position. This was a limitation of Wilkins and Burke (2013) study. Whilst policy and regulation act as structures shaping action, individuals retain a certain level of agency through what is said and done in their work and thus this study aimed to capture multiple voices from each institution and multiple examples of each type of institution.

4.4.1 Research design

The scope of a doctoral research project limited the extent to which a sampling frame could be representative of a wide field of higher education. Phase one therefore focused on identifying differences in discourses between pre-92 and post-92 institutions and phase two focused on how widening participation policies are enacted and variance between institutions. This allowed for broader coverage in phase one and a more focused examination of practice in phase two, balancing breadth of coverage with sufficient data to develop understanding of nuanced practices within individual institutions. Adopting a phased approach allowed for a decoupling of practitioners from institutions. The need to do this was a key ethical concern to maintain the anonymity of the participants as the documents analysed in phase one are identifiable due to their existence in the public realm.

4.4.2 Selecting a sample

There is a diverse range of HEIs, but similarities exist between institutions based on entry requirements (broadly designated as being selecting or recruiting institutions), membership of mission groups (i.e. Oxbridge, Russell Group, Million+ etc.), or the point of designation as a university (pre-92 and post-92 institutions). Examining all 164 HEIs[12], was not practical within a doctoral research project. Consequently, this study focused on a pre/post -92 classification as often used in higher education research. Whilst increased marketization of the English higher education system has created a more differentiated system where different groupings are possible, Vikki Boliver (2015) conducted a cluster analysis on quantitative data relating to institutions such as: measures relating to resources, teaching, research, student mix and selectivity of entry. She identified a distinct four-way split based on quantitative analysis of metrics. This comprised two lower clusters of post-92 institutions, a cluster containing most pre-92 institutions and a cluster containing just Oxford and Cambridge. Therefore, I would argue a pre/post-92 split remains a sound basis for comparison.

---

[12] It should be noted that for 2019-20, 336 organisations have applied for registration with the Office for Students, thus extending the scope of the sector even further than was the case at the time of this study.

4.4.3 Selecting sample sites

The first phase examined ten institutions in five cities across England. Whilst consideration was given to including both Scotland and Wales, the differences in funding mechanisms meant both were similarly discounted. A shortlist of potential cities to focus on was created through selecting cities that contained at least one pre-92 and one post-92 institution. From this shortlist, five cities were chosen that were spread across a wide range of regions in England (fig 4.1). In some regions, this reduced the selection to one city[13] whereas in other regions, there were several options. Where choice was possible, a certain amount of instrumentalism was adopted, and sites were selected based on potential access for phase two. By selecting both a pre and post-92 institution in the same city, this allowed for comparison between different types of institution facing similar geographical issues. This comparative approach also meant that the focus was primarily urban as the need to contain both a pre and post-92 institution ruled out more rural study sites and institutions that were the sole higher education provider for a region.

4.4.4 A tale of five cities

Spread across England, each city contained both a pre-92 and a post-92 institution. Each institution will be referred to by the pseudonym relating to its classification; for example, the post-92 institution in Norton will be referred to as 'New Norton' and the pre-92 as 'Old Norton'.

---

[13] Whilst this may have had implications for anonymity of those institutions, as the documents being analysed are public, this was not seen as problematic as it made them at no more risk of being identified than any other,

fig 4.1 – Sample sites

The detail on each city's geographical and socio-economic background is limited in order to maintain anonymity as much as possible. Unless otherwise stated, all data on the cities below is drawn from Census statistics from 2011 and the Regional labour statistics from September 2017 (Office for National Statistics, 2017). This is supported by historical accounts of the industries on which each city was established (Hobsbawm, 1968).

City	Population	Regional unemployment (ONS, Sept 2017)	Working age population without qualifications (Regional)	GCSE 5 x A*-C (Inc. maths and English) grades (2011/12)[14]
Overton	200,000-300,000	6%	17.8%	58.5%
Norton	500,000-600,000	4%	16.8%	58.9%
Weston	<100,000	3.7%	12.5%	57.5%
Middleton	1,000,000+	5.7%	18.1%	58.8%
Riverton	8,000,000+	5.2%	12.4%	62.3%
England (average)		4.4%	15.0%	59.4%

table 4.1 – Comparison data on five cities

---

[14]Data from 2011 Census

Overton

Overton is a large industrial city in the North of England shaped by heavy industry and the coal mining in the region. In 2017 11.4% of individuals still worked in production related jobs but most (81.7%) were employed within the service sector. The city's population is between 200,000 and 300,000 with 2.6 million living within the region. Its previous reliance on heavy industry and subsequent decline of this sector has affected local employment opportunities resulting in one of the highest regional unemployment rates in the country at 6% (Office for National Statistics, 2017) and in 2012 had the lowest median weekly wage in the country. From 2011 census data, 17.8% of the working age population had no qualifications; however, 58.5% of children left school in 2011-12 with five or more A*-C GCSE grades, less than 1% below the national average. Ethnicity in the region is quite homogenous in nature with a population consisting of 95.3% White, 2.9% Asian and 0.5% Black individuals as recorded in the 2011 census.

Norton

Norton is another northern city with a population between 500,000 and 600,000. It has its economic roots in the textile industry. In recent years, globalisation has resulted in a decline in these traditional industries and employment in the region. Regional unemployment as of September 2017 was 4% (Office for National Statistics, 2017) and in 2012, the median weekly wage was below the national average. In 2017, 83.3% of individuals worked within the service sector with only 10% still working in production related jobs. From 2011 census data, 16.8% of individuals in the region had no formal qualifications however in 2011-2, 58.9% of children gained five or more A*-C grades at GCSE, close to the national average. Ethnicity in the region is relatively homogenous overall with the 2011 census recording 90.2% White, 6.2% Asian and 1.4% Black individuals in the region.

Weston

Weston in south west England, has the smallest population of cities in the study (under 100,000) in a region with a population of 5.3 million. Farming, tourism and shipping have played a major part in local economic growth. In September 2017, 81.5% of employment was within the service sector and the region had one of the

lowest unemployment rates in 2017 at 3.7% (Office for National Statistics, 2017) with a median wage well below the national average. In 2011, only 12.5% of the working-age population had no formal qualifications, but only 57.5% of children gained five or more A*-C grades at GCSE, the lowest in the study. Ethnicity in the region is the most homogenous in the sample with the 2011 census recording 95.4% White, 2% Asian and 0.9% Black individuals.

Middleton

Middleton, in the West Midlands has a long industrial history based around manufacturing textiles, metal work and the automobile industry. In September 2017, the region had the second highest employment in the production sector in England at 12.3% with 80.2% employed in the service sector. One of the larger cities in the study, with a population of over one million in a region of 5.6 million, with regional unemployment in 2017 at 5.7% (Office for National Statistics, 2017) with the highest percentage of the working-age population with no qualifications in 2012 at 18.1%. In 2011-12 the percentage of children achieving five or more A*-C grades was just below the national average at 58.8%. Ethnicity in the region is the second most diverse of the study with 82.7% White, 10.8% Asian and 3.3% Black individuals based on 2011 census data.

Riverton

Riverton is the largest city within this study with a population over eight million and has a history as a major port, financial and political centre. Its role in finance and trading was also at the centre of the British Empire resulting in a long history of migration and diaspora creating the most diverse region in the study with the 59.8% White, 18.5% Asian and 13.3% Black individuals in 2011. The majority of employment is within the service sector (91.9%) with only 2.6% employed in the production sector and an unemployment rate in 2017 of 5.2% (Office for National Statistics, 2017). In 2011, 12.4% of the working-age population had no qualifications, the lowest in the study, and in 2011-12 62.3% of children achieved five or more A*-C grades at GCSE, the highest in the study.

4.5 Phase one: critical discourse analysis

To explore the policy-practice gap, it was important to examine the policy context within which practitioners worked. Policy surrounding widening participation exists at both national and local levels. Due to the autonomy given to set out local policies they were likely to be closely aligned with the geographical and market context of institutions. The public record of these was within an annually produced document called an access agreement.

4.5.1 Access agreements

Access agreements were produced by every institution wishing to charge above a base level of fees for students (£6000 in 2016-17). As the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) stated these were:

> [A] document setting out how a university or college charging higher fees intends to safeguard and promote fair access to higher education, for example through outreach work in schools to raise learners' aspiration and attainment, or by giving financial support such as bursaries.
>
> (OFFA, n.d.-a)

Previous research by Graham (2012) examined the prospectuses and websites of institutions and whilst these often had in depth coverage of access work, they were created to showcase and promote work . In contrast, the dual purpose of access agreements as both a regulatory document that determines the institutions ability to charge higher fees and as a public declaration of a commitment to widening participation makes them a better focus for analysis than marketing materials.

4.5.2 Analysing discourses

Critical discourse studies (CDS) covers a wide range of methodological and theoretical approaches but unlike other forms of discourse analysis, all focus on

complex social phenomena as opposed to micro issues of linguistics. All CDS are oriented to critique and understand society as opposed to traditional approaches that merely seek to describe or explain society (Wodak and Meyer, 2016). In the context of this study, this meant both making visible what institutions were doing and critically examining processes and policies. Language is a social practice and context is crucial to its understanding. Therefore, the interview data were equally crucial in making visible the process of translation from policy into practice. Whilst different methods of discourse analysis were considered, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was chosen due to its focus on social relations between texts and the power relations that are internalised within texts (Fairclough, 2003, 2010).

4.5.3 Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA positions texts not only as being shaped by social practices but also shaping action. The ability of access agreements to shape practices and to be shaped based on the success of past practices is central to their function. Within CDA, the role of texts in shaping ideologies and maintaining positions of power and dominations is a central issue. Considering this in relation to Lukes' (1974) conceptualisation of power, these texts embed within them institutional value-assumptions and are shaped by the interests of those who create the policies, potentially excluding the real interests of the beneficiaries of the policy; therefore, CDA is a useful way to explore these issues. Texts also offer a way to observe structures. There are differences between examining documents and conversations. Within documents negotiations of meaning and clarifications that may take place between two interlocutors are hidden (Fairclough, 2010). Resultant documents are therefore evidence of these negotiated positions and can be examined for the ideologies and assumptions within.

Fairclough proposed a number of features of text that may be the focus of analysis, however he noted the need for selectivity in textual analysis which centres around the specific research questions. Fairclough operationalised his framework to examine public discourses on the marketisation of universities and within that study he set out a 'three-dimensional CDA framework' (2010 p.93) which identified three distinct facets, namely: the text in itself, the practice of producing

and interpreting the text and the text as a social practice. As such, his analysis focused on the 'multifunctionality' (2010 p.92) of texts and examined the text's relationship to wider sociocultural practices. Examination of social justice and power were central to Fairclough's framework and resonated with the aims of this project. CDA also treats texts as part of the mechanisms that shape the actions of individuals. The idea that language is 'socially shaped but also socially shaping' (Fairclough, 2010 p.92) was particularly relevant in terms of policy documents such as access agreements which are re-written on an annual basis due to changes in government policy and based on success in the previous years in moving towards institutional goals. As Wodak and Meyer (2016) highlighted, most CDS analyse 'typical texts' for the social situation. Previous work on discourse analysis of documents related to widening participation have focused on marketing materials (Graham, 2011, Graham, 2012) or access agreements (McCaig, 2015b). As McCaig has done previously, this study focused on access agreements as these provide a closer link to policy intentions than marketing materials.

Operationalising Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis

In analysing documents extending to between 15 and 46 pages each, it would not be desirable nor practical to code for every element of discourse and many elements are not relevant to the research questions. Fairclough acknowledged that his method can be applied by focusing on a limited number of features relevant to the research questions and suggests that the volume of text will dictate the level of detail possible (Fairclough, 2010). The elements of his model that were most relevant were: assumptions, justification and ideology; these elements often relying on reference to other texts or inter-discursivity. One of the most important elements for this study was the exploration of the underlying assumptions within the access agreements. These assumptions were where differences between institutions became visible. Within CDA, assumptions can be classified as:

Existential: Assumptions about what exists

Propositional: Assumptions about what is or what can be

Value: Assumptions about what is good or desirable.

(Fairclough 2003 p.55)

Focusing the analysis on these assumptions also led to the generation of additional content-based themes[15]. Legitimation was another key element in the analytical framework adopted and occurs on 4 levels:

Authorization   Through reference to tradition or customs

Rationalization   Through explanation of utility

Moral Evaluation   Through reference to value systems

Mythopoesis   Through creation of narrative

<div align="right">(Fairclough 2003 p.98)</div>

Analysis of legitimation in conjunction with assumptions offered useful insights into how access agreements built a rationale for particular visions of widening participation. This area of analysis also linked well with the notion of intertextuality as often legitimation was through reference to other texts.

Piloting CDA

The proposed approach to operationalising CDA was piloted on two 2015-16 access agreements (Old and New Norton) to see if this generated suitable data whilst also being within the scope and scale of the study. Each agreement was coded directly into NVivo[16], creating a node[17] for each of the elements. This process confirmed that grammatical analysis and other rejected elements such as genre analysis would not be appropriate either for addressing the research questions. Some elements were more prevalent than others and the process highlighted key areas of similarities and difference, namely:

- Differences in Structure of the documents
- Intertextuality
- Lexical choices
- Legitimation

---

[15] Coding themes are highlighted in Appendix 8 (p.289)

[16] A qualitative data analysis software package

[17] A node is a way of identifying items in NVivo as being related

- o moral statements
- o rationalization
- o authorization
- o mythopoesis
- Assumptions
  - o What is (propositions),
  - o What exists (existential)
  - o What is good (values)

Furthermore, the process was more iterative than expected, with a number of thematic codes emerging from the documents during the coding process that required repeated coding of the documents. As Wodak and Meyer (2015 p.14) highlight, this 'recursive-abductive relationship between theory and discourse' is common in CDS. As anticipated previously, there were also a number of emergent themes such as the framing of 'potential' of pre-entry students to be suitable candidates for interventions. The treatment of the notion of potential was seen to be shaped by specific attainment profiles in Old Norton, whereas potential targets of widening participation work at New Norton were based purely on demographic characteristics (Rainford, 2015). This theme therefore is broader than one specific text feature and required a node of its own. Coding for emergent themes, in addition to textual features was therefore identified to be an essential part of the analytical process. During the pilot, limitations with coding directly into NVivo were identified. Reading from a screen limited my engagement with the text and it took multiple passes to identify some elements. As a result, for the main study, paper copies of each agreement were manually coded before transferring these nodes and annotations in to NVivo for analysis.

4.5.4 Analysing the 2016-17 access agreements

During the pilot each agreement was coded sequentially, coding all of the elements in one before moving to the next institution. To enable better comparison and a more iterative approach across the ten documents, a modified approach was adopted. Two nodes were selected in turn to code through the entirety of the agreements before repeating this process. This allowed for greater familiarity with

each node and identification of the nuanced use within each institution. This was particularly important when considering lexical choices made by the institutions as these were often very subtle differences. In the process of fully coding the documents, other themes emerged, namely: raising aspirations, attainment, potential, collaboration, finance and targeting. The agreements were then revisited in turn to look for instances of these emerging codes. Transferring the codes into NVivo allowed for cross-comparison of the agreements. Analytic notes were then added identifying similarities and differences in the documents. Some of the emergent themes also became the structuring themes for the rest of the study and this thesis as a whole whereas others, such as evaluation have been reported upon separately as they are beyond the scope to this thesis to explore fully (Rainford, 2018c). This first phase can therefore be seen as generating the themes the second phase of the project explored further.

4.6 Phase two: Semi-structured interviews

The second phase required a different approach. The first phase focused on institutions, the second was focused upon the experiences of individuals. As such, interview-based methods were felt to be the most appropriate. Whilst widening participation practitioners are those tasked with enactment of access agreements, they are often divorced from the process of writing them[18]. There was a need to achieve a balance between breadth of coverage across the sample and the ability to explore nuance of practice within individual institutions. Therefore, four institutions were felt to allow for both comparison across more than one pre-92 and post-92 institution and for multiple practitioners in each institution to be interviewed whilst still manageable for the scope of a doctoral project.

Focusing on a comparative case study of two institutions (one pre-and one post-92) may have generated useful themes, but in selecting four institutions this also allowed for comparison between institutions of the same type. Despite the breadth of the proposed sample still being limited, it allowed for common themes to be

[18] As exemplified by the limited number of participants who talked about being involved with access agreements in their interviews.

identified. Whilst a multiplicity of voices was important, there were practical constraints based on the general size of widening participation teams. Widening participation teams vary in size, but most have at least four staff within the team. Therefore, the initial plan was to conduct sixteen practitioner interviews across two pre-92 and two post-92 institutions. Additionally, a manager from each institution was to be interviewed about the access agreement writing process.

4.6.1 Access to institutions

Whilst phase one was based on analysing public documents, phase two provided a range of challenges related to access. I planned to conduct all the interviews in the 2016-17 academic year[19] ,beginning the recruitment process in August 2016. Initially there was a very low response rate to my e-mails but I managed to secure agreement in principle from three institutions. Whilst other institutions were keen to participate, they did not have the time or capacity to do so. This was particularly notable in the post-92 institutions I approached. One institution had a team of six to draw from; however, with one individual on maternity leave and another resigning, this left insufficient staff that wished to participate to make conducting interviews there impossible. In contrast, the two pre-92 institutions where interviews took place had large teams (15+ practitioners each). This meant access was only possible to three phase one institutions, therefore, four post-92 practitioners were recruited through a widening participation mailing list (Appendix 6). Through this open call for participants, one of the volunteers actually came from a phase one institution resulting in a final sample including four of the phase one institutions and three from the wider sector (two pre-92 institutions and five post-92).

Whilst the managers in the institutions recruited from phase one were keen for colleagues to participate, they were generally unwilling to participate themselves to talk about their access agreements. There were differing levels of explanation given as to why, and often this was shared in confidence; David (post-92) was involved in the writing of the access agreement for his institution and made

---

[19] The same year of the access agreements analysed.

reference to this during the interview. He highlighted the competing demands of a forward planning document and the need to be reactive, especially in relation to local needs. This messiness and complexity resonated with some previous discussions and may have shaped other managers reluctance to discuss such complex institutional tensions.

4.6.2 Practitioner interviews

Individuals came to work in widening participation from a variety of backgrounds[20] such as: careers guidance, teaching, marketing, recruitment or directly from studying. They also came from a variety of educational backgrounds. These backgrounds will have shaped to a certain extent each individuals' own beliefs and motivations behind their work, therefore understanding these personal journeys was important. Whilst the first phase of the project highlighted areas of difference based on institution type, it was the interviews and the resultant data that addressed the remaining four research questions (Section 4.3).

The phase one analysis also highlighted the reliance on ubiquitous terms and concepts to frame work being done such as 'raising aspirations' and 'potential'. However, the use of these terms becomes almost black boxed, so to go beyond them required methods that disrupt the repetition of rhetorical discourses. These terms can have varied interpretations which are often shaped by individual experiences. It was therefore important to develop a method of interviewing that allowed individuals to demonstrate their understandings relating to these key concepts. As Dawn Mannay (2016) argues, visual methods can act as a way to defamiliarise the everyday and enable discussion to go beyond rehearsed meanings into deeper understanding. In order to ask participants to engage with more innovative methods a rapport would need to be created first. For this reason, the interview began with a question exploring how the practitioners came to work in their roles.

---

[20] Appendix 7 (p.287)

Part 1 - Biographical element

The initial interview questions[21] were focused mainly on addressing the motivations and reasons that practitioners choose to undertake widening participation work. Personal biography is key to being able to understand individuals' reflexive deliberations and choices (Archer, 2007b) so it was important to first understand what each individuals' narratives and personal concerns were.

Part 2- Typical student activity

The second part of the interviews sought to explore the practitioners' understandings of targeting. Targeting criteria were often laid out in access agreements and it was important to understand not what the institutional position was but the reality of who practitioners actually work with. Visual methods were therefore considered to take conversations beyond those of institutional rhetoric. Tasks with low level of creative skill needed such as concept mapping (Prosser and Loxley, 2008) or emotion mapping (Gabb, 2010) have been more commonly used with adults due to the lack of reliance on drawing ability. Whilst drawing a 'typical student' is often a core activity for widening participation practitioners concerns that may have arisen from lack of confidence in artistic ability were important to account for (Mannay, 2016). Therefore, each participant was asked to use a worksheet structured with a number of framing questions so that the participants could choose to draw or write to 'draw' a typical student (Appendix 5). This worksheet aimed to develop a rounded understanding of widening participation target students in each institution including key markers of targeting such as geography and ethnicity and what practitioners felt those typical students went on to do at university and beyond. As Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2006) have argued, by encouraging participants to create within an interview, it often causes them to think about things in a different way and as other researchers have suggested, to express things they might not normally do so with direct questioning (Guillemin and Drew, 2010). This tool was designed not as a document to analyse but a talking tool. Other approaches were considered such as

---

[21] The full interview schedules for the pilot and main study are in Appendix 3 and 4 (p.281-284)

the use of collage or vignettes as these have been used more extensively in interviews with adults than drawing. I felt however that whilst both methods claim to adopt a participatory approach, they are still shaped heavily by resources the researcher provides and as such limit the potential responses. Approaches such as photo voice were dismissed due to the ethical issues of capturing images of real students.

The timing of this task was also carefully considered and whilst providing the sheet in advance of the interview might have resulted in more detailed images this could also have led to self-censorship of what was said. By presenting it in the interview setting, this allowed for a more spontaneous response. However, this was not without limitations which will be discussed later in the chapter. It was anticipated that within and across institutions, these chosen typical students would give a point of comparison to see if individual practitioners in the same institutions saw the same students as the focus of their work and also if these mirrored the institutional framings within the access agreements. This visual task was also supplemented by questions to move from their specific example to a more general discussion of targeting.

Part 3 - Ladders of aspirations

'Raising aspirations' was one of the key themes to come out of phase one but seemed to be poorly conceptualised. It was used within the access agreements as an all-encompassing term for work relating to information advice and guidance given in relation to careers, choosing institutions and subject choices in widening participation. Again, this term is so embedded in policy that in order to explore it better, developing an understanding of aspiration from each practitioner was important.

The premise of a need to 'raise aspirations' assumes a deficit model where those from disadvantaged groups have low aspirations. A growing body of work critiquing this will be covered in more depth in Chapter Eight (e.g. Allen and Hollingworth, 2013, Archer et al., 2014, St. Clair et al., 2013) but if this deficit view did underpin practice, then the assumption was that practitioners would have been able to rank different jobs and careers in a hierarchical way. Through

discussion of the rationale of their choices, this task was hoped to offer insights into how they conceptualise aspiration and success. Each participant was provided with a LEGO ladder (fig 4.3) and ten figures representing a range of different jobs (fig 4.4). These were selected based on a number of factors including the pre-requisite level of education, potential level of skill needed, competitiveness of entry to courses, resultant salary and occupational status (such as employed / self-employed) and also included a relatively new job. These jobs were:

- Self-employed decorator
- Builder
- Computer games designer
- Artist
- Scientist

- Primary school teacher
- Investment banker
- Doctor
- Footballer
- Lawyer

fig 4.2 – Aspiration ladder

fig 4.3 – Careers represented by LEGO figures

As with the previous task, the focus was not on the visual artefact itself but the narrative about the artefact using it as a 'starting point for developing thoughts about personal experience' (Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006, p. 82). LEGO has been used in more metaphorical way within training and development resulting in the LEGO serious play model well documented in the literature (e.g. McCusker, 2014, Peabody and Noyes, 2017). In contrast, this study utilised LEGO for its representational quality. Whilst it was representational to a certain extent, the lack of real features was seen as a useful way of eliminating bias as opposed to using vignettes of real people. However, as the LEGO figures are gendered, I decided to place the female figures within non-stereotypical roles and a conscious choice was made to make the primary school teacher male and the doctor and scientist

80

female. The gender of the figures was not mentioned by most participants, however despite the conscious choice to make the doctor female, Andrea (pre-92), struggled with the non-stereotypical genders referring to the female doctor as a nurse and also referred to the scientist as 'he'.

The use of the traditional yellow LEGO figures was because of their use of yellow as a 'neutral skin colour' (LEGO, 2018) . More recently, LEGO created for Sports, TV and film franchises has introduced explicitly racialised skin colours and this has brought that assumption into question (Cook, 2017). As Johnson (2014) has argued, the introduction of skin tones has made visible the 'normative whiteness' (p.322) of the previously homogeneity of yellow minifigures. However, given that all non-franchised LEGO is still produced in yellow, a pragmatic choice to follow the LEGO tradition was made. In a presentation towards the end of the project, this choice was challenged as a whitewashing of the task; something that whilst I had carefully considered was perceived as insufficient (Rainford, 2018a). One suggestion from the delegates was that allowing participants to build their own characters with a selection of different skin colours and gendered hairstyles might have been a more participatory approach and allowed for a wider range of intersectional identities. Whilst this would have extended the interviews beyond the time constraints available it would be an approach worth exploring further as it would have allowed exploration of the gendered and racialised perceptions of different careers.

Part 4 - Exploring the policy-practice gap

The final section of the interviews focused on exploring the nuances of practice as highlighted in the interview schedule. It also covered key issues emerging from phase one such as collaboration and evaluation.

4.6.3 Management interviews

The lack of access to managers to discuss access agreements led to a modified approach to capture managerial perspectives. Interestingly, three of the participants held managerial roles, albeit primarily middle management, so some understanding of the space between the coal face and institutional policy making

emerged in the practitioner interviews. This was also supplemented by conducting a workshop of the emerging findings from the study at the 2018 NEON Summer Symposium using a comic format (fig.4.4).
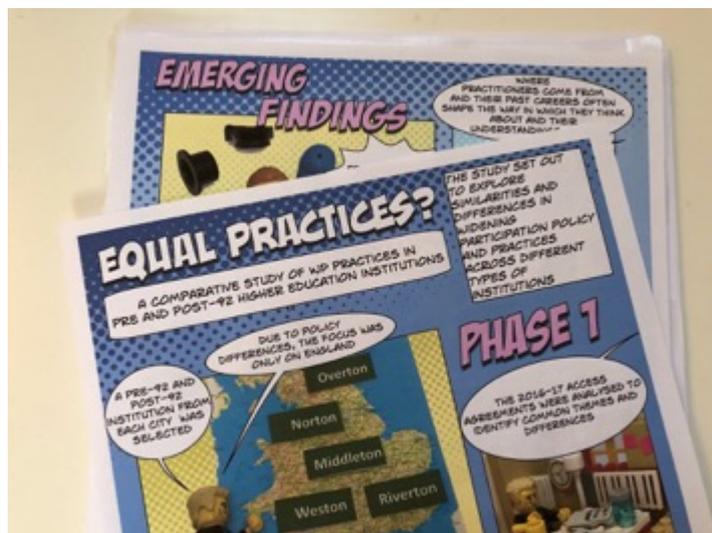
fig 4.4 – Comic of interim findings (full version p. x & xi)

During the session I briefly highlighted the key findings through the comic, before providing a number of ways for delegates (eleven practitioners) to input their views. Delegates were given post-it notes and placed in groups of three or four to discuss the findings. The outcomes of these discussions which involved both junior and senior staff have also been fed into the analysis where appropriate, including the policy recommendations in the concluding chapter.

4.6.5 Piloting the practitioner interviews

The practitioner interview was piloted[24] with two practitioners from a post-92 institution outside of the main study sample. Both participants were female and one was British Bangladeshi and had worked in the institution for two years having previously worked in the third sector. The second participant, of Black Caribbean heritage had worked within the institution for over five years having previously worked in careers guidance. Overall, the interviews generated useful data to address the research questions however there was some refinement needed following the pilot.

---

[24] Pilot interview schedule – Appendix 3 (p.281)

Part 1 - Biographical element

Whilst basic demographic information was collected from the participants, through the interviews it became evident that more in depth knowledge about biography was necessary to understand and develop theories about why individuals may not have consistent approaches and outlooks, despite a similar institutional context. The initial schedule focused on recent career histories, therefore extending this to explore the role of educational or natal contexts or personal approaches to widening participation to understand how these might mediate the institutional and national policy contexts into practice was felt to be a useful refinement.

Part 2 - Typical students

Whilst the pilot data from this task offered a lot of rich data about practitioners' understandings of what a widening participation student was and allowed for the exploration of contradictions in who the practitioners saw as the targets of widening participation work, this part of the interview was approached with less enthusiasm than anticipated. There was a clear reluctance to draw on the part of both participants even though both did do some drawing. Part of this seemed to be the pressure of drawing whilst being watched or embarrassment about their drawing skills, so consideration was given to providing this sheet ahead of time for the main study. However, what the task created was a space to take discussions beyond the visual and to wider issues surrounding the challenges widening participation students face and what makes them the targets of widening participation. Therefore, the benefits of talking while creating outweighed the limited realization of the drawings. As such for the main study no changes were made to the task itself. This section was strengthened to generate richer data by specifically asking about the process of targeting through schools.

Part 3–Ladders of aspiration

The pilot was addressed by the participants using two very contrasting approaches. One engaged fully with the task, the other rejected the task but in doing so generated interesting discussion that equally addressed the research question. She believed that all jobs were good for different individuals, so the task

was not possible. Even with this rejection, the pilot demonstrated that the task was valuable for starting these discussions. Reassuring the participant that she had not failed the task became important to maintain rapport as initially she seemed despondent that she was unable to complete the task.

Part 4–Exploring the policy-practice gap

Asking the participants to explain what they meant by 'raising aspirations' was clearly effective as the pilot data showed nuance within the operationalization of the term. It also highlighted the contradictions between definitions and their approach to the ladder task. This may however have been shaped partially by the participants' awareness of my own position on the subject. One of the areas of weakness was that in order to get enough information for some of the questions, especially around collaboration and how they keep up to date with policy, some clear prompting of examples was needed. These were added into the interview schedule for the main study. The pilot interview schedule did not address issues of reflection or evaluation and given the themes of the discourse analysis this was added. Whilst Evaluation as a theme ended up beyond the scope of the final thesis due to other themes being more prominent in the data, the data that was collected informed a related book chapter (Rainford, 2018c). Offering a chance for participants to talk about anything else they wanted to, in case the interview had caused them to reflect on earlier issues discussed was felt to be a necessary addition. The final interview schedule can be found in Appendix 4.

4.6.6 Conducting the fieldwork

Twelve interviews were conducted in 2016-17 as planned, the final four taking place in December 2017 and January 2018. Access to the institutions and the support of gatekeepers varied across the institutions. Both pre-92 institutions were keen to participate in the study and their staff helped to arrange the interviews. For one pre-92 institution this resulted in conducting four interviews over three visits in Spring 2017. All four participants were female, however in the whole team of sixteen, there were only three possible male interviewees. The second pre-92 institution arranged the interviews over two days in March 2017, again with four female staff. In this case, the entire widening participation team of eighteen

was female. Within the post-92 institutions, access was more challenging. One post-92 was eager to participate and the manager scheduled all four interviews for a day in July 2017. These were an even split of two males and two females. It was clear, however, that having a more limited team size of seven staff including the manager of the team, finding four participants focused on institutional outreach was more challenging and two occupied roles which also spanned the collaborative work of the institution.

Finding a fourth institution from the initial sample frame proved impossible. After having the initial agreement of one manger, two members of the team subsequently left, meaning she had insufficient staff numbers willing to participate. The remaining three post-92 institutions in the initial sample were not able to participate; two of them no longer having dedicated outreach teams and the remaining one having insufficient staff. This led to widening the remit to all English post-92 institutions using a Jiscmail list[25], resulting in eight volunteers with four able to commit to the interview. One was from an institution in the initial sample and three others worked in other post-92 institutions.
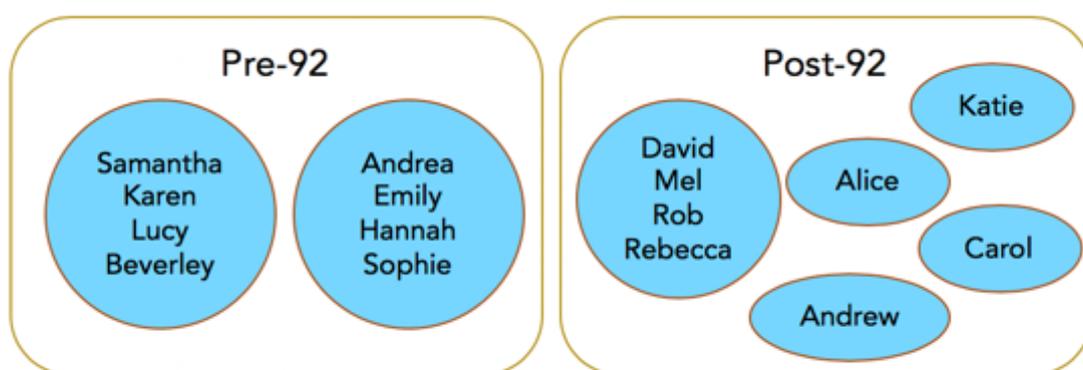
fig 4.5 – Institutional location of practitioners

The interviews were all conducted within classrooms in their institutions except Alice and Katie's interviews which were conducted in a mutually agreed office space. Prior to the formal interview, most of the participants engaged in

---

[25] Appendix 6 (p.286)

discussions of varying length in relation to my study and my role in the sector. Whilst this rapport building is natural, it is important to reflect upon how their positioning of me as a 'familiar' may have been key to eliciting some of their responses, especially those which may be more critical of national and institutional policy. Interviews varied in length from 24 minutes to just over an hour. The shortest interview was partly shaped by Lucy's (pre-92) relatively short career in widening participation and a role primarily focusing on post-entry students limiting her engagement with some of the interview questions. Cultural differences may have also shaped how she responded[26] as the answers to the questions were often very direct, unlike many of the other participants.

4.6.7 Coding and analysis of interview data

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed using ExpressScribePro . Additional field notes were made during and after and photographs of the LEGO artefacts were taken. The transcripts were initially read through and annotated with notes relating to the emergent themes and issues as they appeared. These emerging themes were then visually mapped[27] to form the basis of a coding schedule[28]. Each transcript was then coded by hand before being transferred into NVivo to allow comparative analysis across the corpus of data. There were eleven overarching codes. Two related to methodological issues (action and methods). Another two (interaction and issues) spanned numerous themes. The remaining seven broadly mapped onto four substantive thematic chapters that form the rest of this thesis

Overarching Code	Chapter
target, potential	Six - Students with potential or simply potential students?
aspiration	Eight – Aspiration on whose terms?

---

[26] Lucy was born to Finnish parents and had been in the UK since she started higher education study

[27] Appendix 9 (p.290)

[28] Appendix 8 (p.289)

limitations, collaboration	Five – How markets shape access
origins, role	Seven – From policies into practices

table 4.2 – Links between codes and thematic chapters in the thesis

4.6.8 The challenges and opportunities created by adopting a creative approach

The use of creative approaches within the interviews provoked varied reactions from the participants ranging from excitement to trepidation. The engagement with the drawing task suggested a real discomfort with the prospect of drawing in an interview setting. In many cases participants chose to use the writing option, or in others did not mark the sheet and simply used it to read the questions. The reluctance to draw was typified by Hannah (pre-92) who picked up a felt tip and quickly put it down in favour of a ballpoint pen to write with laughing at her almost 'error'. Beverly (pre-92) was even more explicit protesting that 'I can't draw!'. In contrast, the LEGO was approached with more excitement. Rob (post-92) explicitly saying that 'bringing LEGO into interviews is fantastic'. Other participants were less confident and became worried when pieces fell off. Beverly (pre-92) again referred to her lack of creativity:

> Beverley: I'm just breaking your LEGO
> Jon: It happens
> Beverly: I told you I was not great at – Oh dear! [laughs]

Issues surrounding adults' discomfort with creative tasks are not unique to this study (Mannay, 2016, Mannay, 2010) and whilst as the challenges of creative confidence were accounted for by using LEGO and through the use of a scaffolded worksheet. Similar worksheet approaches have been used with children (Wall, 2008) yet within this study there was limited drawing within the interviews. Lack of confidence in drawing ability (Mannay 2010) and concerns about the time creative tasks take (Gauntlett, 2007) may have been causes of this and were

certainly echoed in a post interview survey with participants[29]. Whilst engagement with the physical act of drawing and making was variable across the interviews, the resultant data was much richer for this shared point of focus to shape discussion around these complex issues. Therefore, whilst the creative tasks did have limitations in their engagement, they allowed participants to respond with reflexivity and criticality through a focus on a theoretical example opposed to challenging institutional framings of contested concepts.

4.7 Ethical considerations

The project adhered to British Education Research Association guidelines on ethical research (BERA, 2011). Phase one focused on publicly available material so had a low level of ethical impact. However, any research that challenges issues of values and power can create dilemmas for the researcher around what can and should be said and this was especially relevant with my ongoing role working within higher education within widening participation. When using public documents, the value of anonymising institutions could be questioned especially when internet searches may lead the reader directly to the source material. In the case of the research questions, it was not the specific individual institutions that were of interest but the differences between pre-and post-92 institutions. Therefore, I elected to use pseudonyms not to protect institutional identities but to focus those engaging with the findings on the institution type within their reading of the analysis.

The second phase presented different ethical challenges. In this case, anonymity was a key concern as the research questions were asking the practitioners to talk about values and experiences which could put them in a challenging position. As mentioned by Rob (post-92) in his interview, enacting policy often put him in tension with institutional positions. For this reason, the participants were not linked to a specific institution from phase one in the analysis, just pre-92 or post-92. This allowed for sufficient granularity of analysis to answer the research

---

[29] Appendix 10 (p.291)

questions whilst minimising risk to the participants. In several cases, I was asked to reassure participants prior to the interviews that the answers they gave would not be identifiable to them. From the resulting data, it is clear that the frank answers often given to some questions showed that this knowledge of anonymity was important in eliciting the data that has emerged from the study. Participants were requested to sign a form giving their informed consent[30] and were provided with a project information sheet[31] that had been approved by the Faculty of Business, Education and Law ethics committee at Staffordshire University. The interviews were also all conducted in publicly accessible spaces to minimise the potential risk to both the researcher and participants.

4.8 Summary

Within this chapter the rationale for the methods and the two-phase approach the study adopted has been outlined. The geographical parameters for the study and the ways in which constraints shaped the sampling frame were first outlined before detailing how Fairclough's model of CDA was used to generate data to address the research questions. Furthermore, I demonstrated the interrelation between the two phases and the use of the emergent themes from the discourse analysis to inform the interview schedule. Additionally, the central role that creative methods played to explore issues of 'raising aspirations' and targeting that went beyond repetition of rhetoric were highlighted. Noting the challenges of access posed by this type of study, I demonstrated how the use of a research informed comic enabled discussion of issues with a wider audience. This use of creative methods for both collection and dissemination for data demonstrates the contribution of this study beyond a purely empirical one to a methodological one that used innovative ways of engaging practitioners in the research process. The rest of this thesis now explores four key emergent themes through four thematic chapters which integrate data from both phases of the study with relevant literature. The first theme is how markets shape access

---

[30] Appendix 2 (p.279)

[31] Appendix 1 (p.277)

Chapter 5: How markets shape access

5.1 Introduction

This chapter primarily focuses on the differences at a macro level that shaped conceptions of who and what widening participation is for. Drawing together data from both phases of the study to specifically address research questions i-iii.[32]. Whilst access agreements cover the whole student lifecycle of access, success and progression, pre-entry access work is usually led by specific teams of practitioners. In this area, the type of institution significantly shapes what is done both in terms of spend and scope and therefore was the focus of the study. This chapter builds upon the more general discussion of the historical origins of higher education in England by drawing upon literature relating to marketisation and widening participation. This chapter examines key areas of difference between institutions and explores how they legitimate and justify their positions. Drawing on the work of Iris Marion Young (1990), I argue that institutional policies purporting to address issues of injustice despite having the best intentions may perpetuate inequalities. Integrating the access agreement analysis with the interviews with practitioners allowed for exploration of the blurring of boundaries between policy intentions and enactment, highlighting tensions created by marketisation of higher education. Whilst policy is often thought of as 'coherent and rational' (Trowler, 2014, p. 14) its enactment is often much less coherent and is subject to subversion and selective implementation.

In 2016-17, 121 HEIs and 62 further education colleges submitted access agreements due to their intention to charge above the £6,000 basic tuition fees. 99% of HEIs detailed an intention to charge the maximum £9,000 tuition fee for some or all of their courses (OFFA, 2015a). The total spend including financial support

---

[32] Section 4.3 (p.64)

across all institutions was £750 million (£351 million allocated to access, success and progression work) and £149 million specifically targeted to access measures. This significant spend on access whilst mandated nationally is driven by individual institutions agendas.

Access agreements were not simply a representation of institutional views but were also negotiated documents with both negotiation within the institution during process of their creation and externally with the regulator. This has become more prominent over time due to increased regulatory pressure to drive more rapid change (OFFA, 2017a). In the 2016-17 access agreements, OFFA stated that they worked with 103 of the 183 institutions to improve their access agreements (OFFA, 2015a). This negotiation is steeped in power relations, primarily from the side of the regulator. In an interview towards the end of his tenure, Les Ebdon, then Director of Fair Access explained he:

> …had to turn up at various universities or have lengthy telephone conversations with vice-chancellors to say, "we are publishing a list in a week's time and your institution is not going to be on it because your proposal is unacceptable".

(Else, 2017)

This demonstrates more a pressure to comply with the national agenda as opposed to one that offers the maximum benefits for all stakeholders.

Doyle and Griffin (2012) in their analysis of Aimhigher highlighted how localised implementation of national policy was driven by varied commitment and understandings, therefore similar issues are likely to shape enactment of national widening participation policy within individual HEIs. As discussed later in this chapter, this can lead to tensions between what is said and what is done when compliance and fulfilling requirements become the focus, as opposed to a more moral sense of what should be done. Where institutional commitments lean towards compliance, widening participation can become focused on 'doing the document opposed to doing the doing' (Ahmed, 2007, p. 590). To understand how

this manifests itself, this chapter offers an overview of the higher education market as it was in 2016-17.

5.2 Why are institutions concerned with access?

Widening access and success is both a moral position and a necessity of operation within the system of higher education in England[33]. Widening participation policy both aimed to create diversity within the student body of an institution and create a diversity of institutions (Archer, 2007a). Despite the extensive expansion of the market, social class inequalities have endured (Boliver, 2011). Creating diversity between institutions has acted as a form of division, sorting individuals based on institutional perceptions of who is the 'right sort' of student as opposed to widening access in all institutions to a wider population (Bathmaker, 2015). When the obligation to widen access is in tension with other factors upon which the success of an institution lies such as employment outcomes or retention rates, this can be an appealing approach. Certainly from their analysis of the early access agreements, McCaig and Adnett (2009) highlighted some of the ways access agreements were used as marketing tools to promote institutions' self-interests.

Whilst compliance with access regulation ensures continued revenue from Home and EU students, there is also an international dimension. Institutions are increasingly positioned in multiple fields of higher education (Naidoo, 2004) and are part of a global geopolitical system (Hazelkorn, 2018). These fields, act as a 'force that mediates and at the same time reproduces fundamental principles of social classification' (Naidoo, 2004, p. 458). Increases in globalisation have seen more institutions regarding themselves as positioned within international fields. This complex positioning places a number of factors such as: international reputation in terms of both research and teaching, national market positioning and the national regulatory requirements to widen access in tension with each other. This shapes the importance afforded to widening participation. Where institutions focus more on their reputations or international market position, this is likely to minimise the focus on access to one of compliance as opposed to one of excellence.

---

[33] As discussed in section 2.4 (p.30)

This marketisation is closely entwined with the concept of injustice (Young, 1990). Despite the 'binary principle' (Collini, 2012, p. 30) being abolished in name over 25 years ago, the divide endures in thinking about higher education. Partly due to the key role higher education plays in social reproduction (Croxford and Raffe, 2015). Croxford and Raffe argue that hierarchies of institutions are rigid and self-perpetuating, and many people still refer to the post-92s as ex-polytechnics, framing them as a different kind of institution, driven by the neoliberal market within which institutions are positioned. A market logic was first introduced into education under the Thatcher government and has shaped the direction of both compulsory and post-compulsory education since (Forrester and Garratt, 2016). Whilst institutions compete within a single market, resources and power are unequally distributed (Archer, 2007a). Therefore expansion of higher education within a marketised environment has also been seen to increase inequalities and stratification (Reay et al., 2005). The dual function of universities as both centres of knowledge and as bestowing credentials for employment entrenches this privilege, with higher status institutions facilitating access to certain job opportunities (Bathmaker et al., 2016). In introducing top up fees, New Labour were keen to extend the power of the market and saw a diversity of institutions with different strengths providing increased choice to students desirable (Archer, 2007a). This market logic also underpinned the 2012 increases in tuition fees, as a ways to differentiate institutions on cost (Collini, 2012).

Despite increasing marketisation, the student number cap kept the system functioning as a 'quasi-market' (Whitty, 1997). Within quasi-markets there is an element of competition between providers but not free choice on the part of the potential student (Bowl and Hughes, 2014). Attempts were made first to remove the cap on numbers for high attaining students (AAB at A-level for 2012-13 and ABB for 2013-14) (Hillman, 2014)). However, McCaig and Taylor (2017) found that two years after this change the student demographics had not significantly altered. For 2015-16 entry the cap was removed for all entrants. This relaxing of capacity restrictions combined with the increase in maximum tuition fees offering more scope for institutions to charge variable fees and was anticipated to create a

cost driven market. However, most institutions charged the maximum fee of £9000, meaning that cost did not become a factor in driving choice. There were many possible reasons for this but the enduring role of degrees as a positional marker in credentialing future employees was a key contributing factor. Furthermore, higher education may not have not fully embraced a market logic due to the fallacious presumption of market neutrality and equal choice for all (Forrester and Garratt, 2016). Previous research has shown that choice is bounded (Archer, 2007a, Reay et al., 2005, Stuart, 2012) and in many cases highly local in nature (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018a). Therefore the market is only for a certain group of students, the mobile middle classes who have fewer constraints on what is economically possible (Archer, 2007a). Whilst it could be argued that the associated increase in loans has opened the market to working class students, these rarely cover the full cost of living as clearly exemplified in research with students estranged from their families (Bland, 2018) and thus choice is still constrained.

Whilst one solution to some of the challenges of widening participation within a marketised system might be 'resisting forms of neoliberal regulation' (Burke, 2012, p. 190), it is impossible to imagine this in a system where institutions' ability to charge fees are contingent on compliance with these forms of regulation. In a similar but weaker vein, Greenbank (2006b) argued that offering institutions increased autonomy in developing access measures would encourage creativity. I dispute this claim. As the data highlighted in this and subsequent chapters shows, the level of autonomy the system already allows leads to narrowed focus solely on the 'brightest and best' students in some institutions.

5.2.1 Making widening participation policy 'fit'

> Education policy is not merely a one-way process by which government dictates to teachers and educational administrators but it involves the application, interpretation and sometimes subversion of the original policy goals.

> (Osler, 2013, p. 53)

94

The drive to widen access to higher education is often in tension with the selective nature of higher education. As Osler argues, doing policy within institutions means interpreting and potentially subverting policy goals. This reading of policy enactment is similar to Trowler (2014, p. 30) who highlighted the 'situated understanding of policy implementation'. There is both a need to meet regulatory requirements and ensure the continued mission of an institution. Reconciling these values, especially working within a selective system can be problematic. For many universities therefore, widening participation was conceptualised through equality of opportunity. Focusing on those who already met or were likely to meet entry criteria but subject to factors not of their own making that limited their access to particular institutions, this conceptualisation aligned with the notion of Luck Egalitarianism (Anderson, 1999). Here, the market offered a vertical choice within which students had access only to higher education within certain institutions, as opposed to a horizontal choice across all institutions. It is not therefore, about improving the chances of the individuals but filtering them to their rightful place in the system.

This ability to focus solely on the 'right students' and to subvert and interpret these goals in favourable ways relies on the institution's ability to exert its own power. In Lukes' (1974) view, power is tied to a set of underlying value assumptions. In the context of universities, these value assumptions are likely to differ based on the origins of each institution. Pre-92 institutions are likely to be concerned with selecting the 'best minds' in the country, whereas post-92 institutions are more likely to be focused on transforming the lives of their local (and increasingly also national and international) populations. How institutions set out these values acts as a form of legitimation for the way in which they interpret and enact national policies at a local level and as Greenbank (2006b) argued, different institutions respond differently to these pressures. Bowl and Hughes (2014) examination of publicity materials for the Million+ group[34] from 2011-12 showed that even those institutions who have a good track record on

---

[34] This is a mission group formed of 20 post-92 universities, established in 1997.

access may choose not to foreground this in their literature, which they argued highlighted the tension between market position and access.

Collini (2012) argues that higher education is built upon an inherent selectivity which over time has been religious, focused on specific vocations, intellectual and nearly always based on social class. This selectivity exists regardless of institutional status. In framing their missions, institutions are always targeting a particular type of student (Stich and Reeves, 2016). These selective positions can shift, for instance in the 1940s and 1950s, redbrick universities, now seen as the pinnacle of selectivity were seen as for lower classes of students (Stuart, 2012). Whilst the Robbins principle was the foundation of much widening participation policy it too retained an element of selectivity within its language:

> Courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and wish to do so.

> (The Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 8)

Therefore, institutions can introduce an element of selectivity regardless of their market positions through influencing both who is able and who wants to attend their institution. They can do this through the courses on offer, the facilities and the targeting of marketing messages and recruitment. In all of these there is an underlying assumption about who the potential students of an institution are. Furthermore, this selectivity is underpinned by an enduring tension between issues of quality and equality; the question of how to include without lowering standards (Burke, 2012). How much this is a real fear is questionable and the correlation between status and quality is contested (Whitty et al., 2015). Nonetheless, it is still a significant consideration by many institutions. This becomes problematic when considering the position of institutions in a global market. These global positions are often reliant on rankings in league tables which in many cases include entry qualifications as a key metric (e.g. Complete University Guide, 2018). The need to perform within national and global markets '…profoundly constrain[s] the possibilities for change and transformation' (Burke, 2012, p. 189). I would argue while it does place constraints on institutions, it is their choice how to position themselves. However, as Zizek (2009) argues, markets

are based on beliefs. For the hierarchical system of higher education, the belief is that the more selective an institution, the better it must be. Therefore, decreasing selectivity is essentially believed by some to devalue the institution.

The purpose of universities is contested with their role in preparation of a workforce in tension with their value of knowledge creation for its own sake (Collini, 2012). Ideals of justice also underpin the social purpose of even the most selective universities due to their role in preparing individuals for certain professions. However, the notion of social justice is complex. For some, 'social justice means the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression' (Young, 1990, p. 18). Whilst this definition is idealistic, eliminating domination in a field that is encouraged to act as a hierarchical market is antithetical to its existence as domination is central to the identities creating tensions between equality and market success. Understandings of social justice may also be very different for the ministers, civil servants, institutional management teams and practitioners.

5.2.2 Juggling agendas and competing locally, national and internationally

Just as the purpose of universities has shifted over time, so has who they target. McCaig (2015b) noted that between 2006-7 and 2012-13 there was a move from a primarily regional focus to a more national recruitment focus for post-92 institutions. Whilst this opens access more widely, a move to national targeting creates reliance on quantitative measures of disadvantage that lack the nuance of local in-depth knowledge. This was partly the reason for the National Network of Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) created by HEFCE to provide a single point of contact between schools and higher education (Whitty et al., 2015). That being said widening participation and outreach work in the 2016-17 access agreements analysed for this study targeted local schools and colleges. Therefore the outreach offer for most individuals is not determined primarily by their needs and interests but by the mission, ethos and offerings of geographically proximal institutions. Whilst a market logic assumes all institutions are competing nationally for the same students, competition is actually far more localised with the majority of

entrants choosing a local institution (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018a). This contrasts to the desire by institutions to be nationally competitive and offering a full range of subjects at both undergraduate and postgraduate level (Collini, 2012). There is also an international dimension here especially when there is no restriction on the fees that can be charged to international students; an important source of revenue.

5.3 The role of the market in shaping institutional positions

The focus now shifts from the literature to the analysis of the access agreements. Fairclough (2010) highlighted three distinct stages of analysis: description, interpretation and explanation. This discourse analysis is supplemented by the interview data in Section 5.4 to generate deeper insights, focusing on the relationship between access agreements and widening participation practices. Previous studies have examined widening participation through texts such as access agreements (McCaig, 2015b, McCaig and Adnett, 2009), widening participation policies (Greenbank, 2006b) and website and marketing material (Graham, 2012). None of these examined the relationship between policy discourses and the practitioners who enact policy. Notably, Harrison et al. (2015) conducted a survey of institutions to explore issues such as targeting and perceptions of success in widening participation although the focus of this was responses from senior managers, not practitioners. Greenbank (2006b), Jones (2014) and Harrison and Waller (2016) have also focused widening participation research on senior policymakers and managers to examine institutional decision-making but this did not capture the messiness of policy enactment at the coal face. Therefore, a distinct contribution this study makes to the literature is the integration of coal face practitioners' voices with institutional narratives.

The analysis weaves in a number of different elements, namely values and assumptions, legitimation and lexical choices. Several of these lexical choices emerged in prominence across the body of data such as language relating to investment, collaboration, potential and aspiration. This chapter focuses on the holistic issues relating to institutional framings and collaboration. Potential and

aspiration are addressed in Chapters Six and Eight respectively as they relate closely to deeper issues of difference between the institutions and specifically to gaps between policy and practice.

5.3.1 Comparing the institutional framings of access

Whilst there was not a set format of the narrative document in access agreements[35], institutions were encouraged to use the following headings:

- fees, student numbers and fee income

- access and student success measures

- targets and milestones

- monitoring and evaluation arrangements

- equality and diversity

- provision of information to prospective students

- consulting with students.

OFFA (2015b, p. 13)

In eight of the ten agreements analysed, in addition to the suggested headings, an additional introduction framing the institution was added. These introductions were markedly different in the language used between pre-92 and post-92 institutions. As Stich and Reeves (2014) argued in their critical analysis of the mission statements of American universities, these types of statement deploy rhetoric and language that reveal messages about who and what universities are for. Whilst they argued that some normalized use of rhetoric can hide meaning, other language is value laden and a good signifier of institutional values. In post-92 institutions, this was focused on their positive track records around widening participation and long-standing commitments to this agenda. For example, New Riverton talked about its 'long standing commitment and success in widening access to groups traditionally under-represented' in higher education and New Norton lead with its 'commitment to inclusion'. These commitments can be seen as a form of authorization, setting out their expertise in this area. In contrast, the pre-92 institutions such as Old Riverton focused on their need to 'seek out and

---

[35] The access agreements also comprised an associated spreadsheet detailing spend and targets. Only the targets are made public and thus the analysis focused on these narrative documents.

nurture talent' and Old Norton on 'identifying and attracting the most-able students regardless of background'. Old Middleton focused on their position as a 'selective leading global university'. This rationalisation frames issues of access as more challenging and positions access and prestige in tension. These texts also seemed to mirror the 'welcome' messages Graham (2012) described in her study of websites, positioning the pre-92 institutions as elite and post-92 as accessible.

This framing demarcates two distinct ideological positions. For pre-92 institutions, the framing is on talented individuals who may be from the target groups upon which they have been asked to focus. Both Old Norton and Old Overton explicitly state they are looking for the 'most able' students, regardless of their backgrounds. In a manner of speaking, they are trying to find the diamonds in the rough. This position is in many ways logical, as Old Weston identified, their aim was to '… increase [their] applicant pool sufficient to meet [their] entrant targets for the relevant under-represented groups'. However, this position is assimilationist, assuming that the only students who should have access are the ones that are like their current entrants. Old Riverton has a slightly more progressive position in that they:

> Seek out and nurture talent to ensure that our pursuit of academic
> excellence is enriched by the diverse experiences of our students.

This suggests there is an awareness that whilst talent may be something that can be identified, it may still need to be developed. Although later they set out that:

> The aim is to demystify elite universities and to equip students most of
> whom will be the first in their families to go on to higher education with
> the knowledge and insight to make high-quality applications to prestigious
> universities.

So therefore, this is not just a benevolent endeavour but one framed through a lens of recruitment. This essentially is a deficit model based around those who have talent as conceived by institutions but not the intentions to progress to them. As Whitty et al. (2015, p. 53) highlighted, 'any so called 'deficit' is not based solely in disadvantaged young people but embedded in universities' own structures,

procedures and attitudes'. Framing talent in this way can be seen to be a manufactured concept, that can be read as a form of mythopoesis; a narrative that has been created to maintain status of the pre-92 institutions by focusing students who are likely to assimilate into their structures. Chapter Six discusses the issue of targeting in more depth. Post-92 institutions adopted a very different position. None of these mentioned ability within their introductions. Instead their framing was more inclusive based on an interest in widening the demographic who go to university.

5.3.2 Is widening access at odds with competing in the market?

> The University itself continues to evolve and in recent years has raised its academic profile, particularly the entry standards which applicants must achieve in order to gain admission. It is recognised that in some instances this has added to the ongoing challenge to widen access to the University for students from a wide range of backgrounds.

> (New Overton)

Competing within national and global markets requires institutions to ensure they perform well in league tables which means institutional policy is framed through these metrics (Greenbank, 2006b). Currently there are 20 global rankings and 150 national ones and competing on these global stages has been seen by some institutions to be more important than previous roles as civic universities (Hazelkorn, 2018). One of the metrics that impact league table positions is entry tariff. Therefore pre-92 institutions focus on high attaining students from under-represented backgrounds. This is also becoming increasingly problematic in some post-92 institutions through attempts to strategically increase their market positioning following the changes to student number controls in order to compete alongside higher status institutions (McCaig and Taylor, 2017). In the case of New Overton, this means trading off their longstanding commitment to access with what is needed to compete in the market. This is congruent with analysis of HEI websites which highlighted a move over time to marketing positions that focused less on inclusivity and more on prestige (Graham, 2012). I argue that when post-92

institutions are still heavily reliant on local intakes of students whose choices are bounded by constraints of geography, that concerns with league tables can be detrimental to offering opportunities to local communities who need them. Through a shifting focus to international competition, the mission of local widening access may be taking a backseat, relying on historical successes in this area.

5.3.3 Acts of nobility or acts of necessity?

Two approaches to widening participation existed within access agreements; moral and instrumental. This was not a binary distinction, as all types of institution had instrumental needs and a moral agenda but these were prioritised differently along this continuum in different institutions. Autonomy over target setting was always liable to privilege a focus on those targets which are in the institutions' self-interest (McCaig and Adnett, 2009), something actually designed into the system in the Dearing Report through the encouragement of institutions to develop strategies that 'fit their strategic mission' (Robertson and Hillman, 1997, p. 60), however subsequent marketisation has further shaped these positions.

The instrumental position is more clearly noted by the post-92 institutions. For example, New Overton are clear that widening participation and recruitment are one and the same:

> In practice there is no distinction between our work to raise awareness and aspiration and our mainstream recruitment activity.

Two post-92 institutions that were approached to participate in the study no longer had dedicated widening participation outreach staff. Instead this work was devolved to faculties and subsumed into general recruitment work. This resonated with the findings of Harrison et al. (2015, p. 3) who referred to this being an issue in a 'substantial minority' of institutions in their sample. This notion of instrumental widening participation in order to ensure the continued viability of an institution has also been framed through what Jones and Thomas (2005) have theorized as a utilitarian approach.

As McCaig (2015b) noted in his comparative analysis of 2006-7 and 2012-13 access agreements, the move from specific targets relating to the composition of the student body to ones focused on strategic priorities offered a solution to the tension between high entry tariffs and widening access. Whilst strategic approaches are often needed in order to address enduring inequalities, it is through practices that ideologies are realised (Althusser, 2008). Therefore, writing a strategy does not commit the institution to a change, it is only in realising that change through practices that we see a change in ideology. However, the level of institutional commitments to these missions is variable. As Sara Ahmed (2017) has highlighted in relation to equality work, just because there is a strategy does not mean the issues are being addressed .

5.3.4 Legitimising institutional positions

There were a number of ways institutions legitimated their positions. Firstly, drawing on a positive past history was common across both pre-92 and post-92 institutions. For example, New Riverton highlighted its:

> long standing commitment and success in widening access to groups traditionally under-represented in higher education

This claim to historical success was most pronounced in the post-92 institutions. For example, New Overton states:

> We have been working for more than 20 years with schools and colleges from primary through to sixth form to promote progression, participation and flexible access

The unquestioned assumption was that widening access is a 'good'. Whilst this is somewhat unsurprising given the documents are written to fulfil a required commitment to widen access, one of the key flaws was the 'fallacy of accountability' (Collini, 2012, p. 108). The institution was claiming that by reporting something in the required way, meant it had addressed the problem. This claim was legitimated through limited evidence. If we consider these claims of legitimacy in terms of power, the institutions are asserting their authority. Using Lukes (1974) three-dimensional view, this assertion is an attempt to control

the political agenda by demonstrating expertise. This expertise can be evidenced by institutions through the benchmarking of performance against other institutions. How pre-92 and post-92 institutions benchmarked their performance was a clear point of differentiation. Whitty et al. (2015, p. 55) have argued that:

> The narrow scope of performance indicators is increasingly defining how universities view and measure success.

The root of this conundrum can be seen in the Dearing report which sets out that governing bodies 'should benchmark their performance with comparable institutions' (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997, p. 107). This essentially gave a carte blanche to institutions not to consider their performance holistically but in relation to those who were similar to them. Common to all post-92 access agreements analysed was framing of performance in absolute terms. For example, New Norton talked about:

> …high absolute performance in both access and widening participation and, particularly against national benchmarks, is considerably higher than the sector average.

In contrast, some pre-92 institutions situated their performance in relative terms. Old Riverton for example talked about being 'in the vanguard of the Russell Group' or Old Norton who had the 'highest absolute number of students across each of the key widening participation indicators among our peer institutions in the English Russell Group'. This framing is arguably only possible due to the fact they also have one of the largest student populations in the group and this offers a more favourable picture than a percentage. Old Middleton is also adamant that their:

> … performance should be placed against that of institutions most similar to us in the Russell Group.

Absolute performance is not of interest to them. The framing of success in comparison to other highly selective institutions suggests an investment in the enduring ideology that only those who it deems worthy of being its peers matter. Additionally, there is an assumption that what is possible in terms of how far

access can be widened by elite institutions is constrained, an example of mythopoesis. This resonates with analysis of documents from 2011-12 including access agreements, which found similar framings of performance (Bowl and Hughes, 2014). Bowl and Hughes argued that these selective institutions are complying with policy whilst staking out their strategic positions and I argue that the key issue here is power. Where institutions already held positions of power, such as is conferred by being in the Russell Group, they use this position of privilege to potentially down play their lack of progress on access. This use of authorization to justify that high entry requirements meant what could be achieved was limited by who actually gain these grades. This would not be possible without possessing that power. In contrast, Old Riverton and Old Weston make no such claims in their peer groups, instead comparing their progress over time. It is likely therefore that they felt framing it in this way painted a more positive picture for them and a rationalisation of their position. Unlike the other pre-92 institutions, Old Overton focused on its absolute performance within its geographical context:

> Our record of Widening Participation in the North East is outstanding, and we significantly exceed all of the national WP benchmarks in terms of the WP profile of North East entrants.

This is most likely because its performance is comparable on a national level so there is no need to be selective about its presentation. Notably, all of these pre-92 institutions are not merely presenting an objective account of success but framing their performance in the most positive light, thus legitimating their approaches; a key difference between the two types of institution.

There are also differences to the extent upon which different institutions reference internal and external documents to set out their positions. Most balanced reference to internal and external sources. In contrast, Old Overton and Old Norton's primarily focused upon internal documents to back up their claims of the strategic approach they adopted. New Weston referred to 55 external sources ranging from HEFCE reports to research. Taken in light of the expansive nature of their access agreement at 44 pages in length, this could suggest a relatively inexperienced

author or a desire to create an evidence led agreement. In contrast, the content did not differ significantly from other post-92 agreements.
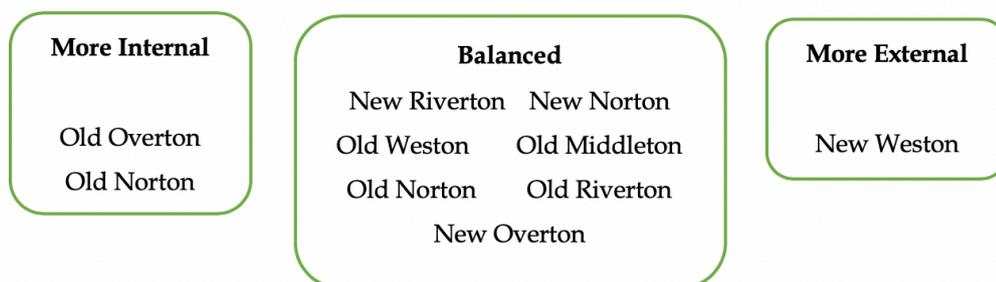
fig 5.1 – Intertextuality in access agreements

5.3.5 Investment or expenditure?

The spend and the language that was used to talk about the finances used to support widening access and success are also a point of variance between institutions. Differences in spend were driven by both student fee income and the OFFA guidance on spend expectations. Additionally, institutions were asked to focus on the parts of the lifecycle which were most problematic for students from under-represented backgrounds. Therefore, post-92 institutions focused more of their spend on success and progression issues and less on access. On the contrary, pre-92 institutions focused more spend on access measures. There are also differences in the lexical choices made relating to this spend.

	New	Old
Riverton	£600,000	£3,500,000
Weston	£700,000	£1,900,000
Norton	£1,300,000	£3,300,000
Middleton	£500,000	£4,700,000
Overton	£1,400,000	£3,300,000

table 5.1 - Spend on Access and Outreach measures (rounded to nearest £100,000)[36]

---

[36]https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Access-agreements-for-2016-17-data-tables.xlsx

Whilst some institutions framed additional fee income used to support access, success and progression as **investment**, others saw it as an **expenditure**. Eight of the institutions referred to spend as investment and this was not influenced by geography or institutional type. However, mentions of investment were more often linked to measures to increase retention and success as opposed to access and outreach work. In a field of higher education that is becoming increasingly marketised, retention can have a direct impact on income by ensuring once recruited, students do not leave, whereas the impact of outreach work is often less directly correlated to income. Whilst access and success spend was a statutory obligation originating from a desire to ensure tuition fees did not create barriers to success in higher education, it was clear that institutions saw that correct investment of these funds could also pay dividends for their position within the market. To take for example New Middleton:

> The focus of our access agreement expenditure will remain upon the provision of tailored investment to support retention and success in achieving an award along with maintaining the increased level of expenditure on outreach activities.

Here, the pre-entry work was framed as an expense and post-entry work as an investment. This position is logical when we consider the student body already comprised a large percentage of students from widening participation backgrounds without need for additional interventions.

5.3.6 All for one or survival of the fittest

If enabling access to the institution which best meets the needs of an individual is at the heart of widening participation, this necessitates a collaborative approach as their local higher education institution may not meet their needs. This is something New Overton acknowledges:

> …as a University we recognise that we expend considerable staff and non-staff resource in enthusing applicants who ultimately will apply and progress to other universities.

(New Overton)

107

This is more of an issue for those post-92 institutions who work with a wide spectrum of individuals as opposed to pre-92 institutions who focus on the 'brightest and the best'. It is here the moral and economic imperatives for widening participation sit in tension. Widening access to higher education more generally is the moral good, but the diversity of the institution's own student body is what is assessed by the regulator. Since Aimhigher, institutions were no longer mandated to work collaboratively (McCaig, 2015b) although it has been encouraged by OFFA and many have continued to do so. New and Old Weston both highlighted their continued partnerships following Aimhigher. One of the idiosyncrasies of the development of access agreements is the lag between them being written and the period they cover; the 2016-17 agreements were submitted in April 2015. Therefore, whilst eight of them mention the NNCO projects, these finished early in 2016-17. None mention the NCOP as these had not yet been agreed at the point the documents were written[37]. This lag meant access agreements were not always representative of what was being done, raising a question about the ability for them to offer a granular picture of what was actually done by institutions.

Whilst most NNCO and NCOP collaborations were formulated on location-based partnerships[38], several pre-92 institutions mentioned the Realising Opportunities programme which Old Overton describes as:

> an award-winning national fair access scheme involving 15 leading universities, which work together to promote access for WP students to research intensive universities.

Additionally, Old Norton also mentioned a collaboration with another regional Russell Group university. This national collaboration with competitor institutions seemed to be distinct to the pre-92 institutions and suggests that due to their selective nature and lower reliance on recruitment numbers, there is a more open approach to collaborate with other institutions that hold similar market positions.

---

[37] NNCO and NCOP were discussed more extensively in Chapter Two

[38] Exceptions being the NNCOs for Oxbridge, care leavers and mature students

5.3.7 Summary

This section has highlighted some of the key points of difference in the access agreements. There were clear variations based on the values underlying how institutions framed access based on: ideological positions relating to whom and what university is for, the way in which they legitimated their positions and how they measured success in this area, the framing of this work in terms of investment or expense and who they collaborate with. The documents only offer a partial picture of how and why these positions existed telling little of how these differences were realised in practice. Therefore, the analysis moves to examine these issues in relation to the narratives of practitioners.

5.4 Enacting institutional positions

So far, this chapter has focused on institutions as a singular entity through their access agreements as a reification of their norms and values. However, institutions are not monolithic and are made up of multiple voices and perspectives (Fairclough, 2010). Access agreements as negotiated documents shape 'what can and should be said' (p.43). Moreover, just because something was written does not imply the author subscribed to those ideas. As Fairclough noted in his reflection on writing his own academic CV:

> I suppose I saw the preparation of the submission as a rhetorical exercise. By which I mean I was consciously using language in a way I dislike, playing with and parodying an alien discourse, in order to 'play the game'.

(p.112)

Similarly, interview data was potentially shaped by what individuals felt comfortable with sharing, however, it allowed for deeper probing of individual's perspectives than can be done through text analysis and demonstrated where individual positions were in tension with institutional positions. Interviewing practitioners at the time of enactment also added a temporal distinction between the two data sets. Drawing back on the morphogenetic cycle (fig.5.2) the access agreements highlighted thinking at T_1 but the practitioners are discussing

interpretation of policy taking place between T_2 and T_3 and enactment at T_4. I argue therefore that in many cases, widening participation is morphostatic and although practitioners worked reflexively within the policy context, this did not feed back into changes at a structural level due to low levels of socio-cultural interaction between practitioners and institutional policy makers thus leading to limited structural change. This argument was supported by the interview data where it was evident that very few of the practitioners interviewed were involved in the access agreement process.

T_1 Structural Conditioning

T_2 Socio-cultural T_3
          interaction
                    Structural elaboration (morphogenesis)
                                                            T_4
                    Structural reproduction (morphostasis)
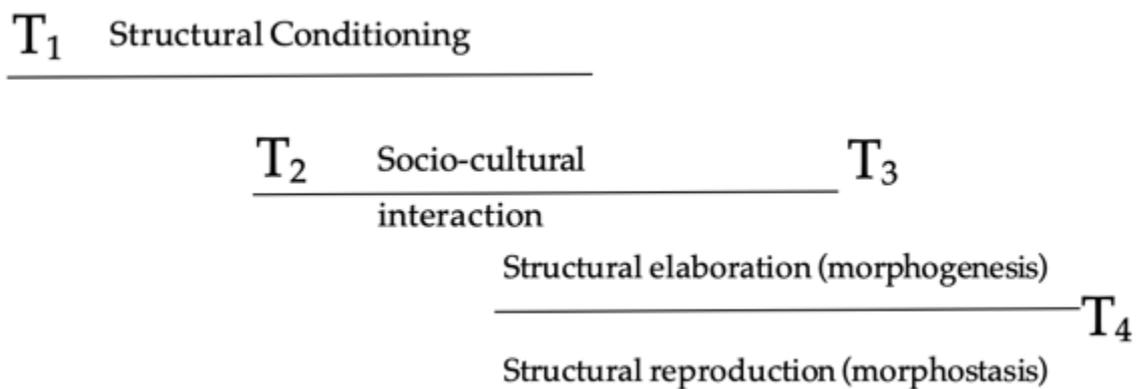
fig.5.2 – Morphogenetic cycle (Archer, 1995)

David (post-92) offered an insight into why there is a variation between what is said and what is done:

> …access agreements if you look at them are so high level that it doesn't - You might use a few examples but the stuff you are actually going to get monitored on mostly is stuff that you don't have a massive amount of control over.

This comparison between what was said and done, focused not on specific institutions and how their practices varied from what was set out in access agreements, but on how the themes discussed previously resonated with practitioners' narratives. Whilst thirteen practitioners interviewed worked in phase one institutions, three did not, however their narratives highlighted many of the same issues and these data have been considered holistically in terms of exploring the differences between policy and practice in pre-92 and post-92 institutions. These data foregrounded some of the tensions that the pluralism of

110

individuals within an institution can create between competing conceptions of equality and ideologies.

Enacting policy and creating practice in widening participation can be seen as a form of policy decoding and this offers a space for 'creative reinvention' (Trowler, 2014, p. 24). It is this need to account for agency and reflexivity in relation to this process that drove the use of a critical realist perspective in order to provide a theoretical basis underpinning the research. Whilst this section introduces some of the issues, this creative reinvention will be returned to in Chapter Seven when looking at the role of practitioners in more depth.

5.4.1 'We recognise that as a small department that there's only so much that we can do'

The teams practitioners worked in was a point of variance across institutions. Generally, teams focused primarily on outreach work, with student success and progression taking place elsewhere in the institutions. The major difference between pre-92 and post-92 institutions was the size of widening participation teams. Somewhat ironically, the quote for the title of this section comes from Beverley (pre-92) who worked in one of the larger teams. In fact, both pre-92 institutions in phase two had teams consisting of more than fifteen practitioners. In the post-92 institutions teams ranged from six to two practitioners. Whilst small teams were common to post-92 institutions, Alice (post-92) summarised the common issues:

> So in theory [name of university] has a large WP budget, but in actuality how much of that is spent on actual access is questionable. Yeah so there's a team of four of us and we do all the schools and colleges engagement and all of the WP […] I used to work at [name of pre-92 university] and that's a massive team, so you have you know an evaluation officer and other people working on that so the data is much more refined whereas we are much more working on a kind of ad hoc basis.

In contrast Rebecca (post-92) had moved from a small team to a much larger one but felt there were benefits of being in a smaller team:

> it was a very small team, much smaller team than [name of university] so I got a lot of experience very quickly, was entrusted with a lot of stuff very early on.

In most cases those practitioners being interviewed were in specific widening participation teams which were distinct from the recruitment function of the institution. Within one pre-92 institution they were co-located in the same wider team but the widening participation roles were a specific sub-team separate from recruitment. In contrast, in just two post-92 institutions where Alice and Carol worked, a small team was tasked with all the schools and colleges liaison work.
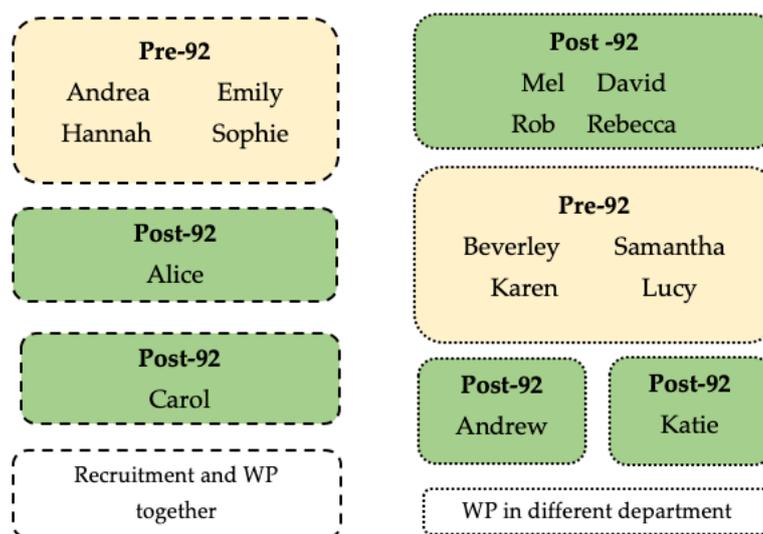
fig 5.3 - Location of widening participation teams in institutions

Regardless of the stated level of investment in outreach in the access agreements, the number of staff limits the scope of what can be co-ordinated and organised centrally. Whilst more devolved strategies can be adopted, this means that work is being carried out at a distance from those who have the professional knowledge of widening participation; a challenge to which Chapter Seven returns.

The tension between being under resourced and overstretched is also underpinned by the assumption that more is better; essentially, the debate about

quantity of outreach undertaken versus one of quality. This is crystallised in New Weston's agreement:

> The targets and milestones were set around the volume of key outreach activity that we intend to deliver. Where possible, an indication of the number of participants that will be reached has been given.

Certainly from the OFFA summary of 2016-17 access agreements, they highlight positively the year on year increase in the amounts institutions are spending on access agreement measures (£735.2 million (2015-16) to £750.8 million (2016-17)) (OFFA, 2015a). This focus on spend and quantifiable targets has led to a focus often on what can be counted opposed to that which matters most. As Collini has argued, 'It is a mistake to think that if you make people more accountable for what they do, you will necessarily make them more efficient at doing it' (Collini, 2012, p. 135). This was also a concern of practitioners:

> I think the OFFA access agreement is a great thing and I think they are extremely important, but I think that sometimes people can do things just to get the numbers up and actually when we are talking about quality versus quantity, OFFA access agreements come to mind because it's more important that I deliver a quality service than just get 300 kids in for a day and they don't actually go away with anything. I'd rather do a full ten-week programme but do it with less students and it be more intensive with my time and those students actually feel like something has changed than just tick a box and I think sometimes we can be asked to do things that aren't really supportive of the aims that we are all in this for which is just very frustrating.

> Rebecca (post-92)

Other participants also highlighted tensions between doing what is needed and the ways in which success is measured. Again, this can be seen as exemplary of non-performativity; institutions making writing policies and setting targets as the main solution as opposed to solving the actual issues in question (Ahmed, 2007). Whilst I would argue that it is not just about the targets, there is a clear pressure identified within the data that work is often driven by regulatory requirements

and targeting as opposed to the needs of the individuals who benefit from widening participation. This issue transcends institutional type but is more evident in post-92 institutions when there is more limited capacity. It is also problematic if those institutions with the greatest reach are the ones whose resources are the most stretched and those with a narrow focus are investing more resource into a small sub group of students who, based on attainment, are already predisposed to progress to higher education.

5.4.2 'You couldn't put it in the access agreement because you don't know if it is going to be there next year'

Another key theme in the interview data was the limited capacity access agreements had for capturing a full picture of the work going on in institutions. Most of the practitioners interviewed were not at the level of seniority to be directly involved in writing their access agreements. One of the exceptions was David (post-92)[39]. Within his interview he highlighted some of the tensions between long term strategic planning in the access agreements and the required pace and reactivity that was indicative of much widening participation work. The transitory nature of many projects, especially with external partners was clearly a concern for him. More than this was also the time and space for practitioners to be able to think strategically about what they are doing. His relatively small team in a post-92 institution meant that the pressure to do more was marginalising the space for this planning work:

> The summer was the time for reflecting but inevitably the summer is getting shorter and before you know it you are being asked to put a programme together for next year without time to even look. Very often before you've even delivered stuff for this year.

This highlighted a distinct awareness and yet a seeming inability to solve the issue. There is a danger in aligning investment to areas of institutional risk which potentially squeezes areas of historically good performance, reducing them to a

---

[39] Beverley (pre-92) also mentioned being involved in the process but did not talk about this in her interview.

level that becomes ineffective. These are often the institutions doing the heavy lifting of reaching out to those who otherwise may not consider higher education at all, meaning this does not just impact that institution but also the sector more widely.

5.4.3 Moving across boundaries

The interviews allowed practitioners to talk about their experiences relative to their current institutions but five of the practitioners had also previously worked in other institutions. This allowed for the discussion of differences in ethos between different types of institutions with these practitioners. Contrasting narratives showed that in some cases they felt their previous institutions had a greater focus on recruitment. Both Mel (post-92) and Rebecca (post-92) felt their previous pre-92 institutions were less focused on widening participation per se and more focused on recruitment:

> [the university has] not got that underlying recruitment kind of focus to it whereas I used to work on the access programme at [a pre-92 university] that was a widening participation programme, but it had a very specific purpose of getting students from certain backgrounds into that university.

> Mel (post-92)

Other practitioners, such as Alice (post-92), felt that the progress needed in relation to WP in the pre-92 institutions meant there was a greater commitment:

> Because [the other pre-92 and Oxbridge institutions] all have so much to do in terms of making progress in terms of meeting that gap between getting in and upping the number of students from state schools and from non-traditional backgrounds, whether that's BME etc., because those institutions have so much more to do there's almost a, from my experience, certainly within the departments themselves, within the WP teams, there's almost a greater commitment to widening participation.

These differences were not just noted moving across the pre-92 and post-92 divide, Katie (post-92) described the difference in the two post-92 institutions she had worked in:

> despite the fact that I think the universities are quite similar in their cohort of students and things like that. I think the approach to widening participation is really different. Even just take, for example, the number of people that work in the team. So, at the moment I'm currently part of a team of two, so that's me and my manager but at the time when I worked at [previous university] there was four graduate staff and then four officers and then managers as well so it was a much larger team that seemed to do a bit more diverse range of stuff.

The differences highlighted resonated with previous issues raised in this chapter relating to resources, team size and the purpose of widening participation. This therefore suggests that some of the issues highlighted in the study are more generalisable across the sector.

5.4.4 Collaboration within a competitive market

Differences in institutional approaches often created tensions, limiting scope for collaboration. Collaboration can be challenging but Aimhigher allowed schools to be more comfortable with widening participation as it reduced the risk of it being a pure recruitment drive for one institution (Whitty et al., 2015). Whilst the access agreements analysed in the study highlighted a diverse range of collaborative projects, this was not mirrored by interview data. Whilst thirteen practitioners mentioned collaboration in their interviews, the form this collaboration took was framed in varied ways both internal and external to the institutions. External collaboration highlighted included: work with local authorities, third sector organisations, research councils, cultural institutions, corporate partners, other HEIs and government in one case. Variation was notable across institutional types. For example, no practitioners working in one pre-92 mentioned any collaboration with other HEIs, despite this being mentioned extensively within their access agreement. There was equally variation between institutions of the same type. For example, the use of corporate partners to support widening participation work

was uncommon, despite the role policy places on employment outcomes. David (post-92) was one of five practitioners who talked about business links. He explained that it was an undervalued form of collaboration:

> I think it's one that universities don't make enough of and ironically with the social mobility agenda, it's probably an open door with businesses at the moment.

David's narrative returned to the tension between the long-term planning required of access agreements and the more ad hoc opportunities highlighted previously. Furthermore, to collaborate, partnerships need to be developed and where practitioners are already describing an under resourced role that is being pushed to do more, the space to create these partnerships is likely to be limited. Partnerships with third-sector organisations were also mentioned; three of the practitioners in pre-92 institutions made explicit reference to the Brilliant club, a charity that uses PhD students and targets gifted and talented students in schools as mentioned in their access agreements. This national organisation targets the same types of students as the pre-92 institutions but widens the geographical reach so builds on the claim that market competition means finding ways to extend the geographical reach of widening participation work.

There was also a distinct focus on internal collaboration within the institutions. Six practitioners mentioned internal collaborations in different forms. Hannah (pre-92) explicitly outlined that they '…collaborate with different parts of the university but not other institutions'. This internal collaboration often focused on funding, support and advice for activities being delivered in other departments:

> we have colleagues we give money to through the access agreement to the different departments, so pharmacy will run their own events, nursing will, you know so I sort of help them target, work out what they are doing, recruit students, that kind of thing for those, give them advice.

Emily (pre-92)

The framing of internal collaborations highlighted that widening participation in some institutions is still a peripheral activity which other internal departments

117

need to be incentivised through funding streams to engage with. As Beverley (pre-92) phrased it 'we have a lot of partnerships with different departments across [the institution] to help us meet our WP targets'. 'Our targets' could have referred to the institutions targets, but it felt more like her team bore the primary responsibility for these and that it was their role to get other parts of the institution to help the team achieve them. Given that key performance indicators are used to measure success in staff performance, this is unsurprising but is at odds with the whole institution strategic approach laid out in their access agreement which framed ownership firmly with the institution's senior management. Internal collaboration was more prevalent in the narratives of the pre-92 practitioners but Carol (post-92) also highlighted that her role involved a lot of internal collaboration with academics. It may be that the participants were not the ones who were working on the collaborative initiatives in their institutions and both phase two pre-92 institutions had large teams yet external collaborative projects were often framed as additionality as opposed to a core part of their provision. In contrast the capacity in some post-92 institutions meant collaboration was essential to ensure they could continue to deliver the same volume of pre-entry activity:

> no matter what the government says about this is additional money for additional activity. At the same time, you've just taken money off universities through HEFCE's outreach funding so inevitably some of this is ending up being rebadging what was already going on.
>
> David (post-92)

This meant that teams within institutions with smaller access and outreach budgets (because the focus has shifted to retention and success) had to do more collaborative work to ensure that they could continue existing work streams. As David elaborated:

> …we're going to do this event anyway and we'll count this proportion of the learners to NCOP and this proportion to our WP budget and it becomes an accounting exercise.

In continuing to retain a strong collaborative ethos, the work described by Mel (post-92) from the same institution who seemed to offer resistance to the marketised narrative of other institutions:

> We have an existing collaborative programme of work which is one of the only truly collaborative and impartial outreach programmes in the country from my understanding of this area of work. So, we run visits at any university and the content and the experience that the young people get should be broadly the same and they get to find out about the full range of higher education from part time HNDs right through to like masters level study.

Valuing collaboration both as a necessity and a strength, allowed some institutions to work within their context to offer opportunities that fit their conceptions of social justice at the same time as fulfilling regulatory requirements. Other institutions saw the NCOP projects as external to their work. For example, Alice (post-92) felt that they '…don't use that commitment as much as we could'. Partly this can be seen in the way in which these projects were initiated and regulated. Whilst commitments in the access agreement fell to OFFA to regulate, the NCOP projects were separately funded and monitored by HEFCE. Most collaboration highlighted in interviews was restricted to the NCOP (and NNCO projects before them). Where HEIs were collaborating outside of NCOP projects, it seemed more focused on specific groups. For example, Carol (post-92) talked about a partnership with a pre-92 institution in the city on a Looked After Children programme.

5.4.5 'I always refer to recruitment teams as like state secrets'

One of the recurrent tensions in the interview data was between the needs of the individual and the institutions. Whilst access agreements were often framed in terms of recruitment to the institution and changing the demographic of the student body, this was not always replicated in the culture of the teams discussed by the practitioners:

> I don't believe that we should be pushing specific institutions because what

> [we] do well, [the local pre-92 university] does as well and you get to see
> that rounded picture […] that's kind of why I like [here] as well as it just
> doesn't have that recruitment agenda.

<p style="text-align:right">Rebecca (post-92)</p>

Andrew (post-92) also described a similar approach but highlighted how this was
in tension with the institution to some extent:

> I would argue, you wouldn't want your WP or outreach student to be
> contaminated by recruitment and we certainly don't advocate in our
> activities attending this institution but the way that I think the way
> outreach and WP is sort of perceived by senior leaders is yeah, they see it
> with more of a business case attached to it so I think there a definite tension
> there.

In fact, David (post-92) who led their team expressly stated:

> And we do think it is important that actually what we do is around
> widening participation not recruitment.

In contrast, Carol (post-92) and Alice (post-92) described working in institutions
which had a highly local intake. For Carol (post-92), there was a dilemma that if
they were to encourage them to go elsewhere then this would negatively impact
the institutions finances:

> My salary is paid for by the university so I have some commitment there
> and I would like to see, particularly with my post-16 work, it makes
> strategic sense that when I'm designing an activity it's around the subject
> areas that my university either needs to recruit for or it's a flagship course
> or something so it's very much kind of influenced by those admissions
> figures.

Thus, the economic imperative impacted upon the ability for Carol to fulfil her
perceived moral duty to meet the needs of individuals she works with when these
did not intersect with institutional needs. Even within more selective institutions
the same tensions recurred:

I will always say it's about making the right choice rather than saying it's about coming [here] but essentially the wider university wants to see that we're getting a certain number of students that are coming to the university as a result of our outreach activity.

Samantha (pre-92)

Here the concern is not filling places to survive, but ensuring under-represented students needed to hit institutional targets are recruited. For other institutions, there seems to be a clear line at sixteen:

we are all pre-16 so anything post-16 goes onto the recruitment team regardless of whether kind of they are on our WP cohort list or not. everything goes to recruitment after that.

Katie (post-92)

Being reliant on recruitment for survival creates a tension with the needs of the students they might be trying to attract. As highlighted earlier, the distance between widening participation outreach and recruitment teams is important. Where they are co-located, this amplifies the tension as the ability to offer impartial advice to individuals on the right course and institution for their needs is limited. This control over potential students was highlighted by Mel (post-92) who talked of the issue of competition:

We're all trying to do the same things, but we've all got different challenges … I always refer to recruitment teams as like state secrets. I'm pretty sure you've all got the same contact in that school because it's the same contact that I've got. Oh no, we can't share contacts, that's sensitive information. Sensitive commercial information!

Therefore, I would question whether widening participation that meets the needs of individuals is possible in this environment where institutions have the power to set their own targets based on their own agendas and within the policy recommendations in Chapter Nine, I set out possible solutions to this.

5.4.6 Summary

In integrating the interview data with the analysis of the access agreements the variation between institutions and also within them can be seen. The data has also highlighted the limitations of access agreements to capture a real picture of what was happening in practice. Key tensions between institutional missions and the purpose of widening participation have been foregrounded, specifically in terms of collaboration in a marketised environment. This section has also demonstrated the agency to resist institutional framings in practice.

5.5 Theorising difference

Whilst this chapter has highlighted differences between both types of institutions and between similar institutions, there were clear differences in approaches between the pre-92 and post-92 institutions. Pre-92 institutions generally focused on recruiting the academically more able students and post-92 institutions on supporting a wider range of potential students to access higher education. These overarching institutional positions drove practices. As Althusser (2008, p. 44) posited, 'there is no practice except by and in an ideology' and whilst ideology certainly shapes practice, my analysis advances this idea further through the use of the notion of 'institutional doxa' (Davey, 2012) to show how practices were shaped by, but yet not fully determined by, these ideologies.

Whilst the data supported tendencies within institutions to shape practices, there was certainly evidence of resistance to these ideologies, something Althusser offers little capacity for and an issue critiqued by critical realists (Puehretmayer, 2001). Greenbank (2006b) identified institutional culture as being key to how political and economic positions were mediated into institutional policy. I propose an alternative way of thinking about how practices are shaped. Within institutions there was a commonality in approaches to widening participation yet also clear variations between individuals in the same institution. I argue that this can be theorised through drawing together this idea of ideology driving practice, Iris Marion Young's (1990) conception of oppression and the concept of institutional doxa (Davey, 2012).

Young (1990, p. 41) argued that oppression is not simply created by the intentional exercising of power but through 'the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society' and is exercised through 'unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules'. This notion of unquestioned norms resonates with some of the more recent development of Bourdieu's concepts related to institutional habitus (Reay et al., 2005) and institutional doxa (Davey, 2012). As Chapter Three outlined, institutional doxa allows for the understanding of institutional power to shape practices based on ideological positions and values whilst still allowing for the capacity for reflexive action. There was sufficient variation in the narratives of the practitioners to suggest that institutional positions were not accepted uncritically and that there was the capacity for resistance. Therefore, I argue that institutional doxa is a productive way of understanding how values and assumptions influence but do not completely determine practices. Chapter Seven will return to this concept to further explore the way in which this shapes practices at a more micro-level. In adopting this framing, it can be seen how value assumptions which are shaped by institutional doxa drive practice but can also be resisted and challenged by practitioners.

5.6 Summary

This chapter explored some of the macro level issues of similarities within institutions and differences between pre-92 and post-92 institutions. Clear differences were demonstrated in approaches within access agreements aligned with the pre-92 / post-92 divide. These findings resonated with similar differences in discourses found in previous analysis of prospectuses and websites (Graham, 2012). When it comes to practices, there was more variation. This variation was within the confines of institutional ideologies which I argued influence practices through the notion of institutional doxa with practices being shaped, but not fully determined by institutional ideology. The chapter also demonstrated how marketisation means that in order to carve out a position of difference and compete in rankings, issues such as entry tariffs can work to perpetuate inequalities. Once an issue primarily for pre-92 institutions, in highlighting the

123

position of New Overton, it can be seen that this market ideology may extend into those institutions historically marked as less selective. The following chapter maintains the focus on the gap between policy and practice at a macro level and examines in more detail targeting and the term 'potential'. Within a marketised system in which individual institutions' performance is judged on who comes to them, the overt focus is on 'getting them in'. It is therefore important to understand just who each institution assumes 'them' to be.

Chapter 6: Students with 'potential' or simply potential students?

6.1 Introduction

There are three competing agendas concerning access to higher education; the moral imperative to develop individuals through education, the policy imperative concerning who needs support to access higher education and the economic imperative to recruit enough students to maintain financial viability. This chapter argues that these competing agendas shape how different types of institutions target pre-entry widening participation and addresses questions of difference between institutions, how policy relates to practice and how individual values intersect with those of institutions[40]. Enabling access to anyone who has the potential to benefit from higher education has underpinned policy positions for over half a century since the Robbins Principle mandated that 'courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so' (The Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 8); broadening within the Dearing report to:

> …encourage and enable all students - whether they demonstrate the highest intellectual potential or whether they have struggled to reach the threshold of higher education - to achieve beyond their expectations.
>
> (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997, p. 7)

A further shift was evident in the 2003 White paper which foregrounded the need to 'make sure that potential is recognized and fostered wherever it is found'

---

[40] Research questions i., ii., iii., and v. (p.11)

(Department for Education and Skills, 2003, p. 67). Therefore, potential is often framed as an innate quality that an individual either possesses or lacks. More recently, the *National Strategy for Access and Student Success*, was based on the premise that:

> all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have equal opportunity to participate and succeed, on a course and in an institution that best fit their potential, needs and ambitions for employment or further study.

(HEFCE and OFFA, 2014, p. 7)

Despite recent changes in government, the notion of 'potential' or 'talent' recurs as a central enduring concern. In the recent Department for Education plan for social mobility, Justine Greening, the then Minister for Education, stated that 'while talent is spread evenly across the country, opportunity is not' (Department for Education, 2017d, p. 5). This framing of talent is premised on something that can be identified and exists in its own right, not something that can be developed. As this chapter demonstrates, potential and targeting are two intertwined issues, with more selective institutions framing target students based on prior attainment and this is adopted as a marker of who is likely to succeed within their institutions. Building on the previous arguments made in Chapter Five relating to the market positions of institutions and the role of institutional doxa in shaping who is seen as the potential students for an institution, analysis of the discourses within the access agreements and practitioner interview data is combined to address a number of the central research questions: firstly, the difference in discourses between pre and post-92 institutions and secondly, the question of how far the discourses are mirrored in practitioners' experiences. This enabled comparison of the experiences of practitioners in both types of institution, addressing the third research question of how these practitioners reconcile policy positions and their own values. Examining these data in this way, provides a distinct contribution to knowledge in that no previous studies have examined the practicalities of how this work is targeted and the ways in which this mirrors or fails to mirror the positions set out by institutions. Through drawing again on the notion of the implementation staircase this chapter demonstrates how the different actors

involved in enacting policy can reshape who actually benefits from this work, theorising how policy shifts may occur.

6.2 Who is university for?

This section focuses on the ways the literature has problematised the issues of potential in higher education, a subject of continued debate and contestation. As argued in previous chapters, the notion of who should benefit from higher education evolved through increased marketisation. Chapter Two argued that the field of higher education in England is diverse and one of the key principles from over twenty years ago has been maintaining a '…diversity of missions between institutions and their autonomy' (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997, p. 107). As that report further set out:

> All the available evidence suggests that the largest single determinant of participation in higher education amongst the 18 to 21 year old cohort is educational achievement at 18. The evidence suggests that 'differential participation therefore arises largely because of differences in the proportions of those possessing entry qualifications for HE.

This privileging of autonomy and lack of will to interfere with institutions' admissions laid the ground work for the ways in which the relationship between attainment at 18 and potential to succeed in higher education have become synonymous. If an institution wants to have the best graduates possible, then this is more achievable with those who have succeeded academically prior to entry. In an analysis of access agreements from 2006-7 and 2012-3, McCaig (2015b) argued that pre-92 institutions were focusing outreach on the 'brightest' of applicants, what he terms the 'most able, least likely' (p.19) and what resembles the 'cream skimming' that has endured in this system for many years (McCaig and Adnett, 2009). Yet, this focus on academic attainment fails to acknowledge 'the complexity and multiplicity of obstacles' (Jones and Thomas, 2005, p. 617) that come with socio-economic disadvantage. Attainment in formal examinations as a marker is in effect a measure of intelligence and yet is shaped to some extent by structural inequalities (Andrews et al., 2017). However, elite institutions frame this selection

as logical as they are interested in 'the brightest and the best' therefore reinforcing inequalities.

The premise of access to most institutions is grounded on the notion of meritocracy. If individuals can achieve sufficient academic success in compulsory education, they can gain entry to the institution of their choice. This language of neutrality is, in many ways a fallacy. Objective measures of academic success are not neutral to issues of inequality. As Iris Marion Young argues, 'claims to impartiality feed cultural imperialism by allowing particular experience and perspective of privileged groups to parade as universal' (Young, 1990, p. 10). Consequently, ignoring the structural issues that impact upon attainment, it is likely that selection on this basis will continue to reproduce existing inequalities of access. Yet even within the DfE's social mobility plan they acknowledge that 'opportunity breeds opportunity and, while early advantage accumulates, so does early disadvantage' (Department for Education, 2017d, p. 6); suggesting national policymakers are aware that later attainment may be significantly shaped by disadvantage.

There is also a tendency to overly focus on A-levels as a marker of potential. The Social Market Foundation highlighted that students from disadvantaged backgrounds disproportionately have a vocational qualification, such as a BTEC as at least part of their university entry profile (Gicheva and Petrie, 2018). Yet, the Office for Students reported in 2018 that:

> 98 per cent of students with A-level A*A*A* are going to high tariff institutions whereas only 21 per cent of students with BTEC D*D*D* are going to the same institutions.

> (Finlayson, 2018)

Not only is taking a BTEC often limiting access to highly selective institutions; as the Russell Group outline:

> It is very important to know, however, that vocational qualifications are not always a suitable pathway towards studying for a degree at a Russell

Group university. Certain vocational qualifications may only be suitable for selected degree subjects or may not meet the criteria for entry at all.

<div align="right">(Russell Group, 2017, p. 16)</div>

Additionally, Crawford et al. (2011) demonstrated that even for those doing A-levels and when controlled for attainment, progression rates to HE from FE are lower than from sixth forms; a form of post-16 education that is often disproportionately undertaken by students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Department for Education, 2017a). Where institutions are oversubscribed, continuing to legitimately select students based on this vague notion of 'potential' as encoded in qualifications and attainment focuses on those under-represented students who are less likely to have faced obstacles or the most able, most likely group. For many institutions, there are more applicants for places and personal statements in applications also act as a marker of potential. Warikoo and Fuhr (2014) have argued through the example of admission to Oxford how this can lead to privileging of measures of cultural capital which perpetuate inequalities. Whilst Oxford is a more extreme example than the institutions within this study due to its highly competitive elite status, this highlights how institutional framings of who has potential may be shaped by institutional assumptions.

6.2.1 Widening participation but narrowing potential

Whilst the proportion of applicants receiving offers at university is at an all-time high (UniversitiesUK, 2018), inequalities in distribution of offers persists (UCAS, 2017) . A normative gaze shapes who is seen as a potential student with ideology transforming individuals into potential students. Whilst Jones and Thomas (2005) have argued that institutions should adapt to meet the needs of under-represented groups, in many cases the expectation is still that students should already fit or adapt to fit institutional norms. It recognises them as legitimate based on specific markers, primarily in the case of higher education, attainment (Althusser, 2008). These markers are often implicitly classed and racialised. In meeting the criteria that the institution decides singles them out as 'bright', they move from being another disadvantaged young person to a potential student. Furthermore, these markers of disadvantage such as socio-economic background or ethnicity for

example are often treated as separate from the identity and lived experience of potential students (Coulson et al., 2018). As such, as long as they have 'potential', the complexity of their lives that relate to what is desirable and possible is often disregarded. This has a significant impact on their likely success if and when they do gain entry to an institution. Moreover, this framing of the potential student is increasingly global in nature (Stich and Reeves, 2016) and due to the ability to command higher fees, international students are often an important source of income.

The focus of institutions' widening participation efforts are often within a narrow geographical area. UniversitiesUK (2018) highlighted that newer universities are more prone to this local effect, as are London based institutions. As widening access targets were based on the institution's own intake, for locally recruiting institutions, this was a logical position. Yet when disadvantaged groups are not evenly spread across England this becomes problematic (HEFCE, 2015b). Framing access around institutional demographics was a direct result of the Higher Education Act (2004) as it:

> explicitly [requires] the governing body to take, or secure the taking of measures to attract applications from prospective students who are members of groups which, at the time when the plan is approved are under-represented in higher education.

> (*Higher Education Act*, 2004, p. 17).

However, there is no explicit regulation relating to encouraging participation in higher education in a wider sense. McCaig and Adnett (2009, p. 212) argued ten years ago that:

> It may also be thought naïve that in the increasingly market-driven system which the government has created, individual HEIs would utilise their additional fee income in an altruistic manner and target system wide objectives rather than their own institution's self-interest.

Therefore, the framing of potential in institutional terms is unsurprising as they are being required to widen participation in their own provision. However, I

argue that widening participation to higher education more generally is also a moral obligation and certainly in the spirit of national policy, albeit unrewarded within accountability systems.

Whilst the focus of this study is very much on who gets in, the issues of equality relating to higher education go far beyond this. Just as important are the ways in which institutions value the different perspectives brought to the institutions by diverse groups as opposed to expecting assimilation to a hegemonic culture (Young, 1990). When characteristics are used for targeting, they are used in the form of attributes. Individuals are grouped according to a specific identifiable characteristics and yet, their identity with a social group may be a more important consideration. To advance an argument made by Iris Marion Young (1990 p.44):

> A person's particular sense of history, affinity, and separateness, even the persons mode of reasoning, evaluating and expressing feeling, are constituted partly by her or his group affinities. This does not mean that persons have no individual styles or are unable to transcend or reject a group identity. Nor does it preclude persons from having many aspects that are independent of these group identities.

In terms of individual's *modus vivendi* (Archer, 2007b), that is their way of being, it can be seen that merely facilitating access based on a characteristic alone is unlikely to solve the core problem; identity is not limited to an attribute but to many essential elements of a person's sense of being. To ignore identities is to homogenise experience and focus on who is most likely to assimilate into institutional ways of being. The limitations of this approach can be seen in post-entry behaviours of under-represented students often being dislocated from other students with whom they feel they have little in common (Coulson et al., 2018). It is therefore important to highlight how this understanding may also influence who is seen as having potential.

6.2.2 Framings of under-representation

Each institution and subject has different issues of underrepresentation. For example, the issues of women in STEM are well documented (e.g. Smith, 2011) as

is the lack of Black students in Oxbridge (e.g. Warikoo and Fuhr, 2014). The *National Strategy for Access and Student Success* stated:

> Widening participation to higher education is about ensuring that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can access higher education, get the support they need to succeed in their studies, and progress to further study and/or employment suited to their qualifications and potential.

<div align="right">(HEFCE and OFFA, 2014, p. 3)</div>

Within regulatory guidance also produced by OFFA, certain groups are identified as being under-represented in higher education:

- people from low income backgrounds

- people from lower socio-economic groups or from neighbourhoods where higher education participation is low, including white males from economically disadvantaged backgrounds

- Black and minority ethnic groups[41]

- disabled people

- people with mental health problems, Specific Learning Difficulties and/or who are on the autism spectrum

- mature and part-time learners

- care leavers

- carers

- people estranged from their families

- people from gypsy and Traveller communities.

- refugees

- children from military families.

<div align="right">(OFFA, n.d.-b)</div>

---

[41] Despite high levels of participation from some ethic groups, all of these were highlighted as possible under-represented groups.

Consequently, whilst key target groups are identified nationally, each institution must consider their own student body and identify their under-represented groups. This leads to variation at institutional level. Nationally, within analysis of access agreements from across the whole sector, OFFA highlighted that:

> Institutions have responded to OFFA's guidance by increasing their focus on specific target groups. These include part-time and flexible students, mature students, care leavers, young carers, disabled students and medical students.

(OFFA, 2015a, p. 3)

This increased sector wide focus, whilst positive can also mask differences on the ground and between what is said versus what is done, as addressed later in the chapter. As argued in Chapter Five, unquestioned values and norms underpin institutional culture and enabling access alone does not solve issues of inequality. These norms and values can be seen to reproduce the values of those dominant classes within institutions (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1992). Consequently, objective targets can be shaped by the subjective understandings of those developing national and institutional policy. Where those values and experiences are invested in a selective model of higher education, assumptions of what potential means is manifest in objective criteria such as academic grades. Therefore, as Jones and Thomas (2005) predicted following the 2003 White paper, research-intensive universities have primarily placed an emphasis on attracting the 'gifted and talented' students from under-represented groups. In discussing a socially just education system more generally, Reay (2012) argued that choice and diversity have been 'neoliberalised' and work to 'sanction and exacerbate inequalities' (p.592). I would argue that the notion of 'potential' has similarly been 'neoliberalised' to enable the reproduction of norms within a veil of social justice.

The idea of potential as a quality that is present or absent contradicts research where it has been argued that potential needs to be developed and nurtured. For example, Archer et al. (2014) argued that providing support was important for disadvantaged students to develop and inform interests where their background may not have afforded them to do so. Therefore, the targeting of pre-entry

widening participation interventions based on 'potential' can be problematic where this potential is narrowly framed. As Thomas (2001) has argued, the misdirection of targeting can lead to resources being allocated away from those who most need them. 'Potential' can also be weaponised in order to frame institutional approaches to access based upon a much narrower definition of who should benefit from higher education. It also can mask the limited success that some institutions have in widening participation. Underpinning this debate is the question of whether access to higher education should be open to everyone as an opportunity for personal growth, or whether it should be a positional good afforded to a select few based on prior academic success. This issue is also not unique to England (e.g. Pitman et al., 2015 in the Australian context). Arguably, selective institutions favour the latter position, a future potential encoded in past success through formal attainment and yet issues of inequality may have limited this attainment making it therefore unrepresentative of the individual's potential.

6.2.3 What's in a target

Target groups vary from those with protected characteristics as set out in the *Equality Act* (2010) (e.g. Black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, mature learners or disabled people), to those with specific personal circumstances (e.g. refugees, care leavers, carers and people estranged from their families). There is also a focus on income and those from lower-socio-economic groups or from neighbourhoods with low participation in higher education. As with any grouping none of these are clear cut or homogenous and many intersect.

Black and Minority Ethnic groups for example, have highly variable patterns of participation in higher education. In fact, the proportion of British Chinese students that entered higher education in 2016-17 is higher than any other group (UCAS, 2017). Bhopal (2018) has argued that 'universities, by perpetuating their privilege, reinforce their identities as being reserved for the privileged few' (p.158). Focusing on BAME as a homogenous group, combined with existing academic entry requirements, limits the ability for selective institutions to widen access to all ethnic groups and focuses attention on those who are already statistically more likely to progress to university. This homogenisation is

widespread and means resources are often not focused on those groups most in need of support (Stevenson et al., 2019). This does not mean success once there is guaranteed and the BAME degree attainment gap is often significant (Equality Challenge Unit, 2017). Yet without critically deconstructing the BAME category when considering targeting, it can be seen how the focus may not be particularly on those who need it.

Social class has been white washed from policy discourses. This issue has been highlighted as problematic for over a decade (Greenbank, 2009) and yet still policy refuses to acknowledge the role it plays in access to higher education. Even when white working-class boys were highlighted as a key target group, and extensively researched (e.g. Ingram, 2018) they have been reframed in policy as 'white males from economically disadvantaged backgrounds'. This group is poorly defined in policy resulting in varied interpretation of how to identify target students. Therefore, inconsistent measures are used across different settings with individuals targeted in some cases using based on place-based measures (such as POLAR) or economic criteria (either directly, or using proxies such as FSM). I would argue that this issue is partially pragmatic. Identifying an individual's class is a contested issue for researchers (Savage, 2015) and is less easily measured compared to household income or geographical measures. However by erasing the question of class, the resultant issues in identification and measurement of target groups has been limited at best and this omits to address class-based issues of identity.

One of the most common proxies for disadvantage in higher education is the participation of local areas (POLAR) classification. This metric classifies local areas into quintiles based on the progression of 18-year olds who enter higher education aged 18 or 19. Quintile 1 has the lowest participation, ranging up to quintile 5 with the highest. Quintile 1, or sometimes 1 and 2 are often referred to as low participation neighbourhoods (LPNs) (HEFCE, 2015b). As Harrison and McCaig (2014) foregrounded, this proxy has a number of flaws, namely that these areas are not neighbourhoods but often encompass over 10,000 people and that the measure does not differentiate the progression rate by the type of institution attended.

Additionally, for sustained outreach work, the move from POLAR2, to POLAR3, and now to POLAR4 has changed the way in which some areas are classified[42]. Despite a young person living in a low participation neighbourhood at age 10, by age 18 this may no longer be the case due to reclassification even though their circumstances have not changed. Similarly, where targeting is at school level, the geographic location of the school may not represent the associated disadvantage of the young people who may come from a very different 'neighbourhood'.

When examined in terms of who goes where, the use of place and space-based measures of disadvantage as a measure of success becomes even more problematic. In 2014, less than half (47%) of HE entrants progressed to an institution outside of their region (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018b) and yet LPNs are unequally geographically distributed. For example, there are few POLAR quintile 1 areas in London, and yet institutions are targeted on this metric, with its use as a measure assuming a level of mobility for students that is not reflective of data on HE progression. This policy assumption can be considered in terms of other data within Donnelly and Gamsu's paper; 74.6% of those attending private school attend a university outside their 'home' region. Where the civil service and government have disproportionately higher levels of privately educated individuals, there is a potential for greater assumptions of mobility as a norm than is actually the case.

6.2.4 Intersections of characteristics

Within national policy, the intersections of class, gender and race are highlighted in one particular target group, namely white working-class males. Whilst this group are under-represented in higher education, focusing on specific intersections also makes others invisible. As Walby et al. (2012) noted, when considering intersectionality there are competing notions of structural and political intersectionalities. The actual social relations and political projects associated with them are separate. There is also a danger, that one group becomes

---

[42] Each iteration is based on a different time period. E.g. POLAR3 is based on 18-year-old cohort entry from 2005-6 to 2010-11 and POLAR4 2009-10 to 2013-14.

seen as worthier than others. For example, as Anne Marie Canning has argued, white working-class girls are also a group which suffer significant barriers to accessing higher education (Clarke and Beech, 2018). A later OFFA topic briefing reframed the target group as 'White British Students from lower socio-economic groups' to encompass girls as well (OFFA, 2018). To consider the intersectionality of certain groups, not just in structural terms but political terms, makes some demographics become invisible. For example, in England in 2016, 62 Black Caribbean students obtained an A-level grade profile of AAA (Department for Education, 2017c). Therefore, where institutions have a high entry requirement and have identified Black Caribbean students as a target group, they are competing over a small number of eligible individuals. Consequently, focusing on intersectional groups without structural change may result in institutions competing in a small pond of applicants already on track to higher education not widening participation for those groups.

6.2.5 Redressing the balance of under-representation

Narrowed definitions of potential therefore feeds into who is targeted to participate in pre-entry widening participation work. Often this is based on who meets the criteria of under representation but is also most like the current student body. One of the key issues with an approach which attempts to look for target students who resemble the current student body is that it is predicated on the idea of assimilation. As Audre Lorde argued:

> Difference must be not merely tolerated but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.

(Lorde, 2018, p. 18)

This position of tolerance of diversity is one adopted by elite institutions in England. In a comparative study of the elite institutions in the US and UK, Natasha Warikoo (2016) compared the underlying philosophies of diversifying intakes. In the US, diversity was seen as a benefit of all students, enriching their studies. In the UK, it was seen as a benefit for the individual who possesses the requisite talent. Her study focused on one of the most elite institutions, Oxford,

and whilst even more selective than the institutions within this study, the focus on the individual benefits of higher education is a recurrent theme in the literature. That is not to say that the intake of universities is not becoming more diverse in the UK. Certainly, as higher education has expanded, so has the diversity of students entering higher education. Entry rates of individuals from all disadvantaged and ethnic groups has increased over the last ten years (OFFA, 2017b). However, where they go is still polarised. As the Times Higher Education (2016) reported, the number of students from parents in lower level occupations on the NS-SEC measure[43] showed an increase of 4.8 per cent across the whole sector. This was only a 1.4 per cent increase in the Russell Group and in seven Russell Group institutions, the proportion of students from these backgrounds actually declined. Therefore, despite increased diversity in the sector, this is unequal across institutions.

6.3 How institutions frame potential

In the 2016-17 access agreements, the way in which the term 'potential' was operationalised was quite distinct. The implementation of widening participation policy by autonomous institutions meant that the focus was likely to be driven by the underlying institutional ideologies. Therefore, the discourse of 'potential' was repurposed in terms of who they believed to have potential. Returning to the notion of institutional doxa, 'a particular point of view, the point of view of the dominant' (Bourdieu, 1998 [2001], p. 57) especially in terms of who has the power to set institutional policy means national policy is likely to shift to meet local agendas. This is not always explicit shifting and much ideology becomes taken for granted norms. The notion of being able to identify 'potential' and framing individuals as potential students overlap. It was often unclear as to what role the institution felt they had in developing potential or merely identifying it. It can be seen from New Middleton's framing that schools and colleges play a crucial part in this:

> Going forward the University is forging stronger relationships with key

---

[43] This measure is no longer published as part of official data and therefore this was the most recent data in relation to the study.

partner schools and colleges, and as part of these partnerships will be offering targeted advice and guidance to potential students from a widening participation background.

This collaborative approach to identifying 'potential' transcended institutional type. Old Middleton also focused on students who had been '…identified by their school and teachers as having the intellectual potential to succeed…'. The problems of a nebulous notion of 'potential 'and multiple actors being involved in identifying these students means that there is often the potential to simply reproduce the types of students already seen in those institutions. Where previously pre-92 and post-92 institutions would have worked in local partnerships for all students during the Aimhigher period, since 2012 the focus of pre-92 institutions has been primarily on those students who were already likely to become future students of their institutions (McCaig, 2015b). The reasons for this are complex and not solely based in institutions themselves but through the relationships, assumptions and other pressures that underpin engagement in this agenda. Where multiple institutions are targeting individual schools, who goes where has the potential to become a reductive choice; those already excelling being pushed towards pre-92 interventions and the rest towards post-92s. For those not deemed to have 'potential' this may mean not being offered support to explore higher education routes. The policy positions of institutions can also reproduce this further. Through widening participation being overlaid with the ability to become a future student, many of the pre-92s shift the focus of potential into framings such as the 'best and brightest' (Old Riverton) or 'Gifted and talented' (Old Middleton) with a lack of acknowledgement for the structural inequalities that underpin these concepts. More problematic is how most able and brightest students are defined. Whilst 'Gifted and talented' had been used within Aimhigher as a concept, it was never properly defined other than 'At least two thirds of this cohort are expected to be those with the highest levels of attainment in academic areas of the curriculum' (Morris et al., 2005, p. iii). Data suggests race and socio-economic factors play a significant role in formal exam performance (Andrews et al., 2017), and progression to higher education (Department for Education, 2017a) hence grades may not be indicative of potential, yet many selective institutions are continuing to frame potential in exactly these terms.

There are two possible readings of this. Firstly, policy actors involved in writing the access agreements could be unaware of the ways in which formal academic success is constrained by inequality, assuming that attainment is an objective measure of potential. Secondly, that maintaining inequality is important to maintain the institution's privileged position (Young, 1990). This is an extreme position and from the interview data, the few practitioners involved in writing access agreements did not seem to espouse exclusionary views. In her interview, Beverley (pre-92) spoke of how there were so many demands in policy that it was hard to work out what they had the capacity to do. Specifically, in relation to raising attainment she stated:

> There's just so much to consider you know OFFA are now saying we want you to look at raising attainment of students and you know there's a big discussion across university institutions as to whether or not it's our responsibility to raise attainment. That's the responsibility of schools and colleges, or is it?

This position that schools have the responsibility to develop the potential and their role as an institution is to then find that potential is unlikely to widen participation where data consistently shows the impact personal circumstance has on attainment (Andrews et al., 2017). Of course, some students from disadvantaged backgrounds will excel academically in spite of this, but relying on just attracting those exceptional few is likely to widen participation at the rate pushed for within governmental policy. In delineating a group as deserving of support for accessing higher education, institutions also mark out those who it does not see as deserving. In some cases, this is a positive outcome as it directs resources at those who most need the support to access higher education. In others it is based on assumptions of what potential looks like. I am not arguing that we should indeed adopt the position taken by some policy makers, that elite higher education is the best or only route to success, however the symbolic capital associated with a degree from a selective institution should not be underestimated. Whilst potential is narrowly framed by these institutions in a way that privileges individuals who are likely to have had certain early advantages,

highlighting this as problematic is important. The effects of this have been well documented in the Paired Peers project which compared undergraduate students from similar backgrounds in a pre and post-92 institutions and more recently followed them into employment (Bathmaker et al., 2016). This does not mean some of the pre-92 institutions have not considered this issue. For example, Old Overton states that:

> Our admissions policies and practices are based on principles of integrity and fairness, in which each applicant's ability, achievements and potential are carefully assessed in the context in which they have been achieved.

Vicki Boliver et al. (2017) argued that this type of contextual admission is often limited in its impact and has limited ability to create systemic change to who can access these institutions. Furthermore, as Warikoo (2016) has argued in relation to the most elite institutions, the admission process can blind individuals to inequalities. After all, widening participation programmes are primarily about encouraging applications not ensuring admission. This approach to diversity is one of the clear marked differences between the pre and post-92 institutions. Whilst the post-92s are trying to widen the net and develop a diverse student body, the pre-92s are focusing in on students with high academic attainment who are disadvantaged but who have the least academic distance to travel.

The framing of potential through academic performance is notable by its absence in the post-92 agreements. This seems a logical position given the less stringent academic entry requirements but also aligns with the institutional values espoused by post-92 institutions of education being for all and key to regenerating the communities within which they are situated (e.g. New Riverton). The proposition that education should be for everyone, not simply those with high levels of previous success is clearly evident. In contrast, New Overton's emergent desire to compete within the highly marketised environment seems to have moved toward a middle position framing their potential students as needing to be 'high quality', citing the way in which they have recently raised entry requirements. It is possible therefore that increased marketisation will encourage

other institutions to adopt similar positions, which lock out those students who for whatever reason have lower academic grades.

6.3.1 Using proxies to measure disadvantage

Starting with the target groups outlined by OFFA, there is a variation in conceptualisation of disadvantage. They refer to disadvantage as: low-income, people from lower socio-economic groups and, neighbourhoods where higher education participation is low. Previous national datasets also included the use of the NS-SEC employment classification which was discounted from 2015-16 because of concerns relating to the quality of the data (HESA, 2016). As Noble and Davies (2009) argued, available measures for parental education and occupation have often been weak. They also rely on self-report and are time consuming to collect and code which explains why they are omitted from access agreements in favour of income based measures. Yet removal does not mean this metric was not useful and is a good example of a proxy taking over due to ease of measurement. Both pre and post-92 institutions are also clear within their access agreements that targeting is often at school level as opposed to at an individual level. For example, New Norton states they target 'schools and colleges that have high numbers of students from under- represented groups'. Therefore, if the catchment area for the school includes advantaged areas then these interventions may not necessarily be targeting those it appears to.

Five access agreements mentioned free school meals (FSM) as part of the institution's targeting strategies, four pre-92 (Old Riverton, Old Weston, Old Overton and Old Norton) and one post-92 (New Weston). New Weston included this in a general statement highlighting a range of target measures but did not mention specifically how it might be used. Old Middleton and Old Norton were interested in the percentage of students in schools that they targeted being eligible for FSM. Within the interview data where FSM were mentioned as a metric of targeting, this was also at a school level or reliant on teachers selecting these pupils. Only Old Riverton specifically mentioned targeting individuals based on this metric. This method of targeting, whilst seeming to focus on those under-represented groups may therefore actually not catch them at all. The Joseph

Rowntree Foundation (2015) reported 70 percent of FSM recipients nationally did not achieve 5 A*-C at GCSE in 2014. Furthermore, not all those eligible claim them (Holford, 2015). Therefore, whilst selective institutions focus on schools with high levels of FSM recipients, the academic entry requirements exclude those specific students.

There was also often a fundamental misunderstanding amongst practitioners from both pre-92 and post-92 institutions of what geographical metrics (i.e. POLAR) actually measure.

> We're doing ACORN and POLAR so we don't actually say what does your mum or dad earn because it's really difficult for us to test that whereas it's easier for us to run a postcode through a profiler, but we're hoping that the postcode profiler will say that they are from a low income household or not many people from that area progress to university.

> Samantha (pre-92)

Whilst there can be correlation between non-participation in higher education and income, POLAR is not a measure of income (Harrison and McCaig, 2014). Katie's (post-92) explanation of how they identify socio-economic background was typical of most practitioners in the study:

> In terms of the area where she's from but also in terms of my knowledge of schools in [the city]. The school that she goes to is, has a large WP cohort.

As with school level FSM targeting, this also allows for cream-skimming. In fact, the structural issues encourage this behaviour as school performance metrics include measures of Oxbridge and Russell Group progression (Department for Education, 2017a).

Baxter, Tate and Hatt (2005) foregrounded that the exclusion of students from participating in an intervention based on targeting criteria when contested can lead to the agreement to allow them to participate anyway. Therefore, schools can subvert the criteria based on their needs. As it is in the interests of schools to ensure their students' progress to the most competitive institutions, this means

that there is more at play in the selection process and that selection can be shaped by perceptions of who needs an additional push in the right direction, as opposed to those who have not considered going to university at all. Additionally, good behaviour has found to play a role in teacher selection of pupils (Thomas, 2001). This means that those identified as disengaged from education may not benefit from widening participation work. Furthermore, the transitional nature of interventions can lead them to be viewed cynically by teachers, especially for groups needing long term intervention to affect change (Blackmore et al., 2017). This may play a role in encouraging teachers to focus on those young people with fewer barriers to participation as opposed to the least likely groups.

6.3.2 Hidden harms of targeting

Widening participation is based on the assumption that higher education is a positive destination for everyone. The targeting of interventions at those with the potential to succeed often funnels students from school to this route. However, a theme emerging in the interview data was whether university was actually the route that best met the needs of all young people:

> I've also come from a background where we've worked with young people from a variety of different backgrounds and we've applied much more of like I said before a person-centred individual approach and then developed a scheme or a progression route that is best suited to that individual and so do I feel conflicted at times? I do because I think sometimes, I do come across WP students who I think, do you know what? I wonder you know university is great, but I wonder if university is the right route for you. You know would you be better suited to doing a fabulous apprenticeship.

> Beverley (pre-92)

The combination of policy drivers on both institutions and schools to encourage progression to higher education both reinforces university as an optimal route and portrays others as in some ways deficient. As Mendick et al. (2018) argued from a wide range of literature on aspirations, this can result in anxiety when young people are trying to meet the demands of a certain way of meeting their potential

which may not align with their own desires. This alignment of institutional priorities and the actual impact of work was questioned by David (post-92) when talking about work to reach out to the community and what actually helps to widen participation:

> Our Humanities faculty for instance really run the children's book festival which attracts maybe 10,000 people onto the campus talking about books. In many respects we go, yeah this is a WP event and then you look at who is turning up and it's not your WP students. Unfortunately, I think most community engagement stuff where it involves coming to a university is not really WP. There are very good reasons for doing it otherwise but I think it's necessary sometimes to take a step back and go, well that's part of our community commitment as an institution rather than it being our WP work.
>
> David (post 92)

Whilst this was the only mention of community work, the tension between institutional desires and local needs was often at odds.

6.4 Targeting 'potential' in practice

Whilst the complexities of targeting mean that policy framing are likely to require simplification, there are stark differences in what is said and what is done. Beverley (pre-92) highlighted a tension between what she would like to do and what was possible within the time and resources that she had, returned to in Chapter Seven. Within this chapter, it is important to understand how the narrowing of targeting is often pragmatic as well as ideological. Additionally, I will problematise the way in which these negotiations can limit who gets access to interventions. This is particularly important in relation to the pre-92 programmes where participation can result in lower entry offers.

Some practitioners accepted the targeting process unquestioningly. Samantha (pre-92) was quite clear that they were '… trying to get [their] students to a Russell group university' which came with certain restrictions on who they should be working with. In contrast, Mel (post-92) was frustrated because she felt that policy

makers 'don't know what it means on the ground'. As Emily (pre92) highlighted when asked to pick a typical student:

> I guess it's difficult because we work with so many different students and backgrounds.

However, by examining the target groups set out in access agreements and those foregrounded in discussions of typical students, certain groups gained more attention than others and this was often shaped by types of institution. The other notable difference was the way in which targets were used to shape the cohorts that were being worked with. Drawing heavily on the 'typical student' task (fig.6.1)[44] the analysis now explores these themes and more general issues surrounding targeting[45]
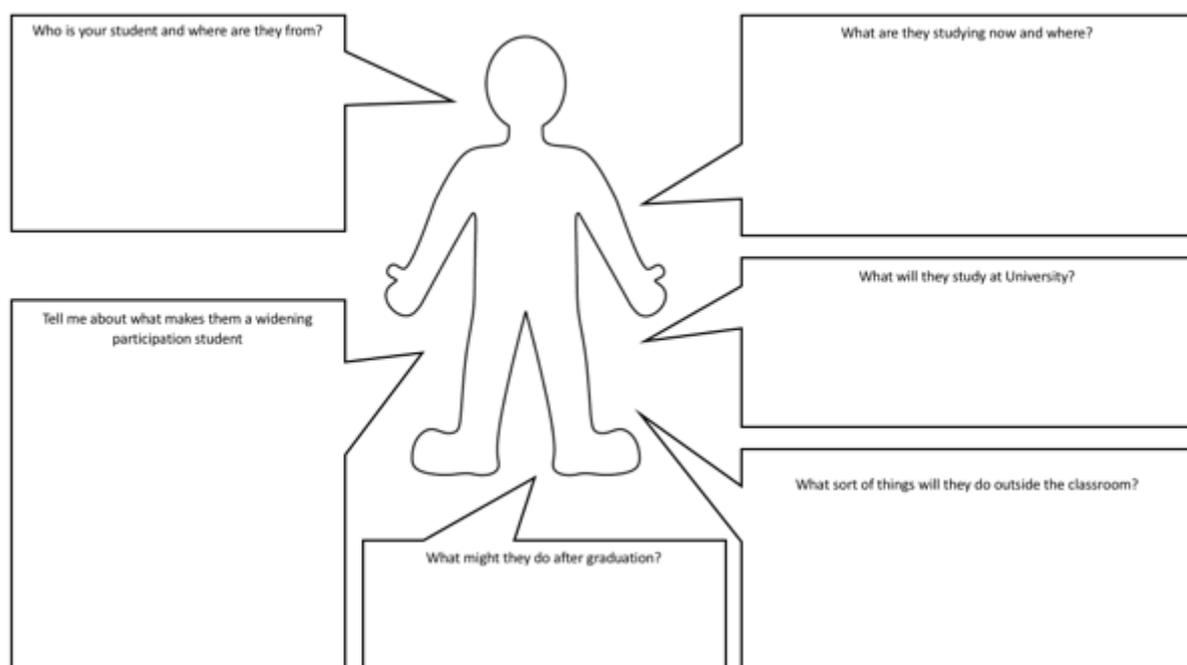
Fig 6.1 – 'Typical student' worksheet

Some participants such as Lucy (pre-92) talked very generically about what a 'typical student' was. Others, such as Beverley (pre-92), reeled off a mental script using very similar framings to those in the access agreements. Whilst discussion often moved from the specific to the general, a number of themes emerged in terms of who each institution felt was a 'typical student'. For the pre-92

---

[44] Discussed in more depth in section 4.6.2 (p.77)

[45] Full interview schedule can be found in Appendix 4 (p.283)

practitioners, their typical students were interested in studying, volunteering, the library and cultural activities. This type of 'typical student' engaged in educational activities in their spare time for building a good university application was highlighted by Sophie (pre-92):

> …some of them do you know volunteering, Duke of Edinburgh that are provided by schools and so you'll see like sports coming up in a lot of the applications.

Less commonly they had other commitments such as part time jobs (e.g. Samantha (pre-92)) or caring responsibilities (e.g. Beverley (pre-92)). These framings of a typical student already focused on university resonated with an evaluation of an academic enrichment outreach programme at a pre-92 institution, the University of Birmingham (Barkat, 2017) Out of 304 participants, 69% already felt it was extremely or very important 'to go to the best university'. Arguably therefore these students being targeted are firstly, already likely to progress to university and secondly, already focused on a certain type of institution. The type of student that the pre-92 practitioners described therefore seem to be significantly different in the lives they lead and their orientations to those described by post-92 practitioners. If we compare it to the 'typical student' David (post-92) describes:

> What sort of things do they do outside of the classroom? Work! I think is probably fair to say. Certainly the conversations I've had with a lot of them part time work is a big factor in their lives.

It would be disingenuous to make claims based on the limited data within the study, however it could be questioned whether these 'typical students' described by pre-92 practitioners who spend all of their spare time studying and engaged in CV building activities are those in need of support to access higher education. However, Andrea (pre-92) described a very different type of student:

> The children that I usually see, their teachers tell me they've never been off the estate or they've never been into [the city] centre. This is the first time they've been out of [their local area]. So, for them this is a big day out where they are coming to the University because it can be the first time they've left their community.

Andrea is working with those students for whom the idea of university is genuinely novel. This is possibly because unlike the other pre-92 practitioners, Andrea's role was with primary school pupils where less selectivity took place. As Bayes (In press) has argued, the emphasis on recruitment often becomes more intense the older the cohort of young people the university is targeting, which could certainly explain this narrative and is an enduring issue (Greenbank, 2006b). Within the interviews, most practitioners described individuals in Secondary education, with only Andrea (pre-92) focusing on a primary age typical student. Given Andrea's role, this was understandable. However, primary work was featured in seven of the ten access agreements. Consistent with analysis of earlier agreements by McCaig (2015b) primary work was more prevalent in the pre-92 institutions. Out of the post-92 institutions in the sample, only New Norton and New Weston make reference to primary age outreach work which is an enduring issue. The selective nature of pre-92 institutions drives a need to get young people focusing on an academic track earlier but the focus on access as opposed to success and progression means that they have more resource to invest in longer term work. Conversely, post-92s needed to do more work in other parts of the student lifecycle, leaving limited budgets for pre-entry work.

6.4.1 Casting the net near or wide

As Harrison (2012a) predicted in the wake of Aimhigher, institutions have become focused on narrower geographical areas. Within both pre-92 and post-92 access agreements, the focus was primarily local in scope. For example, Old Weston highlighted:

> … an outreach programme designed to identify and nurture the academic talent of under-represented young people within our region.

The rationalisation for a local focus was often that there were many target learners in close proximity. For example, New Middleton states:

> Our main catchment areas include a high proportion of learners from a widening participation background.

Whilst some institutions, (e.g. New Norton) highlighted national collaborative work, the primary focus for all the institutions was within close geographical proximity. This seemed logical given that for 2014-15 entry, 56% of individuals progressing to higher education stayed within 55 miles of their home (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018a). In fact, Old Overton used a similar institutional statistic within their access agreement:

> We attract students of high ability and potential from all parts of the UK, though just over half are from the three northern regions of England.

As Reay et al. (2005, p. 47) have argued from their study into degree choice, 'almost all the students make their higher education choices within constraints', what David James (2018, p. 241) termed a 'choice of the necessary'. This localised choice is not fully reflected in national policy which framed the whole field of higher education as a market. It is also contrary to the legitimation institutions use within their own agreements, especially pre-92 institutions who position their performance relative to other Russell Group institutions as opposed to local institutions. This is not a new phenomenon and the widening participation sub report of the Dearing enquiry stated:

> Prospects for progression come to depend on the unique decisions of specific institutions. This is unlikely to be satisfactory for many members of under-represented groups whose personal circumstances may not allow them to travel widely in search of a sympathetic institution.

> (Robertson and Hillman, 1997 section 3.8)

In contrast to this localism, all five pre-92 institutions mentioned a move towards developing national schemes in their access agreements, for example Old Weston state:

> University will extend its targeted outreach activities to schools and colleges outside the immediate area through increased provision for academic visits, campus days and residential summer schools, setting a target for summer schools, taster days and special projects to reach 500 learners.

McCaig and Taylor (2017) predicted this national expansion of widening participation as a strategic move in light of the removal of student number controls. Though through the interview data it can be seen that this is not unproblematic. When potential is conceived through a narrow lens of prior academic ability, it can often lead to several institutions working with the same group of pupils, thus not widening the net but putting their energy into the same small group. Karen (pre-92), for example, highlighted:

> We know that some students can't some to [outreach summer school] because they are doing a summer school at [another Russell group] at the same time. So, we are aware that things like that are going on.

When specific projects were targeted at similar 'ideal students', this becomes a diminishing pool and as institutions cast the net ever wider, so the competition for these programmes becomes greater. In both phase two pre-92 institutions, the participants highlighted the link between participation in their post-16 intensive projects and a reduced tariff offer. It is therefore understandable why those young people as of yet undecided on their institution would hedge their bets by participating in multiple programmes. However, this sort of action presupposes a certain type of student. As the interview data demonstrated, the typical students described in the post-92 institutions were often very different to those of the pre-92 institutions. Therefore, the pre-92 programmes in some cases were being monopolised by a select group as opposed to widening the range of individuals participating in these schemes.

6.4.2 Missing demographics

Another difference between policy and practice was the absence of some groups in the narratives of the practitioners and the embryonic nature of some work outlined in the access agreements. Carol (post-92) offered a very clear example of this:

> We are going to start to look at sort of white working-class students, white males from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds but for us in this university it's not just males, it's females as well but it's not something

I've done as much on.

This lag between what was promised and what was actually being done was a recurrent theme. One of the tensions Alice (post-92) highlighted was the fact that certain groups were not being targeted:

> In terms of what we are doing for the young people we are working with I think what we are doing is fine. So, we give them advice and support but it's probably actually more what we're not doing for them, for the young people we're not actually working with.

<div align="right">Alice (post-92)</div>

Within Alice's institution there was a team of four people doing all of the schools and colleges engagement. This was not unusual in the post-92 institutions in this study, but as she highlighted, it limited the scope of who could be targeted due to issues of capacity. Pre-92 institutions, who had teams four times the size offered increased capacity for work to target specific demographics of students more intensively.

Other target groups were notable by their absence both in the access agreements and in the narratives. The absence of reference to part-time provision is stark, apart from in setting out the fees, only one pre-92 mentioned part-time students in the access agreements analysed and that was to acknowledge that it did not offer part time provision! Only two post-92s actually stated it was a priority; New Weston and New Riverton. This was particularly noteworthy due to the renewed focus on the importance of part-time study. In their national analysis of all 2016-17 access agreements, OFFA (2015a) highlighted an increasing focus on part-time students due to the significant decrease in their number since the increase in tuition fees in 2012 but this was not evident in the institutions within this study.

6.4.3 When potential and potential student become entangled

The removal of the student number cap, pressure for further faster progress in relation to access of under-represented groups to higher education and the move of funding from a block grant to individual student's tuition fees has created an

environment where recruitment of students from under-represented backgrounds is key. Additionally, there is the danger that where access targets are not met, an institution may be restricted in the maximum tuition fee it can levy. Pre-entry widening participation therefore has huge financial implications for an institution. This means that the targeting of who can participate is often tied up with who would meet the entry requirements of an institution. In the case of the pre-92 institutions, this means good GCSE results.

Several institutions highlighted the Realising Opportunities programme in their access agreements. Old Overton states that one aim of Realising Opportunities is to enable participants '…to demonstrate their potential to succeed at a research-intensive university'. Problematically, to participate in this programme applicants must have eight A*-C grade GCSEs with at least five A or A* grades in addition to meeting two other criteria such as being from a low participation neighbourhood, eligible for free school meals or first in the family to attend university. Furthermore, the students have to be attending an eligible state school as designated by performance in attainment below the national average (Realising Opportunities, n.d.). Within the interviews, this and other similar institutional schemes were mentioned in pre-92 institutions. Samantha (pre-92) highlighted how oversubscribed their scheme was, which meant those who gained entry to the programme had 'seven or eight As or A*s at GCSE'. This was in contrast to an advertised requirement for five A's meaning even those framed as having 'potential' were unable to participate. This framing is problematic when it is considered in terms of the inequalities in attainment at 16. Whilst 70.3% of students achieved A*-C grades at GCSE in English and Maths in 2015, this compared to 43.1% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds[46] (Department for Education, 2017b, p. 19). Therefore when selection for interventions is based on future potential as measured in past academic ability, this is likely to disproportionately exclude the most disadvantaged students who may have potential but whose academic grades are lower due to compounded disadvantage. Education datalab (2015) analysed progress across all four key stages and found a

---

[46] eligible for free school meals in the past six years

heterogeneous range of progress trajectories, which therefore puts into question previous attainment as a measure of future 'potential'. Additionally, with prior attainment of this level, the likelihood of non-participation in higher education is limited. Thus, these programmes are really a form of recruitment to these specific universities.

Selection, based on requirements far in excess of the advertised criteria also means those who need these interventions may be excluded but without understanding why. Whilst they may meet all the criteria, limitations of resources mean they cannot access the intervention. If they do not understand the reasons for this, it becomes another reinforcement that this route is not for them. Two of the participants that spoke about these schemes in relation to Medicine clarified that if applicants were unsuccessful, whilst one institution offered signposting to places offering help such as an aspiring students society run by the Students' Union, the other offered no support for the unsuccessful applicants. This suggests support for those who miss the cut off for these competitive schemes may be inconsistent and not wholly supportive of progression to higher education more generally. When multiple indicators of disadvantage intersect but prior attainment takes priority, this means that even when targeting Black and Minority Ethnic students, those who participate are not representative of all ethnic groups. As Clark et al. (2015) found in their evaluation of a Russell group post-16 programme, whilst 33% of the cohort were from Black and Minority Ethnic groups, these were primarily from Asian groups, specifically Indian and Bangladeshi. If this is compared to the 'typical students' discussed by my participants, where ethnicity was mentioned it was on the whole Asian or highlighted that the student would be BAME. Only in one case was a Black student explicitly mentioned. This is problematic as progression rates vary by ethic group with Black students being less likely to progress than Asian students (UCAS, 2015). It also aligns with the findings of Stevenson et al. (2019) research into targeting of minority ethnic groups which highlighted how the overall BAME label can mask significant issues in providing interventions for particular groups.

6.4.4 'We can't share contacts, that's sensitive information. Sensitive commercial information!'

In discussing collaboration, Mel (post-92) highlighted another recurrent theme, the divide between recruitment and widening participation. This manifested itself in a number of ways in different institutions and was a key area of difference. This competition was not just felt between institutions but within them; often post-16 was the preserve of student recruitment teams whereas widening participation teams were encouraged to focus on pre-16 groups. There were also issues surrounding competition in the wider market. Despite the students who meet the most markers relating to widening participation being located in further education, many practitioners (both pre-92 and post-92) talked about their limited ability to engage with this part of the sector. The focus on schools and sixth forms over colleges was common. This is highly problematic when in 2016-17 there were 744,000 16-18 year olds studying in colleges as opposed to 433,000 in schools, not to mention the 1.9 million adults also studying in further education (Association of Colleges, 2017). Without proper engagement with FE, the further, faster change in access demanded by policymakers is unlikely to ever materialise. This was often framed by the participants as being problematic due to access to those FE colleges. Similarly, Crawford et al. (2011) found lower rates of progression from FE to HE compared to Sixth form to HE progression, even when attainment was controlled for. Within the session discussing the emergent findings with practitioners[47], the issue of FE colleges being in competition with local universities offered a potential reason for the greater challenge of engaging with them. The Association for Colleges also highlight that in 2016-17, 153,000 students (including one third of under 19s entering HE) were studying for HE qualifications in a college, so this risk to their business models is significant.

There was an overlap between issues of ideology and pragmatism that intersected in who was being targeted, but this pragmatism was often driven by resource availability, in terms of staffing, funding and time pressures. Even when work was highlighted as taking place in further education during the interviews, it was

---

[47] As outlined in Section 4.6.3 (p.81)

usually more focused on A-level students. Mel (post-92) was quite candid about why they primarily worked with A-level students:

> It's not because those students are the ones we should be working with, I guess they're the ones that it's almost easier to work with because A-levels are much more like a conveyor belt.

Therefore, it can be seen how despite setting out plans to work with both schools and colleges and with both A-level and BTEC students, the translation of policy into practice narrows who becomes the targets of this work.

6.5 Translating targets

Through the interviews it became clear that the creation of criteria for targeting at school or college level had two flaws; it often focused on the institutions' demographics, not those of the individuals being worked with and it was often reliant on teacher judgement of exactly which students should be the beneficiaries. This was also confirmed to be a common issue within the discussion of the emergent findings with eleven other practitioners. It could be questioned whether targeting by teachers is always effective. A study with student ambassadors at Newcastle university highlighted that they worked with 'the ones that probably will go to uni, who have always gone to uni whether you'd been there or not' (Taylor, 2008, p. 162). This issue recurs in evaluations of Aimhigher and is an enduring issue (Doyle and Griffin, 2012) resonating with this comment from Sophie (pre-92) that:

> You wouldn't apply to a programme like ours if you didn't have those aspirations.

McCaig (2015b) highlighted how pre-92 institutions have been encouraged through policy changes to focus on academically able students. However, as argued earlier in the chapter, with no consensus of what terms like 'brightest', 'gifted and talented' or 'potential' actually mean. When selection is reliant on school selection, this can lead to reliance on who teachers see as the right sort of student for particular institutions and resonates with the relationship between

teacher perceptions and academic streaming (Campbell, 2017). This can narrow the focus but also works both ways as Beverley (pre-92) outlines:

> …on the odd occasion we make, go in and deliver a presentation and it's quite clear that the group is a mixed group. If that does happen it's not a problem but we are very clear when we are giving out presentations or speaking to schools that for our programmes we are looking to target students that are expected to get five A-Cs at GCSE level minimum so our marketing and our targeting approach is very specific for the purpose of managing expectations.

No matter whether they narrow or widen the focus, teachers play a role in translation of policy. Mapping this idea onto the policy implementation staircase creates three levels of translation of what 'potential' means, shaped by four possibly different worldviews of policymakers, institutional senior management, practitioners and teachers relating to what and who higher education is for.

National — Potential to succeed in Higher Education

Institutional — Potential student of this institution

Practitioner — Students who are likely to progress to the institution in schools that are accessible and want to participate

Teacher — Students who they feel would be 'right' for a particular institution
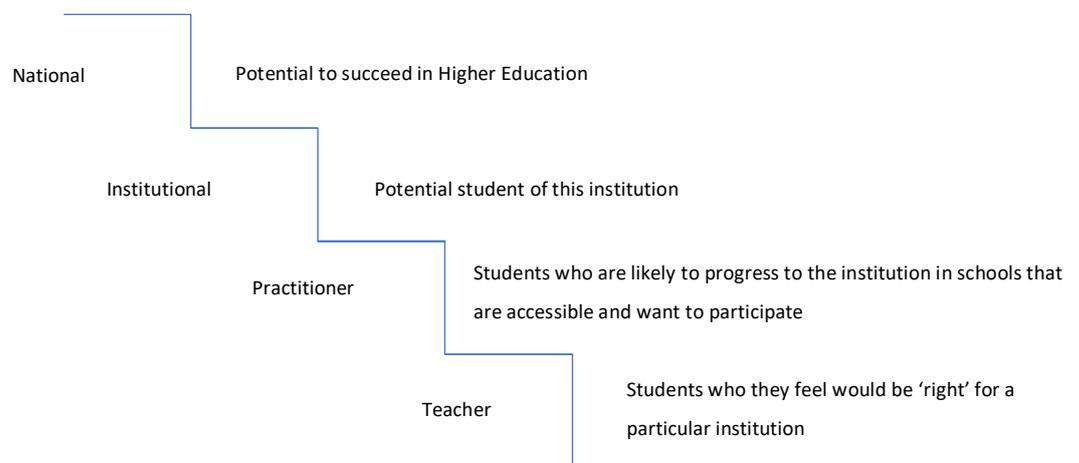
Fig 6.2 - Mapping potential onto the policy implementation staircase (adapted from Reynold and Saunders 1987 cf. Trowler 2014 p.15)

Driving the impetus to make policy 'fit' the needs of different stakeholders are multiple policy drivers. Schools are judged on their progression rates to higher education and selective universities more specifically (Department for Education, 2017a). This can lead to focusing on those they believe can progress to ensure they

do, meaning even when given targeting criteria, they may bring different students. Consequently, the process is one of negotiation:

> …it's difficult, obviously the day will still go ahead as planned with whatever students they bring but all teachers are advised before they come that at least 66% of the students that they bring need to be from the WP cohort list. unfortunately, there's not too much more that can be done.

> Katie (post-92)

The choices of teachers may also be shaped by parental input. The notion of 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2011) echoed in two research studies (Reay et al., 2005, Reay et al., 2013) highlighted how middle class parents often work towards structuring the free time of their children to ensure they obtained the best start in life. Thus, where parents understand the value of these programmes, not only to develop the young person's aspirations, but as valuable for personal statements and the accompanying promise of lowered entry requirements in some cases, there is a potential to game the system. Therefore, whilst the expectation of progression to higher education is there, they take greater advantage of these opportunities. This specific 'type' of student was highlighted by Andrew, working in a post-92 setting that was unlike those in phase one[48]:

> I will see students who seem incredibly focused on what they want to do and have a real sense of I'm trying to get a career in X or I want to be a physiotherapist or I'd like to run my own business in X and they seem very dedicated towards that and they've researched it a lot and they've identified that university is a step they need.

For intensive programmes, students have to attend the institutions a number of times over a period of a year or more and this can have a compound effect on who has the means to access these interventions (Rainford, 2016). As Karen (pre-92) highlighted, this means certain students monopolise these programmes, attending more than one. In Clark et al. (2015) evaluation of post-16 Russell group widening

---

[48] Whilst the exact details of these students were not disclosed, the local catchment of Andrew's institution was in a predominantly affluent area.

participation programmes, all of the participants already showed a preference for and resultant applications to a Russell group institution. Whilst parents do play a key role in this, schools are also complicit in who gets to participate. As Beverley (pre-92) frames the selection of gifted and talented students:

> Fortunately, a lot of the schools that we do work with you know they will, they have identified their gifted and talented students and I guess maybe because of the brand of [this institution] or because we're considered a highly selective university, they want their students to go to university like [us] so they will identify them for us.

However, teacher judgements are not neutral. A study of over 800 seven-year olds found that there was evidence that setting in schools can impact upon teacher judgements (Campbell, 2017). Therefore, the perception of who should participate may be distorted relating to issues such as pupil behaviour or attitudes. This issue is enduring and evidence of the impact of setting upon the message this may give to young people and their parents was found by Kim Slack (2009) in her in-depth study of the destination of young people from a disadvantaged urban area. Similar issues relating to the ways careers guidance officers challenge students choices of careers based on perceived ability have also been noted (Gillborn and Youdell, 1999). Therefore, similar issues are likely to be at play on the borderline of who is encouraged to progress to university at all and therefore the notion of potential becomes even more clouded and subjective.

6.6 Problematising the use of 'potential'

Whilst 'potential' played a role in the selection of students to be targeted and to participate in pre-entry work, within the access agreements and interviews, the assumption seems to be that 'potential' is evidenced by consistent academic success. The expectation is that the students have good grades in numerous subjects. Where an individual might have excelled in one area, such as Maths, Art or Music they were unlikely to be eligible to access these interventions. Personal conceptions of success were also important here. Alice (post-92) described her institution as one for '… students who are struggling more with A levels'. She noted Sociology and Psychology as examples, yet with respective BBC and BBB A-

level entry requirements, this perception of those students as struggling could be questioned. In framing them as such, those with far lower grades who are still expected to and encouraged to progress to higher education are placed further in deficit; another example of a potential hidden harm. The positioning of widening participation interventions as the preserve of the 'brightest and the best' can act as a form of symbolic violence for those who do not fit within the narrow parameters designated by these institutions. Not intentionally to cause harm, but through the demand and capacity of these programmes, the bar became higher. As Rob (post-92) who had also worked in both a pre-92 and post-92 setting reflected:

> because the [pre-92 access programme] was a very discreet package that a young person would apply to, join, achieve all these benchmarks along the way, graduate and at the end they then get two UCAS grades reduction on their offer, financial support and then access to things once they get to university. For that they can only maybe have four or five hundred people on that programme at any one time. For ours, there are tens of thousands of young people that fall into our category between year nine and thirteen.

> Rob (post-92)

Problematically, these constraints may not be fully understood by those students rejected from oversubscribed programmes, potentially rationalising that they are not good enough to realise their aspirations and therefore lowering their own expectations for what is achievable. Drawing on the work of Althusser, Puehretmayer (2001, p. 4) has argued that ideology is 'profoundly unconscious'. Within the interview data this was often the case. The need for certain attainment levels at GCSE to participate in post-16 work in pre-92 institutions went unquestioned. Being high tariff institutions, it was taken for granted that those who had 'potential' to progress to their type of institution would already have demonstrated this at GCSE. In contrast to this some practitioners across both pre-92 and post-92 institutions were aware that those who engaged with the pre-entry activities were often not those who were designed to be the targets of work to widen participation. This showed a willing acceptance that whilst the activities were helping individuals to access a selective university, these individuals may

already be predisposed to be on a pathway to accessing that type of institution. For example, Samantha (pre-92) explained that:

> Often the students we get applying to us are super bright and are the top students and their teachers put them forward for everything so they're likely to be doing other things to help them progress to university in addition to what we are doing to them.

Whilst there is still a value in this work to help ensure these young people are making informed decisions and choosing the right course for them, to call this work widening participation is a stretch and yet, institutions are funnelling large amounts of funding into exactly these types of schemes. This awareness but complicity in the institutional ideological position can be theorised using the work of Zizek (2009, p. 37) who has argued that, 'like love, ideology is blind, even if the people caught up in it are not'. There were other examples of practitioners questioning the effectiveness of their targeting. As highlighted previously, Karen (pre-92) talked about how many of their participants also participated in a number of similar schemes. Clark et al. (2015) have argued that engaging in these activities is part of a 'series of strategic rationalised calculations around higher education'. Where these programmes are lowering entry requirement based on their completion, it makes sense that they may be engaging with multiple interventions to strategically keep their options open. Yet, this limits the reach and impact of these schemes beyond a select group of students already predisposed to higher education.

6.7 Summary

This chapter has highlighted the way in which different interpretations of the notion of 'potential', shape and constrain who becomes the target of work to widen participation. Through the policy implementation staircase and the notion of institutional doxa, I have shown how national policy can be shifted both intentionally and through unseen values and assumptions relating to who higher education is for. Despite claiming that 'a person's background should not affect their choice and opportunity in accessing higher education' (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014, p. 14), it is clear that through a number of mechanisms it still does. The data

has demonstrated the ways in which the ideological positions of institutions, practitioners and teachers can all play a role in who is actually invited to access these opportunities. This matters as even though national and institutional policies appear to focus on the correct groups, the mechanisms for targeting and the policy shifts can lead to the actual beneficiaries of pre-entry widening participation work not being those framed by policy. This is increasingly evident in pre-92 institutions who have academic prerequisites unattainable by many under-represented groups. This does not mean they do not have the potential to succeed in the future, but their past successes might have been limited by personal circumstance. If 'potential' is only measured in this way, then it will always be focused on those who have had the best early starts in life. Additionally, marketisation of the sector and competition between HEIs and further education colleges for students means that engagement with the FE sector, where the majority of 16-18 year olds study, is more limited than would be needed for the rate of change demanded by policymakers.

As O'Sullivan et al. (2018) have argued, research needs to further the understandings of the relationships between socio-economic and educational disadvantage from the perspectives of all stakeholders. This chapter highlighted how limited understanding of some of these issues can mean the way in which students are identified as having 'potential' can reproduce privileged positions. This can be both through a lack of understanding by both policymakers and, as Chapter Seven demonstrates, practitioners' understanding of the way in which academic attainment can be contingent on issues of class, race and the complex lives that individuals may have to navigate. It can also be a deliberate action. In framing an institution through high entry tariffs and only for a certain type of student, this becomes a marker of distinction. However, to uncritically link academic attainment and 'potential' renders invisible the extensive inequalities that shape educational success long before access to higher education. This supports O'Sullivan and colleagues call for institutions to develop a deeper understanding of the structural limitations of the educational system and to engage with a wider range of students within under-represented groups. Of course, this means confronting long held assumptions of education as

meritocratic. The next chapter will focus further on practitioners and explore this idea in greater depth, theorising how personal understandings of what is right can develop into practice as resistance.

Chapter 7: From policies into practices

7.1 Introduction

Practitioners are crucial to widening participation outreach. They are required to translate policies often predicated on a mythical typical student and a middle-class conceptualisation of aspiration and social mobility into practice. Despite the role of the widening participation practitioner existing for over twenty years, these roles are often poorly defined, under resourced and insufficiently supported. In spite of this practitioners are often highly invested in their work and this investment is key to effective interventions. Ostensibly these are 'good' people doing 'good' work. However, as Ball et al. (2012) also argued in the context of teaching, it can be problematic when practices enacted by well-meaning people may not meet the needs of their recipients and cause unintended harm. For widening participation to be transformative, taken for granted assumptions in policy need to be challenged (Burke, 2012) and yet as this study demonstrates, many practitioners lack any education to understand the inequalities their work seeks to address. Additionally, previous studies have highlighted the lack of research into how university staff generally (Stevenson et al., 2010) and widening participation practitioners in particular (Burke, 2012) understand widening participation. Whilst research focusing on policymakers and senior management has been conducted (e.g. Harrison et al., 2015, Jones, 2017) the experiences of widening participation practitioners working on the front line still remains under-researched.

Previous chapters have highlighted some of the gaps between policy and practice and this chapter focuses on reasons for the varied ways individual practitioners interpret and enact policies. As (Ozga, 2000, p. 1) has argued, 'policy is struggled over, not delivered in tablets of stone'. This struggle is often complex, and is not

only shaped by institutional values, but by individual's values and experiences (Thompson, 2017). The focus of this chapter will be the latter three research questions (Section 4.3 iii.-v.) which seek to understand the similarities and differences in pre-92 and post-92 practices, the motivations and reasons for working in widening participation and how practitioners reconcile institutional and national policy with their individual beliefs and values.

Whilst Chapters Five and Six integrated the data from phases one and two, this chapter primarily focuses on interview data to explore the relationship between practitioners' personal narratives and their practices. As set out in Chapter Three, the theoretical framework adopted acknowledges that practitioners have the capacity to act reflexively and with agency, acting as what Ball et al. (2012, p. 138) termed 'meaning makers'. Drawing on the framing by Maguire et al. (2014) of policy enactment, I explore the enactment of policy as the way policy is interpreted and implemented which is by nature messy and incomplete. Within the morphogenetic cycle[49], this enactment is likely to take place between T_3 and T_4. Whilst the relative success or failure of this enactment can feed back into the policy development phase, this enactment happens after the initial policy has been written and at a level or more below it on the policy implementation staircase. This creates scope for a shift from the intentions of policy to the actuality of enactment. Nonetheless, this does not negate the fact that structural power may constrain possible practices and within this chapter a model is proposed to theorise how different practitioners adopt particular positions in relation to policy enactment, theorising both how power restricts practitioner agency and how practice can be used as a form of resistance.

7.2 Enacting policies

Research into widening participation interventions has often framed them as dehumanised projects, ones that have activities and objectives that are delivered but are in many ways not shaped by the individual staff that deliver them. As

---

[49]As detailed in section 3.2.1 (p.44)

(Ozga, 2000, p. 10) highlighted, there is a 'tension between the dominant intention or purpose [of policy] and the way things work on the ground'. In a similar vein, Leibowitz and Bozalek (2014) in their study of South African higher education emphasised the role of people's reflexive agency in activating policy. Additionally, policy enactment is often messy and ad hoc in nature (Ball, 1993). It is, therefore, vital that we understand the ways in which widening participation policy is enacted to better understand this complexity.

7.2.1 Policy enactment in widening participation

The conflict between the intentions of policy makers and the realities of implementation is key to understanding the dynamism of policy (Forrester and Garratt, 2016). Similar to the critique of research into school policy implementation (Ball et al., 2012) much of the research directly related to widening participation focuses primarily on senior leaders (e.g. Harrison et al., 2015, Jones, 2017) not front line practitioners. Despite this gap of research into practitioners being identified over ten years ago (Burke, 2008 cf. Burke, 2012), very little research has ensued in this area, a key gap that my research addressed. At the inception of this project, Wilkins and Burke (2013) had conducted the only published study into practitioners. However, its scope was limited and involved only one practitioner in each of seven institutions. Additionally, it was conducted prior to the recent increases in student fees and demise of Aimhigher. Over the course of my own research, I also became aware of others working on similar topics. An unpublished MA thesis by Anna Burchfiel (2017) examined the role of practitioners and Chris Bayes (In press) undertook a small scale study of those working in student recruitment and widening participation to explore the tensions between the two agendas.

This lack of research on a key group is important, as information being delivered is not neutral (Archer et al., 2003) . This issue has become increasingly acute since 2012 when institutional reliance on fee income became a primary concern for many institutions. Therefore widening participation has become both about supporting individuals, and ensuring that the institution meet its targets with OFFA to enable them to continue to charge the maximum tuition fees. Mahony

and Weiner (2017) argued in their research into the impact of neo-liberalism in universities that the work of staff across universities has become increasingly performative and increasing amounts of time are spent accounting for what is done as opposed to doing it. This tension can limit the capacity to enact policy intentions, as it becomes not just about the doing, but reporting on the doing. Moreover, it becomes about what is likely to have the greatest impact on often metric based targets in the shortest amount of time.

Examining wider research into widening participation, Whitty et al. (2015) noted the expertise in outreach teams regarding how to prepare applications for university. Yet the remits of these practitioners goes far beyond this. However, it is not always clear where their remit starts and ends. During Aimhigher there was a confusion about the focus of widening participation (Harrison, 2012a). Initially framed as focused on 'raising aspirations' and increasing applications, it latterly focussed on attainment and measured success through entry and retention data. The idea of widening participation is also underpinned by conflicting moral and philosophical positions (Stevenson et al., 2010)[50]. It is no surprise therefore that the role of the widening participation practitioner is poorly conceptualised and what is required of these practitioners varies between institutions (section 7.3).

The role of policy actors in widening participation has been a more common focus of recent research. Iain Jones (2017) interviewed seven national and eight institutional policy actors to examine the relationship between national and institutional widening participation policies from the 2004 - 2014 period. His focus was on enactment at the institutional level and the translation of national policies into institutional narratives. Framed through the implementation staircase[51], his research focused on the stair above the one on which this study focused. Jones has argued that widening participation should be seen as a complex dilemma and these dilemmas and competing agendas also resonated with my study. Some of these dilemmas may be shaped by institutional context, especially where there is a tension between individuals' values and institutional values (Parker et al., 2005).

---

[50] As previously discussed in Section 2.4 (p.30)

[51] As outlined in section 2.7.1 (p.35)

Whilst Parker and colleagues research focused on academic staff, I would argue that this tension also exists for the practitioners in this study. Stevenson et al. (2018b) also recently conducted an extensive study with academics of the pedagogical implications of widening participation. Whilst this also involved the enactment of policy, especially in relation to success and progression, some of these academics may have also been involved in delivering pre-entry interventions. This is problematic as a key finding of that study was the lack of understanding of what widening participation means. For institutions, adopting a more integrated approach to widening participation without specialist outreach teams, this may mean interventions are being delivered with little sense of the issues staff are actually trying to address[52].

Furthermore, Clare Gartland (2015) examined the role of student ambassadors in widening participation. Their role could also be considered in terms of policy enactment. However, unlike practitioners, ambassadors are even less likely to have directly engaged with the policy that they are enacting. One of Gartland's conclusions was that individualisation of success can reify the deficit model of aspiration and lead to a lack of acknowledgement of structural obstacles that potential students face, an issue addressed further in Chapter Eight. Some of the practitioners in my study came through ambassador schemes when they were students, so it is likely that Gartland's findings may resonate with some of these practitioners.

7.2.2 Wider issues of policy enactment

Whilst research on widening participation practitioners is limited, work in other areas of education and social policy is more extensive. The role of the widening participation practitioner as an enactor of policy shares many similarities with practitioners in related fields, such as teachers. Maguire et al. (2014, p. 2) examined policy enactment in four schools and found that it was 'multi-layered and messy'. They identified four key issues for implementation: context, competing policies,

---

[52] In recruiting participants for phase two, one institution declined to participate as they no longer had a widening participation team.

interpretation and resources. They also found that practice differed based on professional orientation. Additionally, Ball et al. (2012) highlighted that teachers' personal experiences and scepticisms can shape the way in which they do, or do not enact policies and the importance they placed upon them. Similarly, enactment of widening participation policy can be shaped by an individual's investment in certain issues. As Chapter Six outlined, there are numerous target groups and it is up to institutions to foreground those which are under-represented in their context. Where this work is carried out by a team of practitioners these agendas are also likely to be taken forward by individual staff who may be more or less invested in that agenda.

Given that the analysis of the institutional factors shaping policy and practice led to framing through a lens of institutional doxa, there is a temptation to continue to examine widening participation through a Bourdieusian lens. However, through analysis of the interview data, it became clear that conceptualising action as framed through a Bourdieusian lens would not accurately describe the way in which practitioners act as it is limited in how much agency is taken into account. If an analytically dualistic view of structure and agency (Archer, 1995) is adopted then it is possible to view institutions as shaped by doxa whilst examining practitioners through a different lens of analysis, acknowledging their capacity for agency based on reflexive action. The tensions Ozga (2000) foregrounded in policy enactment suggested a level of agency afforded to practitioners. Policy only shapes the range of options available to practitioners, it does not determine actions (Ball, 1993). Nor does policy exist in a vacuum. It is for this reason the personal and career narratives of practitioners were central to understanding the professional and personal contexts within which they were enacting policy. Moreover, as Thompson (2017) has noted, the existence of communities of practice for practitioners takes the remit of understanding these issues beyond individual institutions and into a wider sector based context. As Archer (2003, p. 135) theorised:

> Courses of action are produced through the reflexive deliberations of agents who subjectively determine their practical projects in relation to their objective circumstances.

When individuals are subjectively deciding how to enact policy, their background can be influential. In a study with eight undergraduate students working on widening participation interventions, Taylor (2008) questioned whether the interactions between these students and a group of participants who typified the urban myths of stereotypical disadvantaged students may reinforce stereotypes. In examining my own data from the post-92 practitioners, there is some evidence for this; certainly many of the 'typical students' discussed in Chapter Six reproduced media narratives of 'hanging around on the streets'. In contrast, the more nuanced descriptions of complex lives involving caring and the necessity of part-time work, suggests that whilst these practitioners' framings may have been shaped by media narratives to fill unknowns about students' lives, that they overall represented the realities of the lives of the students that they work with.

Hannah Jones (2015) study on community cohesion policy and local government, examined in depth the role of 'policy practitioners' (p.15). These individuals and their relationship to national and local policy embodied a similar position to widening participation practitioners. Whilst their roles were very different, many of the mechanisms Jones describes resonate with this study. She argued that practitioners were 'reflexive and self-governing' (*ibid.*) and that implementing policy was complex and involved an element of personal interpretation which was shaped through their own personal experiences and knowledge. Similarly, Duggan (2014) in his study of a local authority noted the disconnect between policy and practitioner understandings of it. Therefore, complexity and gaps between policy and practice are recurrent themes in studies in different settings.

7.3 The who, what, and why of practice

Practitioners in this study were employed in seven different institutions. Four from phase one and three additional institutions in the phase two interviews alone. The emerging findings were also presented at the 2018 National Educational Opportunities Network (NEON) Summer Symposium where a further 11 practitioners from a range of institutions discussed how these findings resonated with their experiences. It is upon all these data that I have drawn. The

practitioners and the institutions they worked in is highlighted in fig 7.1. In some post-92 institutions where students from traditionally under-represented backgrounds already had good entry rates (as with one of the phase one institutions), some institutions had no pre-entry widening participation teams. Instead they embedded widening participation into academic faculties, leaving pre-entry work to recruitment teams. This and decreasing team sizes, this was the main reason for not being able to recruit all my participants from the phase one institutions.
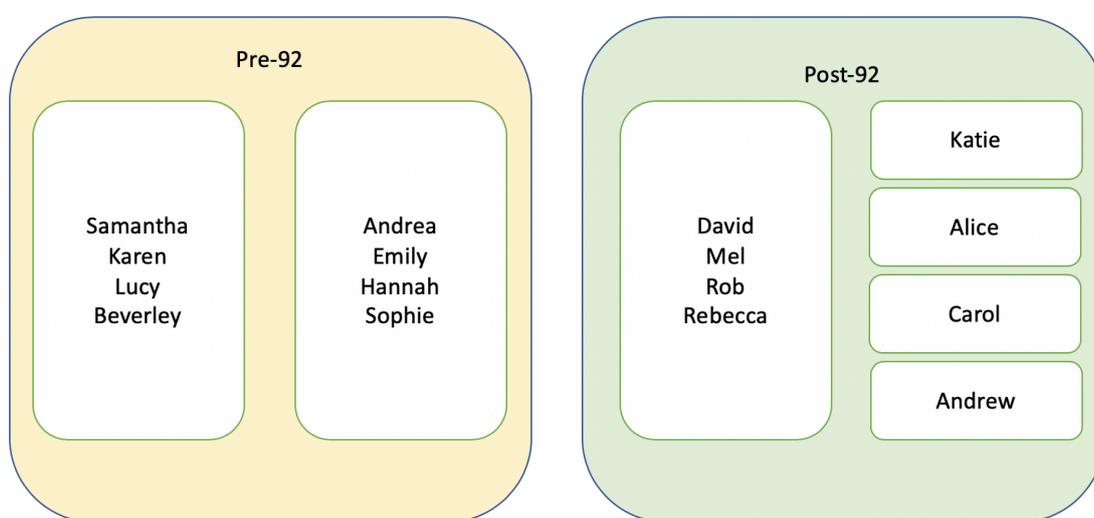
fig 7.1 - practitioners in institutions

7.3.1 'A particular group of people'

The study participants were 16 individuals with a wide range of backgrounds[53] but were often working in widening participation for similar reasons. As Rebecca (post-92) outlined:

> People that work in WP are a very particular group of people and I think everybody has this overwhelming want to make a difference and make a massive social change to the small bits that we do.

---

[53] Appendix 7 (p.287)

The practitioners in the sample all seemed motivated by a social justice agenda. This interest in widening participation explicitly for its contribution to social justice aligns with previous findings in relation to conceptualisations of widening participation by a broader range of staff in a higher education institution (Stevenson et al., 2010). Despite a common agenda, there were several reasons behind this: some were from more privileged backgrounds that wanted to do something morally focused with their careers (Alice, Andrew and Rob (all post-92), and Lucy (pre-92)) and some had come from what they self-defined as widening participation backgrounds (Carol and Mel (both post-92), and Hannah and Sophie (both pre-92)). There were others who felt they shared some empathy through their own personal histories such as not fitting in at university (Karen (pre-92) and Rebecca (post-92)) or due to their ethnicity (Rob (post-92), Samantha and Beverley (both pre-92)). Additionally, there were those who had fallen into the role but enjoyed it so stayed (David, Hannah and Katie (all post-92), and Emily (pre-92)).

As previous research has argued, empathy is crucial to be able to make practice authentic (Thompson, 2017, Wilkins and Burke, 2013) yet only some talked about adopting an empathetic position. Hannah (pre-92) felt that her own identity as a student from a widening participation target group made her empathetic. She said, 'I draw on my own experiences and I just, I feel I kind of connect maybe a bit more'. Even when practitioners were not from under-represented groups, they often talked of shared experiences. For example, Lucy (pre-92) felt her experiences as an international student resonated with some of the same issues experienced by students from under-represented backgrounds. This personal commitment was also very important to Mel (post-92). She explained how she felt there were two types of practitioner, those who saw it as a moral obligation and those for whom it was something nice to do. These findings mirror those of Wilkins and Burke (2013) who identified social class positioning and the personal commitments to widening participation as important to practitioners in their ability to ensure their work meets the needs of the individuals they work with.

7.3.2 Who are the practitioners and how did they get there?

Individuals' backgrounds may shape beliefs and attitudes but it is unlikely they will fully determine them (Sayer, 2011). Humans are complex and draw on a wide range of resources which are often shaped by past interactions and experiences. Some of the practitioners in the study (Alice, Carol, Katie, Rob, Rebecca and Mel (all post-92), and Sophie (pre-92)) had experience of working in multiple settings in widening participation. This wider experience of the sector seemed to be embedded within their rationalisations and reflections on their current setting. These differences in institutions were previously explored in Chapter Five, yet the way in which experiences shaped the practitioners' narratives was more than understandings of different institutional ethoses; it seemed to translate into more nuanced understandings of the complexities of widening participation. Chapter Two introduced Ball and colleagues' contextual dimensions of policy enactment and these map onto the issues in this chapter in the following ways:

Situated contexts	Personal histories, Places they have lived, Previous jobs
Professional cultures	Ethos of the team, Institutional Doxa, Training
Material contexts	Teams worked within, Emphasis placed on different part of their roles
External contexts	Engagement in wider sector, Policy pressures

fig 7.2 - Contextual dimensions of policy enactment in widening participation (adapted from Ball et al. (2012, p. 21))

This model can be further developed by drawing on Archer's theorisation of how individuals make their way through the world. Archer (2007b) argued that individuals reflexively mediate objective structural and cultural powers through their actions; mediating them through their own values (or concerns) which shape their personal projects which in turn shape practices as set out in her three-stage model:

> 1 Structural and cultural properties *objectively* shape the situations that agents confront involuntarily, and *inter alia* possess generative powers of constraint and enablement
>
> 2 Subjects own constellations of concerns, as *subjectively* defined in relation to the three orders of natural reality: nature, practice and the social.
>
> 3 Courses of action are produced through the reflexive deliberations of subjects who *subjectively* determine their practical projects in relation to their *objective* circumstances.

fig 7.3 – Three-stage model (Archer, 2007b, p. 17)

Drawing these together, Ball's four dimensions are likely to shape all of Archer's three stages, providing the mental resources to draw upon to understand the objective properties, develop subjective concerns and become aware of alternative courses of action that could be adopted. Consequently, having a greater range of experiences to draw on gave practitioners a greater understanding of structural and cultural issues and provided them with a greater repertoire of solutions to challenges they may face. This aligns with arguments for the role of temporality in agency made by both Archer (1995) and Emirbayer and Mische (1998) . Therefore, over time practitioners may develop an increased capacity for agency.

Experience was not only developed on the job, personal histories also impacted upon individual's concerns and their understandings of structural issues. Within the sample, the majority of the practitioners were state educated. For those who had spent time in private education, there was greater potential for understandings of under-represented groups to be based on stereotypes. Warikoo and Fuhr (2014) found evidence of this in their study of perceptions of meritocracy in undergraduate students at Oxford University. Unlike the undergraduates in that study, the regular contact practitioners had with these groups, was likely to result in more nuanced understandings over time. This temporal change was noted by Andrew (post-92) who coming from outside of the English education system felt his views had changed a lot as he gained experience in the sector. Where staff turnaround may be high (i.e. one-year internship posts), staffing these roles with individuals with no personal experience of the realities of lives of

students from under-represented backgrounds, without substantial training may lead to a disconnect between realties of the structural barriers to participation in higher education and the narratives of policy.

Within the sample there were no practitioners who had come from private education into a short-term role. Where this happens this could be problematic as can be seen through examining the narratives of Beverley, Samantha and Sophie (all pre-92). Within these, there was less acknowledgement of the structural barriers students from under-represented backgrounds face which may have been shaped by their limited exposure to inequality. Beverley (pre-92) had been privately educated for part of her schooling and both Samantha and Sophie (both pre-92) talked about having been to what they described as 'good' schools. Also common to all three was the lack of any formal education in Social Science and being in pre-92 institutions who selected widening participation targets by prior academic attainment. It is therefore likely that they may not have had any exposure to the realities of educational inequality. In contrast, Alice (post-92) explained:

> I did education and poverty in social exclusion as a part of my undergraduate [degree] so all of that knowledge of the cumulative barriers was already there so none of it was new to me when I started working in WP.

Therefore, either personal experience or academic training are important factors in ensuring national policy is translated to best address the needs of the individuals who are targeted and to avoid causing unintended harm. The need for staff training in targeting is supported by the findings of a survey exploring the barriers stakeholders and institutions felt there were to targeting minority ethnic groups (Stevenson et al., 2019) Building this level of professionalisation within the field may have its challenges as unlike teaching, widening participation is often not a planned career path.

7.3.3 The 'accidental' widening participation practitioner

Despite many of the participants talking about shared experiences with the groups they work with and their deep commitment to the agenda, ten of the sixteen practitioners felt they had ended up in the role by accident. Some had come from other sectors (Beverley(pre-92) - Charities, Samantha (pre-92) - Teaching); more commonly though from other roles in the university (Andrea, Emily, Lucy, Sophie (all pre-92), David and Mel (both post-92)).

When I talked about the idea of an 'accidental' practitioner at the NEON conference it also resonated with many of the participants in the session. Even those that has moved through a more formal progression route from being a student ambassador (Rob, Katie, Carol and Rebecca (all post-92), and Sophie (pre-92)) had often accidentally become ambassadors. As Carol (post-92) stated:

> I came back in my fourth year and my two housemates were on [the same degree] and one of them said like oh I'm going to go for this part time student ambassador job. I was like oh, what's that, alright then, so I applied and got the role too.

Similar to Carol, Katie and Rob (both post-92) stumbled across widening participation through an assessed module on their degree course. Rob was asked to develop an event for Year 12 learners as part of a PR module and Katie a project as part of her drama degree:

> it was by complete coincidence. I had never heard of it before so during my undergraduate I did a special project with a focus on theatre in education. We decided to target local scout groups in the area and it just so happens that one of the leaders of the scout group actually worked in the widening participation team at the university

There were very few practitioners who chose widening participation as a natural progression from their degree. The exception to this was Alice (post-92) who wrote her Social Policy undergraduate dissertation on access. This lack of progression from relevant degree pathways into widening participation is notable

especially when an understanding of structural and cultural issues can be highly beneficial. Despite the accidental nature of their careers, all the practitioners demonstrated some kind of personal motivation for remaining in these roles.

7.3.4 Personal troubles, public issues

Personal concerns relating to the challenges of widening participation can shape practices. This resonates with C. Wright Mills (1970) notion of a Sociological Imagination, the ability to turn personal troubles into public issues. Within the sample there are a number of examples of this. Rebecca (post-92) for example comes from a rural coastal area with high levels of deprivation. Whilst she was not from what she defined as a 'poor' background, she felt a personal connection to these issues:

> I've grown up in a coastal area I've seen it everywhere and that's sort of white working-class male that doesn't get interested in education, even though they are bright enough to follow it, and I think it really influences how I see WP in general.

Archer (2007b) posited that concerns formed the second part of her three-stage model[54]. Furthermore, she argued that these concerns are the *modus vivendi* that is the main focus of internal conversations and ultimately acting as the driver for our own practices. For Beverley and Samantha (both pre-92), and Rob (post-92), their identity as from black and minority ethnic groups were key to their concerns. Rob's *modus vivendi* seemed to be equally driven by his fragmented educational career as by his ethnicity. The lack of support he had experienced was key to his motivation:

> I would always try and sort of be learner centric basically because everyone is different. I've benefited from very helpful people once I got into university but I didn't really have anyone through school that kind of pivoted me because it was kind of assumed that he's alright, his parents are really pro uni.

---

[54] Section 7.3.2 (p.172)

Whilst every practitioner cannot be expected to have had a life that mirrors the experiences of every person they work with, it is important to acknowledge that an individual's concerns are shaped by their own experiences.

7.4 Juggling roles

When asking the practitioners to describe their roles, a range of different activities were highlighted (fig.7.4). There were many aspects to their roles and as Hannah (pre-92) outlined: 'I'm sure I do loads more I've just glossed over it'. Therefore, these narratives were partial, however certain tasks recurred across different narratives; administrative tasks, evaluation and organising events being the most prominent. The focus of most of the practitioner's roles was on pre-entry work. Very few worked with students once they had joined the university except with student ambassadors. Despite the importance of careers advice and guidance to pre-entry widening participation work, this was only mentioned by four of the participants as part of their roles. Furthermore, the smaller the team, the greater the number of facets to their roles. Katie (post-92) for example talks about how being in a team of two meant she did a lot of varied roles including leading on evaluation, event planning and more strategic development. In contrast, in larger teams roles often focused on delivering a single project (e.g. Sophie, Lucy and Emily (all pre-92)).

Website development   Running events   Admissions support
Finance reporting   Campus tours   Management
Evaluation   New student inductions   Strategic planning
Training Ambassadors
Developing learning resources   Co-ordinating projects
Workshops   Recruitment   Tracking students   Mentoring
Teaching   Communications and newsletters
Teacher CPD   Summer schools
Developing partnerships
Event planning   Taster days   Running governors scheme
Report writing   Data entry   Academic enrichment

fig 7.4 - Roles and responsibilities of practitioners

7.4.1 Setting them up to succeed?

In light of the wide range of roles that practitioners are expected to undertake, they are likely to be underprepared to undertake some of these tasks. Whilst administration, event planning and co-ordination may require little formal training, teaching and careers guidance require a particular skillset and some professional knowledge. Most secondary school teachers, for example, will have undertaken a year's postgraduate training. As a participant at the NEON symposium stated: 'I began as a teacher. I feel I've applied lessons learnt from my PGCE'. Unlike teachers, there is much less shared understanding amongst widening participation practitioners of the theoretical concepts that underpin their work. Samantha (pre-92) came to widening participation from FE teaching so it could be assumed she has a good understanding of pedagogical practices. Likewise, Beverley (pre-92) and Andrea (pre-92) coming from careers guidance backgrounds were likely to possess requisite skill sets for careers guidance. On the whole, however, few of the practitioners in the study had formal training in these areas. As Emily (pre-92) noted during a discussion of apprenticeships:

> The caveat is I don't profess to know that much about those routes so if I didn't talk that much about it, it would be more through my lack of knowledge than because it wasn't signposted in a positive way.

This lack of formal training also impacts upon the capacity to conduct effective evaluation. In small teams, where there is unlikely to be a specific person in an evaluation role, this becomes a more pressing issue. Further to this, for most widening participation practitioners, their theoretical understanding of what they are trying to achieve within their roles is much more limited. This does depend on their academic background as a graduate of the social sciences might have a good grounding in the issues surrounding inequality and access to education. As Reay et al. (2005) contend, students make choices within constraints and yet it is unclear if all the practitioners in this study really understood those constraints. Therefore, where these understandings are not accessible through the practitioners' own lived experiences, they need to be provided with sufficient academic grounding to ensure they do not cause unintentional harm through the work they do. This

discussion is developed further in Chapter Eight in relation to understandings of aspiration.

7.5 Playing to 'type'?

In analysing the interview data certain commonalities in approaches to practice seemed to emerge. The corpus of the interview data was examined holistically including the answers given to specific questions surrounding employment, interactions with policy and the tensions in their work, as well as the responses to the typical student and ladder of aspirations task[55]. Whilst the practitioners had very different personal, academic and employment histories, their approaches to widening participation demonstrated common features. Each practitioner seemed to occupy a space on two differing continua. Firstly, whether they adopted a **compliant** position with national and local policy or a more **transgressive** position, focused on more personal understandings of what widening participation was for. Secondly, whether the approach they took was based on what was right for the **institution** or what was right for the **individuals** they worked with. In light of this a model was developed (fig. 7.5). The model is predicated on the argument that habitual action is insufficient for giving individuals guidelines within which to function (Archer, 2010). Therefore, reflexivity is key to understanding personal positions on these two continua. This section addresses in more detail the rationale for the practitioners' positions and what may have influenced their positions.

---

[55] Section 4.6.2 (p.77)
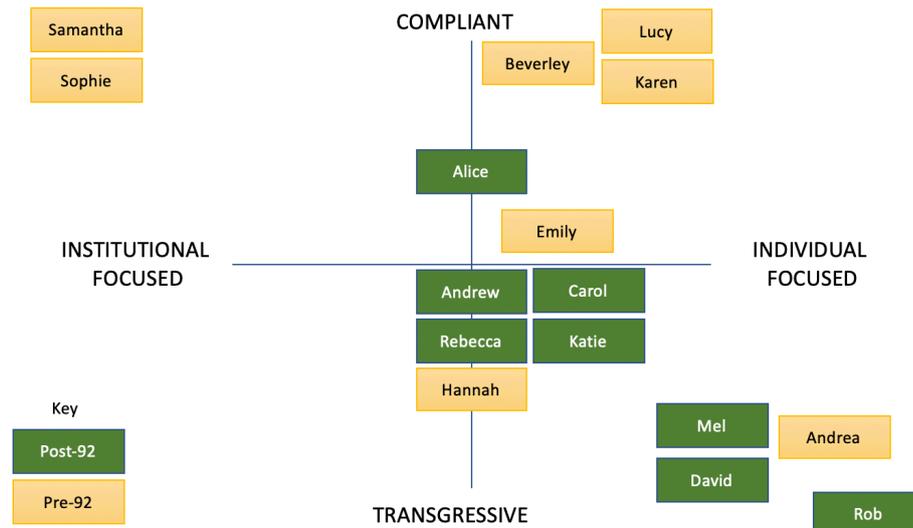
fig.7.5 - Classification of practitioners

The term transgressive was adopted from the work of bell hooks (1994) as there are many parallels between her work towards engaged pedagogy and developing widening participation interventions that are rooted in the needs of the individuals. These needs are often in tension with the agenda of the institutions. bell hooks' idea was that that a focus on the individuals becomes empowering and transformative as opposed to being driven by fixed governing practices. Whilst I am not making claims to the pedagogical practices of these individuals, as this was not within the scope of the fieldwork, I am arguing that those practitioners operating further along this continuum are transgressing further from primarily focusing on the institutions concerns and more reactive to those of the individuals that they work with. I argue that this is not an either/or situation and that individuals exist on a continuum. The positioning along these two continua therefore results in a number of emergent positions. The majority of the practitioners were situated around the mid-point, more towards transgressive-individual focused positions. There were also a number of other groups: two groups of compliant practitioners with varying positions on the institutional-individual continua, a group of individual-transgressive practitioners and an outlying rebel-transgressive practitioner.

7.5.1 The constrained-transgressive practitioner

The majority of the practitioners fell within a mid-position with some showing more or less transgression from institutional norms in their practices and others showing more or less focus on the individuals they work with. For Carol (post-92), she demonstrated this constraint through her obligation to her employer. As highlighted on p.119 she felt that her obligation as an employee was was in tension with what might be right for the young people. For Alice (post-92) the issue was different:

> In terms of what we are doing for the young people we are working with I think what we are doing is fine. We give them advice and support but it's probably actually more what we're not doing for them, for the young people we're not actually working with.

Her constraint was that those she felt needed the support to access her institution were not actually being targeted. I therefore argue that the institutional policy is constraining practices for this group. Those who demonstrated more transgression in their practices were in roles with more agency. Working on pre-16 outreach meant Hannah (pre-92) was less worried about recruiting to the institution and more focused on guiding young people. With the exception of Hannah, the majority of this group had been working in the sector for far longer than those in the compliant groups. This may therefore have given them a stronger sense of what is possible within their interventions and the extent to which transgressions may be tolerated by the institution. Furthermore, Alice, Rebecca, Katie and Carol (all post-92) had all worked in widening participation in multiple institutions. This combination of a greater understanding of different approaches and experiences of working with a wider range of young people is likely to have shaped their position. Whilst Andrew (post-92) had only worked within one institution, he was studying for a doctorate and was involved in a number of external widening participation networks. This may have shaped his understandings in the same way those working in multiple contexts would have understood variations in practices.

Whilst this position seemed to be occupied more often by those working in a post-92 setting, Hannah and Emily (both pre-92) also occupied a similar position. For Hannah, this seemed to be as a result of having recently completed a PhD and being from what she described as a working-class background. Her thesis focused on a very niche topic and demonstrated her awareness that like her own path, the range of routes young people may wish to follow would be wide. This also manifested in her practices where she used her outreach to promote her love of culture and languages, reflecting on what she felt was important for young people and modifying her practices accordingly. She reflected on her position:

> [I] haven't done an apprenticeship and I haven't done a foundation degree, so I can only really talk about my experience […] I do always say on certain days that university's not for everyone. I always use the phrase, If you decide university is for you because it isn't for everyone but I wouldn't, I wouldn't say I feel pressured by the university to be like you have to [come here]. You know you have to promote that I think it's just sometimes unavoidable.

This demonstrated that she felt constrained by her knowledge of other routes and that her primary role was to promote university. This constrained the extent to which she was able to transgress from the institutional position. This resistance can also be conceived as what Greenbank (2006b) framed a local rationality, where managers (in the case of his study) were seen to be pursuing objectives that were rational for them but not necessarily the institution. Unlike others who had been working in the sector a similar length of time, Hannah was far more reflexive of her positionality, something which could be related to her doctoral study in a cognate field that involved her developing a more critical voice. Drawing on Lukes (1974) three-dimensional concept of power, I argue that in shaping the interventions on a micro-level based on a personal agenda can be conceptualised as a form of resistance in order to resolve the latent conflict between the institutional and personal positions. However, not all the practitioners talked about transgressions from institutional positions.

7.5.2 The institutionalised-compliant practitioner and the pragmatic-compliant practitioner

These two groups, whilst distinct in their orientation both shared a commonality. One was focused on the interests of the individual participating in widening participation and the other more towards needs of the institution. For both groups, adherence to institutional policy was a given. In the case of the *institutionalised-compliant practitioners* (Sophie and Samantha (both pre-92)), they did not discuss any tensions between issues of inequality and the work they did. Sophie explicitly said there were no tensions, whereas Samantha highlighted a possible tension if one of her target students chose a more prestigious university over her institution. Yet neither critiqued if elite higher education should be the sole focus of this work. In contrast, the *pragmatic-compliant practitioners* were more reflexive in their discussions surrounding the tensions between what was right for the young people they work with and the institutional position. For example, Beverley (pre-92) extensively talked about the value of other careers paths which did not involve university and the need for 1-to-1 careers advice; yet she did not feel it was within her remit to address this. Similarly, Karen and Lucy (both pre-92) also highlighted tensions of structural inequality but did not suggest how they might alter their practices to address this. I would argue that adopting these compliant positions supports the argument made by Wilkins and Burke (2013, p. 11) about the potential for middle-class professionals to make widening participation a 'colonizing project for the proselytization of middle-class norms and values' a real possibility.

For both groups, the practitioners on the whole were new to the sector (table 7.1). Where careers had spanned a number of periods of policy shift, this may have illuminated other ways of doing things or the limitations of new agendas. In contrast, newer entrants may be unaware of the origins of direction of travel in policy, as also highlighted in Ball et al. (2012) study of teachers. This means policies and initiatives may be viewed in a different way to experienced practitioners who had seen previous success or failure of similar policies in the past.

Practitioner	Institution	Time in widening participation
Beverley	Pre-92	9 months
Lucy	Pre-92	9 months
Karen	Pre-92	18 months
Sophie	Pre-92	4 years
Samantha	Pre-92	2 years

table 7.1 – Employment positions of the compliant practitioners

I therefore argue that in all these cases, having only been exposed to one institution for a relatively short time may have limited their ability to engage critically with policy. Sophie (pre-92) was the exception. She had been in the role for four years and had also previously been a student ambassador. However, by remaining in the same institution she may not have had exposure to other ways of being like the more transgressive practitioners. This position is one that I believe practitioners can transition out of through experience or education and is an issue to which the chapter later returns.

7.5.3 The pragmatic-transgressive practitioner

Common to the practitioners in this group (Mel and David (both post-92), and Andrea (pre-92)) was the intersection of a high level of experience in the sector and a high level of autonomy in their roles. Mel had been working in widening participation for six years, Andrea 15 years and David 17 years. As David (post-92) stated:

> So you try and find a work around and you're sort of going we know a high percentage of these learners in your school are from these postcodes anyway so we'll allow you basically to target anyone and then we'll look at the results and try and see whether it justifies it. Or you start looking at going, Oh we're going to do this event anyway and we'll count this proportion of the learners to NCOP and this proportion to our WP budget and it becomes an accounting exercise

This level of transgression was arguably only made possible through David's seniority and ability to set the agenda in the team. Whilst Mel (post-92) was in a less senior role, she still had some autonomy over her remit. David also talked in his interview about adopting a pragmatic attitude. He was interested in individuals making informed decisions but understood that he had to work within the constraints of institutions' targets and agendas. As he put it there was a: 'balance between doing what we believe to be right and doing what we've been told to do'. In contrast, Andrea's (pre-92) focus was on a primary school programme which she ran more or less in isolation. For all three, this combination of autonomy and experience seemed to be key. The ability for manipulation of the agenda based on personal beliefs within institutional constraints is a way of resolving the latent power conflict but without needed to challenge structural power.

7.5.4 The rebel-transgressive practitioner

Unlike the constrained positions of *pragmatic-transgressive* practitioners, Rob (post-92) occupied a more extreme position, one which was often in tension with the institution:

> I don't always fit with the institutional line, and there's been times occasionally I've been told 'don't say that in public again because that doesn't really fit with what the sector's trying to do'. My job is not to make every young person want to go to university or go to university but it's about making sure that they are aware of all the range of options at every stage in their life.

Rob did not seem constrained by the institution but actively pushed at the boundaries of what was possible within his own practices to ensure what he was doing was, he felt, the morally right thing for the individuals with whom he worked, demonstrating more resistance to power. This did not necessarily seem to be because he had less constraints on his action or was subject to weaker institutional power but as he later stated in his interview:

> I think there is a personal interpretation of how you enact what is required

of us to make sure that it isn't inappropriate for the young people.

Therefore, the *rebel-transgressive* is using practice as a form of resistance. This position is likely to be rooted in several personal factors. As with the *pragmatic-transgressive* his experience in the sector is likely to have shaped his ability to draw on a wide range of possible actions and to develop a more nuanced understanding of structural and cultural contexts. Unlike *pragmatic-transgressive* practitioners, Rob's personal narrative showed a lot of resistance to institutional norms throughout his education career, moving through different schools and making a number of personal choices going against the grain of family expectations. Therefore, it is possible that he would be predisposed to adopting such a position. Resistance or deviation from institutional mission can be seen as a form of political action. As Audre Lorde (2018, p. 19). asserts: 'In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action' Relating this back to Archer's notion of a *modus vivendi*, it is through reflexive engagement with these personal projects and the objective circumstances within which practitioners work that practice emerges. For Rob (post-92), he is very clear about how this may be at odds with what management might see as desirable, but this resistance is still in response to an overarching institutional power and therefore to understand the relationship between practitioners and the institution, I return to discussion of institutional doxa.

7.6 Institutional doxa revisited

This thesis has theorised the way widening participation policy constrains practice using institutional doxa (Davey, 2012) . From the classification of practitioners (fig 7.5), its role in shaping practitioner approaches seemed stronger in two institutions. Samantha, Beverley, Lucy and Karen all worked in one pre-92 institution and occupied compliant positions. Mel, David and Rob all worked in one post-92 institution and adopt similarly individual-transgressive positions. Whilst not as marked in her focus on the individual, possibly due to lower levels of autonomy in her role, Rebecca (also from the same institution) was located in a similar area of the model. Andrea, Emily, Hannah and Sophie, all worked in another pre-92 institution yet were more dispersed on the model. Managing

behaviour to 'fit in' is something that individuals in teams are likely to do (Sayer, 2011) and institutional doxa can be seen to shape certain actions as 'norms'. The doxic influence is likely to be greater in more coherent teams. David's team was much smaller, therefore the potential for this influence was greater than in Sophie's much larger team. Larger teams may result in more reflexive agency exercised by individuals over their actions. Whilst Beverley's team was also large, the relative inexperience of the practitioners may have resulted in less deviation from institutional norms due to having little other experience to draw upon. Experience was therefore a key issue influencing practice as was interaction with other practitioners, an issue to which the chapter now turns.

7.6.1 'Some of the best ideas I've had have been other people's'

Doxa can shape ways of thinking and being. However, the extent to which this institutionalisation can be mitigated comes through interaction of practitioners with the wider sector. The value of networking and discussing issues of widening participation beyond institutional silos is important. As Mel (post 92) stated in the quote that comprises the section heading, it was through talking to others about best practice that some of her best ideas were created. As highlighted previously, Andrew (post-92), despite only having worked in a single institution, seemed to have a better grasp of wider issues through both his formal study and connection into external networks. In fact, those who adopted more transgressive positions all talked about participation in conferences and outside networks. Carol (post-92) felt that there was decreasing time and space to do this and found this most stark coming from a third sector organisation that valued engagement with policy:

> It's really hard. I mean in my last role I had a lot of dedicated reading time. My boss has suggested here that I just do it here when we are a little bit quieter. I'd like to know when that is because maybe the summer, we get maybe a breather in kind of August but other than that it doesn't calm down because you're always chasing your tail.

This meant that different institutional environments resulted in differing approaches. Those in the pre-92 institutions all talked about relying primarily on team briefings and the WonkHE weekly newsletter to keep up to date. For those in

post-92 institutions, team briefings seemed less common with an increased reliance on mainstream media or connection into outside networks. On the whole, those who adopted more transgressive positions were those who were connected into external networks and gained their policy updates from a wide range of sources. Furthermore, even where practitioners were time poor, having studied for a related postgraduate qualification seemed to create a greater awareness of the importance of taking a macro view of the sector to keep up to date with policy changes. What is clear is that there are many targeting demands on time that need to be balanced.

7.7 Juggling the must, should and could of practice

Not all practitioners were aware of tensions between their own positions and institutional ideologies. There may also have been an element of awareness but overwhelming reasons to toe the institutional line. As I argue through the notion of a *constrained-transgressive* practitioner, many of the practitioners in the study did identify tensions between what they felt was right and what they were required to do by policy. As Ball et al. (2012, p. 142) have previously argued in relation to teachers, these policies are 'struggled over and struggled with', yet this does not always mean that they will fully resist implementing these policies. When there are certain targets to meet and when their continued employment relies on meeting these targets, there may be a limited agency in resisting institutional positions. However, as alluded to in Chapter Five, the enactment of policy offers a space for 'creative reinvention' (Trowler, 2014, p. 14). The extent of this can be highly variable; some reinvention may be subtle, altering the content of a workshop, whereas other reinvention may involve deliberate subversion of the aims of a programme. To draw again on Archer (1995, p. 187):

> A person occupying a particular role acquires vested interests with it and is both constrained and enabled by its 'dos and don'ts' in conjunction with the penalties and promotions which encourage compliance.

It was through the navigation of these constraints that the practitioners in the *constrained-transgressive* group showed variation. Emily (pre-92) for example stated that:

> […]one of the positive outcomes of them coming to our events or working with us is that they don't want to come to university. I see that as a positive outcome if that's an informed decision.

Yet this was not reflected in the access agreement of her institution. I therefore argue that Emily was balancing the constraints of what she was asked to do with what she feels was right for the young people. She was very much focused on the individual over the institutional needs. Similarly, Andrew (post-92) highlighted the tension between recruitment to the institution and the needs of the students but demonstrated constraints through the subjects offered. Therefore, he was not adopting a *radical-transgressive* position and suggesting they look elsewhere but working within the realms of what he sees as possible within his context.

Engagement with policy, research and external networks only have the ability to deeply affect practice when there is time to reflect on this engagement. As Sayer (2011, p. 26) argued:

> Our 'professed values' may also differ from our 'values in use', not necessarily through deliberate deceit, but through lack of reflection and self-knowledge.

This resonated with one of the common themes in the data ; that of a lack of time and space to reflect on practice and echoes with wider studies on academic staff in universities (Mahony and Weiner, 2017).

7.8 How could we reimagine practice

This chapter has outlined factors that affect practice: the role of experience, context, understandings of structural and cultural issues and an individual's *modus vivendi*. Like Ball (1993, p. 15), my data supports the notion that 'policies from "above" are not the only constraints and influences upon institutional

practices' and as Wilkins and Burke (2013, p. 16) argued '[policies] are reworked and imagined differently through the contingency and particularity of local actors and their elected professional and social class attachments'. Through theorising types of practitioners, this chapter has highlighted differences in the levels of compliance with institutional agendas. However, these positions are not fixed. More transgressive practitioners appear to have more resources to draw on in developing their own reflexive positions. In order for all practitioners to function in a more reflexive way to meet the needs of the individuals with whom they work, they need to be equipped with these resources, both in terms of agency in developing their practices and in structural and contextual knowledge. For compliant practitioners, lack of experience in the sector or agency in their practice may hold them in this position. The following section sets out possible ways of reimagining practice to offer practitioners the tools to adopt a more transgressive position, allowing them to focus more on the needs of the individuals they work with. The structural changes needed for this to take place will be outlined separately in the concluding chapter as many of these require a radical reframing of how institutions are regulated.

7.8.1 Professionalisation of widening participation

There are many opportunities for development as a practitioner and ways for practice to become more research led. Recently OFFA ran a highly successful pracademic project (Stevenson et al., 2018a). Within this project practitioners were mentored to develop themselves as researchers. NEON also run a range of widening participation training but these opportunities are disparate and limited to those who have institutional support. Even when opportunities do not incur a financial cost to the practitioner, there is the need for the employer to support the practitioner in terms of time and space. Conferences were cited as the most common form of professional development by the practitioners in the study. However, the scope to attend these seemed to be decreasing and several participants felt that they gained few new insights from attending them, instead focusing on disseminating their own practices as the reason for attending.

Penny Jane Burke (2012), drawing on feminist practices argues that in order that widening participation can be transformative, critical tools need to be employed to challenge taken for granted meanings. This, as has been seen in this chapter and will be revisited in Chapter Eight in the context of aspiration, is beyond the current abilities of most practitioners. Those who demonstrate a more critical perspective have done so because of their previous training in teaching or social science. I therefore argue that one of the key ways in which widening participation outreach could become more effective is by giving sociological training to all practitioners as standard practice. When I discussed this finding in the NEON seminar, I was made aware of a master's degree in Education focused on Widening Participation at the University of Sussex[56] but again this would require institutional support and personal funding to complete.

Further to this, drawing on the work of bell hooks, Burke argues that 'to teach in varied communities not only our paradigms must shift but also the way we think' (hooks, 1994, p. 11). I would argue that this is key, however to even begin to address this issue, some form of pedagogical training is needed. Whilst work done by widening participation practitioners is less formal than academic teaching in a school or university context, it is nonetheless a pedagogical act. For this pedagogy to be effective there therefore needs to be some awareness of what pedagogy is and how it works. Some practitioners come with those skills as trained teachers but not all do, and even those who have been trained in pedagogy may in many cases benefit from reflecting on the way in which they enact that pedagogy to ensure it engages with those learners to make them active participants in learning. This is extremely important, as the groups who are often the targets of this work, may have been 'switched off' from traditional didactic teaching and therefore being able to show them that education can be engaging and emancipatory is vital. For this change to be widespread, core training needs to be mandatory across the sector. Without making it mandatory, the effect of developing such training is likely to be unequal and available only to those with the interest and material resources to access it.

---

[56] http://www.sussex.ac.uk/education/pgstudy/wpstrand

7.8.2 Space to reflect

Whilst training is important, just offering professional training is unlikely to solve the problem. When policy pressures force institutions into a quantified focus on delivering more events and interacting with more individuals, valuing scale over quality, there is unlikely to be the space to implement valuable reflective practice. Within a post-interview questionnaire, one participant highlighted that the interview was 'useful to reflect on my own career and practice'. Given the overarching sense from participants that they lacked the time and space to reflect, it is worth considering the impact of this upon the potential effectiveness of practice. The demands placed upon practitioners to meet institutional targets and the issues of performativity noted more widely in higher education (Mahony and Weiner, 2017) mean that time not spent delivering an intervention is often challenged for its value. This devaluation of the space to critically deconstruct practices therefore limits their effectiveness and it is the role of policymakers to put pressure on institutions to ensure that reflective practice becomes embedded in what institutions are expected to do. This is also about value and the value institutions place on the work done by these practitioners not only to widen participation but to prepare students from under-represented groups to enable them to make a successful transition to higher education.

Whilst improving the status and the training afforded to widening participation practitioners would go some way to addressing many of these issues, the actual picture is more complex. Pre-entry widening participation work is not a discreet area and in fact many benefits are derived from the inclusion of academics and students in the design and delivery of these interventions. Many of the issues of lack of understanding of inequality or training in careers also apply to this group. The challenge to address this is more complex, especially when this work may only be a fraction of what they do in the overall employment or studies. Therefore, other methods of reaching staff in academic focused roles may be needed, such as integrating similar training within the professionalisation of teaching staff agenda.

7.9 Summary

Drawing together the themes of this chapter the focus shifts back to the research questions; the motivations and reasons for working in this area, how practitioners reconcile individual and institutional positions, and the similarities and differences across institutions. Whilst many of the practitioners have come to work in widening participation as 'accidental' practitioners, they often have personal reasons for doing so. These can vary between a sense of personal duty to the communities they come from, as a philanthropic endeavour, or because personal troubles they have faced in their own lives resonate with the issues their work addresses. Without exception, social justice is a motivation, but the degree to which this is realised in their practices can be seen to be shaped by their understandings of structural and cultural issues and their own contexts.

To theorise how practitioners reconcile policy and beliefs, this chapter has drawn on the work of Margaret S. Archer (1995, 2007) and Ball et al. (2012) to demonstrate that personal context is central to the ability to be able to reflexively enact policy in a way that is congruent with the individuals moral position and what is possible within their institutions. Through the practitioners' narratives five key types of practitioner emerged, theorised through their orientation to individual or institutional concerns and by their compliance or transgression from institutional positions. Where individuals have fewer resources to draw on, be it experience or agency in their roles, they are more likely to adopt the position of a compliant practitioner. Where they have more experience, or deeper understandings of the complexities of the work they do, they are more likely to adopt one of the transgressive positions, with the level of agency in their role constraining the extent to which they can transgress. There certainly seems to be the possibility for working in a team to influence their positions and I have argued that relative lack of experience or smaller teams may increase the institutional influence. It is not however deterministic, and I have shown how there is still wide variation in some teams. This is an important finding as in understanding why and how practitioners come to adopt different positions, we can better develop training to ensure that they are working in a way which best meets the needs of

the individuals who should be the primary beneficiaries of widening participation work.

Furthermore, whilst types of practitioners can be identified, they are not fixed and nor are they solely determined by the type of institution the practitioner works in, with experiences more commonly shaped by the sizes of teams or the autonomy their roles offer. I have also made the case for reimagining practice across the sector to enable practitioners to adopt a more nuanced position which focuses on what is right for those individuals that they target. Some of these solutions involve valuing reflective practice and giving time and space for practitioners to work in a more critical way or providing more formal training in the structural and cultural issues which impact upon the groups with which they work. This may also involve taking a more holistic look at who delivers work and how prepared they are to do so, creating recruitment pathways from teaching and social science degrees into the field. Some solutions are beyond individual institutions and require structural changes that will be returned to in Chapter Nine.

Chapter 8: Aspiration on whose terms?

8.1 Introduction

For over twenty years, government policy has been focused on the notion of 'raising aspirations'. Despite extensive research debunking the presence of a poverty of aspiration (e.g. St. Clair et al., 2013, Allen and Hollingworth, 2013, Archer et al., 2014, Baker, 2016, Mendick et al., 2018) it still remains a focus. This chapter continues to explore the role of practitioners in examining how the term 'raising aspirations' has been translated from policy into practice. In doing so it draws on institutional doxa and the role personal histories have to play in shaping practices (Chapter Seven). The primary focus is upon three research questions. Firstly, the differences in discourses used in the access agreements between pre and post-92 institutions. Secondly, comparing the use of 'raising aspirations' across pre and post-92 institutions to identify similarities and differences in practitioners' experiences. Lastly, exploring how practitioners reconcile policy and their values through the ways 'raising aspirations' is mediated into practice.

The debates surrounding the role of educational aspirations in widening participation will be outlined first before examining their treatment in institutional policy as presented in access agreements. Subsequently, these are contrasted with practitioner narratives, demonstrating how 'raising aspirations' is defined by practitioners in ways that sit in tension with policy. Exploring these tensions through a detailed examination of practitioners' conceptualisations of what makes a good career, I argue how framing of aspiration is mediated through experience, biography and understandings of inequality and how, if individuals' aspirations are to be dealt with to maximise their potential for realisation, practitioners need to be equipped with the knowledge and space to be able to support them.

8.2 Aspirations in policy

Aspiration is a core of national education policy and was central to the massification of higher education[57]. The increasing focus on aspirations in policy was rooted in an economic argument that originated in a post-war need to tap into the nation's potential in a changing economic climate which required a skilled workforce (Spohrer, 2011). Robbins framed one of the central concerns of his report as 'the growing realisation of this country's economic dependence upon the education of its population' (The Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 5). The way in which this is conceptualised is often narrow and primarily focuses on labour market aspirations. The notion of aspiration was closely tied to the concept of meritocracy (Young, 1958), a term that has driven political agendas since the 1950s but has gained prominence since Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government (Littler, 2018). Meritocracy promotes the idea of equality of opportunity based on talent. As Littler (2018) summarises: 'intelligence combined with effort equals merit' (p.34). This related to the idea of aspiration as the driver for effort. This focus on aspiration increased its hold during Tony Blair's New Labour government from 1997 but was also the foundation of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative policies. Aspiration has been constructed through policy as an 'individual quality which is not static and can be influenced by policy interventions' (Spohrer, 2011, p. 59), framed by government as a way for individuals to increase their status in society through drawing upon their merits to determine their success in life as opposed to their economic privilege. As Littler argued, individuals are 'incited to address their lack of privilege themselves' (Littler, 2018, p. 70). Interventions are therefore based on ameliorating the factors that limit access to opportunity. In the case of aspiration, the premise is that individuals with innate potential to succeed have been limited by a deficit of aspiration and in order to achieve equality of opportunity this needs to be addressed.

Used as a trope on both sides of the political divide, aspiration was a central focus of New Labour education policy. Their leader and then Prime Minister Tony Blair

---

[57] In its various stages from 1944 to the present as documented in Chapter Two

stated this was their unique selling point and highlighted their focus on '… those who are doing well but want to do better; those on the way up, ambitious for themselves and their families' (Blair, 2006, n.p.). On the other side of the political spectrum, the Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron famously spoke of his vision of an 'aspiration nation' (Wintour, 2010, n.p.). This framing of the country as an 'aspiration nation' was tied up with the economic needs of the country and the perceived role of higher education as a pathway to employment, again echoed in the Labour party by Andy Burnham's re-appropriation of the famous 'education, education, education' mantra of New Labour and its reframing as 'aspiration, aspiration, aspiration' (Vasagar, 2011).

8.2.1 Aspiring to what?

Two parallel discourses surrounding aspiration exist both separately and conflated into one; aspirations for a career and aspirations for participation in higher education. Of course, what this omits to account for is the wider personal aspirations of an individual such as building a family, something that is absent in policy framings of aspiration. The conflation of career and higher education aspirations is unsurprising given that 'government policy imposes a hierarchy of aspirations based on a middle-class model, privileging some pathways and denigrating others' (Mendick et al., 2018, p. 60). Therefore, most of the aspirations framed as 'high' are dependent on being a graduate. The Dearing report suggested that higher education should be '…responsive to the aspirations and distinctive abilities of individuals' (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997, p. 101); an idea more closely aligned with a position of democratic equality that socially created oppression should be minimised (Anderson, 1999). This onus on HEIs to change to meet the needs of individuals was side-lined by the incumbent New Labour government in favour of focusing on changing individuals to adapt to desirable pathways. Drawing heavily on the previous Conservative government's focus on individual merit, these policies framed young people as 'failures who are not working hard enough' if they did not engage with this race to the middle-class (Reay, 2017, p. 13). For example the 2003 White paper explicitly focused on the need for young people to 'raise their aspirations and achieve more of their potential in examinations prior to

entry'(Department for Education and Skills, 2003, p. 68). Masking structural issues by focusing on the individual can be seen to resonate with the meritocratic idea of equality of opportunity; the focus being on the young people aspiring to existing opportunities, as opposed to adapting those opportunities to ensure an equality of outcome.

At the point of its establishment under the New Labour government in 2004, it was argued that the practical orientation of the Office For Fair Access would be on raising aspiration; attainment was seen as the remit of schools and colleges and admissions the focus of academics (Jones and Thomas, 2005). The first letter of guidance from the Secretary of State stated, 'institutions that generally attract a narrower range of students may want to put more money into outreach activity to raise aspirations' (Clarke, 2004 para. 6.3.1). Excellence Challenge, one of the initial Aimhigher programmes in 2001 was also framed through a focus on 'raising aspirations' (Burke, 2012), ensuring applications from students who were already likely to achieve the requisite A-levels for university entry as opposed to improving the attainment of students (Jones and Thomas, 2005). For example, in exploring evidence related to Aimhigher summer schools, Hatt et al. (2009) found that summer schools were mainly good at helping those already planning on going to higher education (i.e. at supporting aspiration as opposed to creating initial aspirations). This narrow conceptualisation of aspiration focused on raising aspirations for application to the institutions providing outreach work (McCaig and Adnett, 2009). Problematically, basing provision on the notion of equality of opportunity, it ignored the unequal distribution of attainment which is often found to be influenced by parental levels of education, class and ethnicity (Sammons et al., 2014).

The logic of these policies that focus on 'raising aspirations' was the premise that 'if aspiration could be 'raised', educational achievement and later life success would follow' (Spohrer, 2011, p. 57). This was predicated on several assumptions. Firstly, that where educational achievement is low there is a lack of aspiration. Secondly, that aspiration is the limiting factor to educational achievement and thirdly, that employment is contingent on educational outcomes. The notion that

talent and potential should be the sole determinants of success and that an individual's background should not impact upon success are key meritocratic ideals (Young, 1958). However, this simple reductive causal model negates to account for the complexities surrounding educational attainment.

The period leading up to the second ministerial guidance letter to the Director for Fair Access in 2011[58] saw a shift in language around aspiration. This shift was to one where 'aspiration and attainment' (Cable and Willetts, 2011 para. 5.2) became co-located issues. This move was evidence of the shift in focus during Aimhigher to be both about raising attainment and aspiration (Doyle and Griffin, 2012). More recently, the *National Strategy for Access and Student Success* moved away from using the term 'raising aspiration' and began to frame aspiration work through the lens of 'channelling aspiration' (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014, p. 31). Acknowledging a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report (Cummings et al., 2012), the strategy highlighted that 'interactions between aspiration and attainment are complex' (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014, p. 31), referring to the role of confidence and self-esteem in addition to awareness of possibilities in ensuring the success of young people. Despite the overall move away from seeing aspirations as something to raise, the 2016-17 access agreement guidance makes four references to aspiration, collocating it three times with attainment and once with informing learners (OFFA, 2015b).

Notably, by the 2016 ministerial guidance letter, the discourse in higher level policy had shifted back in the letter to one of 'raising aspirations' towards university, especially from primary age (Johnson, 2016). However, there seems to be little government consensus on this issue and a more recent DfE report acknowledges the problem of 'turn[ing] aspiration into reality' (Department for Education, 2017d, p. 9). These shifts were after the documents analysed in this study were published and thus, whilst they may have impacted upon the interviewees due to their presence in the sector at the time of the interviews, they

---

[58] This letter was the most recent before release of the guidance for the access agreements upon which this study is based.

would not have influenced the agreements, demonstrating that the cyclical nature of policy ideas return regularly to framing aspiration as in deficit.

8.2.2 The problems of a narrow framing of aspiration

This narrow range of desirable aspirations is particularly problematic. In exploring one initiative tasked with 'raising aspirations' for 13 and 14 year olds, Slack (2010) demonstrated how the adults developing interventions can fail to engage young people through ignoring the aspirations of those participating in the activities. This could equally be argued about a focus on particular careers at the expense of others. Despite policy narratives constructing the student as a' future worker' (Brooks, 2017, p. 13) , the types of work that interests individuals is highly personal and is likely to be influenced by wider personal aspirations which may constrain possible future options due to the options local labour markets can provide for. However, whilst there is still a graduate premium associated with a degree (Walker and Zhu, 2013), and access to the professions is still unequal (Milburn, 2009), ensuring young people aspire to university remains a key issue in the goal of a fairer society. The impact of attending a Russell Group university on transition into work is a tangible one and can result in increased chances of upward social mobility for working class students (Bradley and Waller, 2018). This does not, however, mean that it aligns with every individual's future aspirations.

The framing of desirable aspirations has been developed and reinforced through successive government policy agendas. The targets set in 2001 by New Labour to raise the higher education participation rate to 50% formed the basis of the assumptions surrounding aspiring to higher education being the gold standard of aspiration. This was motivated by many factors that are often collocated as a rationale: the graduate salary premium (Walker and Zhu, 2013), the under representation of certain groups in professions (Milburn, 2009) and the geographical cold spots in higher education participation (HEFCE, 2018a). Masked by this is the often-unspoken use of credentials from elite institutions not as an indicator of skills but of position and class (Bradley and Waller, 2018). Therefore, this notion of raising aspirations for certain types of universities can be seen as being related to ensuring that students have the greatest number of opportunities

open to them. However, this can result in a focus on pushing people towards futures framed by narrow conceptions of what success is. As Whitty et al. (2015) argued in elucidation of which pre-entry qualifications were seen as more desirable for entry to higher education through examining the Wolf review which framed an aspiration for university as the most desirable aspiration. The issue became confounded by the measurement of school success in relation to data on pupil destinations relating both to entry to HE and also to Russell group institutions specifically, further entrenching this view (*ibid.*). The form of aspiration privileged in policy is a particular kind; one shaped by neoliberalism and middle-class sensibilities, characterised by professional well-paid jobs.

This hierarchical notion of aspirations shaped by middle-class ideals with professional jobs and access to elite higher education at the pinnacle can be seen to have a clear lineage in the narratives surrounding national economic success and the ideals of neoliberalism. Whilst other approaches such as Sen's capability approach have focused on success being based on individual well-being and their quality of life (Hart, 2012), these rarely inform the social mobility narratives in policy. The opportunities to fulfil these aspirations are shaped by the labour market and geographical distribution of these roles. As the following section will explore, the framing of policy and the complexity of individuals' lives are two distinct issues.

8.3 Does aspiration really look like this?

Despite meeting the needs and desire for a fulfilling life, the range of aspirations expressed by young people may not match the 'high aspirations' of policy discourses (Spohrer, 2016). There have been numerous studies both involving large scale quantitative work (e.g. Khattab, 2015, Anders, 2017, Polesel et al., 2017, Archer et al., 2014) and smaller scale qualitative studies (e.g. Allen and Hollingworth, 2013, Baker, 2016, Reay, 1998, St. Clair et al., 2013) that debunk the notion of a deficit of aspiration, both in terms of desire for a positive occupational destination and for participation in higher education. This section explores some of these studies in order to demonstrate how aspiration is shaped.

Archer et al. (2014) drew on survey data of over five thousand 12-13 year olds and 85 interviews to develop an understanding of aspiration formation. They found most children had occupational aspirations, generally for professional or managerial jobs with little evidence to support a poverty of aspiration. Similarly, Platt and Parsons (2017) studied the educational aspirations of teenagers through analysis of the millennium cohort study[59], focusing mainly on the data from the cohort aged 14 years old. They found high expectations for university for both genders. Self-esteem was identified as important in developing these expectations. In relation to occupational aspirations, they found girls were more likely to aspire to jobs classified as professional or managerial, but which often paid far less than those to which boys aspired. Some of this was attributable to the gendered reproduction of aspirations. These findings when examined through a narrow policy framing of aspirations suggest there may be a discord between what is an ideal aspiration for an individual based on personal dreams and skills and what policy frames as being an ideal aspiration. Similarly, Anders (2017) analysis of the changes in expectations for university application of young people between the ages of 14 and 17 from the LSYPE[60] found that across all socio-economic groups at 14 there were high expectations for university. The difference he found, however, was that those from less advantaged backgrounds were more likely to revise expectations downwards over time even when attainment was controlled for; demonstrated by the fact that despite aspirations for university at 14 years old, there was a decrease in expectations of actually attending university in the responses made at 17 years old. This suggests that the problem may lie in the realisation of aspirations.

---

[59] The Millennium cohort study is a longitudinal study following 19,000 children born in the UK in 2000-1 https://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/page.aspx?sitesectionid=851

[60] The Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) is a cohort study that followed 16,000 people born in 1989-90 http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/page.aspx?&sitesectionid=1246&sitesectiontitle=Welcome+to+the+Longitudinal+Study+of+Young+People+in+England

8.3.1 Realising aspirations

Whilst these large-scale studies find high levels of aspiration to professional and managerial careers and toward university participation, this is not always realised in terms of applications. One of the many problems of the 'raising aspirations' discourse is the predication on becoming middle class to succeed (Boliver, 2017). As Spohrer (2016) found in a study with teenagers and teachers in Scotland, the dominant framing of success was one of middle-class professional aspirations, with other jobs positioned as less desirable. Given the deprivation of that local area, the opportunities for such employment were limited. This individualism of success and social mobility is one of the central issues of policy and assumes not only the desire on the part of the individual to make this move but ignores material constraints. As Slack (2003) argued, raising aspirations without ensuring opportunities are available is morally unfair.

Central to the prevailing policy narrative, a socially mobile person is assumed to be geographically mobile which is not always possible or desirable. Previous studies have shown that geography can have a significant effect on aspirations (e.g.Allen and Hollingworth, 2013, Connolly and Neill, 2001). Within Connolly and Neil's study of working-class young people in Belfast, they described an aspiration that was clearly constrained by the objective circumstances within which they lived. Notably they highlighted the young people 'fantasizing' (Connolly and Neill, 2001, p. 114) about highly unrealistic careers but aiming for careers which were seen in most cases as being of limited aspiration. Whilst they noted more academic aspirations from some girls to become teachers, they argued that aspiration was limited to those roles that are occupied by family members. To view these as lower aspirations per se is a myopic view on the complexity of individuals' lives. This study was a more extreme example as it was based in Belfast at the time of the 'troubles'. Similar mechanisms have been found in areas where remaining part of a community bears more strongly on people's lives than optimising future income. Whilst pupils in a study based in Cornwall had high occupational aspirations, this was taken with the assumption they would move out of the area and that the local job market was not compatible with these aspirations (Boyask et al., 2014). Those who planned to remain in the local area

were framed as having low aspirations due to 'limited horizons' (p.29). I argue, that this labelling of an aspiration to live out a life locally as one that is low adopts a highly reductive view of aspiration framed very much in a purely economic discourse. Studies such as Reay et al. (2005) focused on degree choice demonstrated the contingent nature of choice. Whilst a young person may have an aspiration, if it is not possible to realise it through their academic attainment or through being able to access an institution that offers a relevant degree, then no amount of aspiration is going to fix the problem. Reay et al. described within their analysis 'narrow circumscribed spaces of choice' (p.85). Now whilst these may be constrained through attitudinal factors, it is a demonstration of how aspiration, expectation and constraints can interact.

Of course, aspiration does not always get realised. Drawing on an example of a prestigious Law course at the University of Bristol, one of Bradley and Waller's participants stated ' hardly anyone I know who did the Law degree actually went on to become a lawyer' (Bradley and Waller, 2018, p. 213). They argued that the increasingly competitive nature of the job market and increasing supply of graduates impacts upon the employment outcomes of these young people. Comparing this to the Future Track study (Purcell et al., 2013) to which they also referred, we can see that graduate supply is leading to more diverse employment outcomes. There is a very real danger that focusing aspirations narrowly on particular pathways that are unrealisable for the young people may lead to an inevitable sense of failure for many who do not realise these narrow aspirations.

8.3.2 The tension between aspiration and identities

Aspirations are not universal and are personal, shaped by individual concerns about what matters in life. Analysis of 2003 PISA[61] data (Dupriez et al., 2012) found students from lower socio-economic groups in all countries had lower aspirations towards higher education. However, this study conflated this finding with less elevated aspirations more generally. Conflation of participation in higher education and aspirations is something that plagues many of the large-scale

---

[61] Programme for International Student Assessment http://www.oecd.org/pisa/

quantitative studies highlighted in section 8.3. Given the policy narratives, especially in England to increase higher education participation levels to fifty percent means this is logical, but to suggest the rest of the population have low aspirations because they do not progress to higher education is a very reductive view of aspiration. It also negates the fact that successful careers, whilst supported by qualifications, are not wholly contingent on them. Allen and Hollingworth (2013) highlighted the inter-relation of class and place and found that aspirations can be constrained by labour market opportunities forming objectively limited horizons for aspiration, especially where, as they found more often with working-class participants, there was a desire to remain geographically in proximity to where they were brought up. Whilst participants in their study often had high aspirations, local possibilities made them implausible when combined with their attachment to place. This highlighted the problems of not considering the role of geography in aspiration formation.

Policy has positioned an 'ideal' aspiration as one that is distinctly middle-class, but this may not match the desires of individuals. This can result in them feeling that their aspirations are not good enough, especially those who chose a path not involving higher education (Archer and Yamashita, 2003). The nature of aspirations are also often gendered, with more girls aspiring to the arts than boys (Archer et al., 2014) or for more boys to aspire to jobs such as being a software developer or engineer (Platt and Parsons, 2017). Where gendered roles are perceived as less aspirational, this can also cause a tension between the individual's desires and success for that individual as framed by policy. Furthermore, policy also paints a picture of social mobility that is without harm whereas in reality it can lead to possible internal psychological conflicts (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013) or feeling like a 'fish out of water' (Reay et al., 2010, p. 1106). By engaging in higher education, individuals are promised access to an imagined life that they may not be able to realise, yet their own natal context has been framed as one which is not desirable leaving them feeling like they do not belong in either world.

8.3.3 Aspirations or expectations?

Interrelated to the notion of 'raising aspiration' is the notion of expectation. A recent study conducted interviews and surveys with widening participation managers and whilst over fifty percent of the managers in the study felt their institutions were successful at raising aspirations for higher education, they found that claim was closely linked to the fact that they saw increased applications to their institutions (Harrison and Waller, 2018). Harrison and Waller argued that this assumes that the aspiration the institution is equipped to realise is the same as the individual aspirations of the participants. This is a different framing of aspiration, not to a particular career or higher education more generally, but to a specific institution. It is predicated on an assumption that these individuals might not have progressed to higher education anyway, presuming a deficit of expectation that these young people will transition to university. The literature highlighted already in the chapter shows that this is a fallacy with high expectations for university being common. Using data from LYPSE, Khattab (2015) identified both aspirations and expectations as key to understanding academic achievement, finding that aspirations alone did not determine whether students would apply to university. A growing body of literature, therefore, suggests a link between aspiration, attainment and expectations. Through analysis of existing longitudinal data sets, Goodman and Gregg (2010) found statistical associations between aspirations attainment and behaviours, yet as Cummings et al. (2012) challenge, this association cannot be assumed to be causal. Examining research from across educational, sociological and psychological literature, Gorard et al. (2012) looked for evidence of this causality and found evidence to support the claim of association but not sufficient evidence of causal inference. What large scale studies do show is that it is not necessarily aspiration that is the issue in contrast to the prevailing policy focus.

8.3.4 A Poverty of aspiration?

Policy is predicated on a poverty of aspiration despite the wider research literature discrediting this idea. Cummings et al. (2012) undertook a synthesis of research papers focused on evaluation of widening participation interventions. Whilst they found evidence of impact on attitudes and educational attainment,

they also found no deficit in aspiration, finding both children and parents having high aspirations. However, they noted, that teachers and other professionals may underestimate these aspirations and that aspirations may be unrealistic based on the opportunities for realising them. They proposed that improving opportunities and information would be a better focus for interventions. Whilst some of the studies reviewed had an impact upon aspiration this did not affect attainment. This finding is important as if attainment is not impacted, no matter how high an aspiration an individual has, the chance of realising that aspiration is still constrained.

Whilst the deficit model of aspiration has been extensively critiqued, some studies do support the idea of a deficit of aspiration; for example Travers (2017) study of fifteen second year undergraduate working class boys. She asked them to reflect on why there may be a deficit of aspiration in their peers. What was problematic in this study is that the participants were describing an 'other', those contemporaries who had not transitioned to higher education with them. These individuals had invested in the idea of the emancipatory potential of higher education and therefore could be framing those who had not followed this path as having a 'fear of trying' (p.93). This study tells us nothing of the actual aspirations of those young people to whom Travers' participants refer. In Contrast, Hutchings and Archer (2001) study on non-participants in higher education found the feeling that what was on offer would not positively impact their lives made higher education a non-option. Travers also adopted a narrow view of aspiration as rooted in the academic. This view is problematic and conflates the wider concept of aspiration with a narrow educationally driven form of aspiration. There also seems to be a conflation of the concept of aspiration and expectations. Her participants talked of their colleagues disengaging from academic studies, but I would question to what extent this is evidence of low aspirations or simply not believing that attending university will help them realise their aspirations. Travers findings also differ from a pair of studies conducted by Higham and Gagnon (2017) which looked at both pre and post-entry students who were white working-class males. They found extensive evidence of high aspirations motivated by

finding careers that matched their interests and skills, but that belonging, ability and cost were all concerns that limited transition into higher education.

In an international context, Polesel et al. (2017) used large scale surveys to examine the relationship between transition to university, aspirations and expectations in Australia. They found that whilst there was an impact of social class, aspiration for professional and managerial occupations was generally high across the board with over half of all classes aspiring to professional or managerial roles. For those from high socio-economic status (SES) groups more young people aspired to professional occupations (68.5%) compared to the lowest SES group (43.2%). There were also more respondents in lower SES groups aspiring to technician or community and personal service occupations than in the higher groups. Despite these discrepancies in types of occupational aspirations, nearly 70% expected to go to university, in contrast to around 50% that actually ended up doing so, suggesting no deficit of aspiration. Similar to the findings of other studies on teachers' aspirations (Cummings et al., 2012), the expectation for university progression held by students was higher than their parents or teachers; suggesting an estimation of young people's aspirations that is dislocated from what they actually are. However, this finding was in contrast to studies examining narratives of success that have suggested parental hopes for a better future are often central to aspiration (Buddel, 2017). Despite finding high expectations and aspirations, Polesel et al. (2017, p.14) still question'…whether schools can do more to raise aspirations', demonstrating how ingrained the idea of a deficit of aspirations is. If aspiration towards university was the key issue here, then there would not be such a gap between expectations of university attendance and participation. Given the extensive evidence that young people have high aspirations and the fact that researchers that have been calling for 'a theorised and nuanced approach to understanding aspirations that accounts for identity, context and social relations' (Burke 2006 p.731), this chapter now turns to the literature exploring barriers to realising aspiration.

8.3.5 Barriers to realising aspiration

It has been argued that a shift in focus from stereotypes of communities in deficit to removing barriers to aspiration is needed (Stuart, 2012). These barriers are often complex and require joining up across public policy, focusing not only on education but also on welfare, housing and employment. Baker (2016) explored the link between aspirations and the formation of identity. Focusing on twenty-nine students in a sixth-form in East London, he found all of the students wanted to remain in education but in contrast to the policy discourses of education as purely a route to employment and economic gain their aspirations were shaped by values and a sense of self; what Archer (2007b) terms a *modus vivendi* and a concept drawn upon in previous chapters. Identity formation was also a central focus in another study of working class men (Stahl, 2016) who argued that 'loyalty to self' (p.671) led to rejecting what could be seen as more middle-class learner identities. Stahl claims that through this they 'articulate a desire to be perceived as average and ordinary' (p.674). He makes a conceptual leap, however, that frames this as being 'anti-aspirant' (p.675). I would argue that this is an incorrect conceptualisation and in fact could be interpreted through a different frame that sees the young men's desire to remain embedded in their existing social world as more important to their *modus vivendi*. This affective element to aspiration, whilst in tension with the economic model of aspiration is certainly not evidence of a deficit of aspiration but aspirations that are not purely economically or societally motivated.

Despite the paucity of evidence for low-aspirations, it could be argued that the best place to identify 'low aspirations' would be in non-participants in higher education. Archer and Hutchings (2000) study of 109 non-HE participants from working-class backgrounds highlighted the complexity of aspiring to higher education involving balancing the benefits with financial gain and the perception of potential for failure. This points towards not a deficit in aspiration but in confidence, both in individuals' capabilities and of their faith in university to offer a positive impact upon their lives. This balancing act resonates with Mendick et al. (2018) discussions of aspirations with young people which found that intrinsic

factors such as enjoyment and belonging were more important to the young people than extrinsic factors, such as pay, in their aspiration formation.

Whilst many young people possess aspirations, the ability to realise them is reliant on other factors such as expectations, self-confidence, opportunities and attainment. Therefore, the use of 'raising aspirations' as a catch all phrase covering a multitude of factors thus masks the real issues and reifies the idea that the issue lies in young people not aiming high enough, ignoring the complexity of realising aspirations. These aspirations are shaped not only by economic factors or wanting to be more socially mobile but by affective issues relating to an individual's *modus vivendi*, their passions, their interests and their sense of identity.

8.4 'Raising aspirations' in 2016-17 access agreements

Whilst the chapter so far has outlined the extensive critique of the need to 'raise aspirations', the use of the term endures within the access agreements in the study sample. Reference to 'raising aspirations' is made in all ten access agreements analysed, although the way it is used and the frequency varies significantly. As table 8.1 demonstrates, pre-92 institutions made on average more references to the term. In both pre and post-92 cases, Weston seems to be an outlier in terms of the frequency the term is referred to and when the figures here are discounted, there is a clearer separation between pre and post-92 institutions. Here, there appears to be an increased deployment of the term in those institutions which are more selective in nature. The way in which the concept is deployed is also a point of departure, especially in light of which terms also become co-located with aspiration. The main terms co-located with raising aspiration were: applications, attainment and awareness. In spite of the previous prevalence of the link to expectations in the literature, only Old Overton mentioned aspirations in conjunction with expectations.

	Old (pre-92)	New (post-92)
Norton	3	4
Weston	10	16
Middleton	4	1
Riverton	8	1
Overton	4	6
Mean	5.8	5.6
Mean exc. Weston	4.75	3

table 8.1 - References to 'raising aspirations' in access agreements.

8.4.1 Raising aspirations and applications

Within the pre-92 access agreements, raising aspiration and progression to the institution itself were commonly conflated. Old Middleton explicitly framed it as a concern of 'raising aspirations and applications', primarily to Old Middleton but also to other 'research intensive' universities. Old Norton adopted a broader framing of 'rais[ing] aspirations of local students to progress into HE'. As was demonstrated in Chapter Six, despite this broader framing, the narrow pre-requisites for participation in many of the institutions' programmes means that it is likely these young people already have aspirations for higher education. Therefore, despite the varied language, it is probable that both of these are referring to progression to the institutions themselves. New Middleton also linked a desire to 'raise aspirations and encourage applications to higher education', but this was not common across that group. Given the geographical proximity to Old Middleton, this could be due to local collaboration and sharing of ideas resulting in overlapping discourses.

8.4.2 Aspirations and attainment

In seven of the ten times the notion of 'raising aspirations' was highlighted in Old Weston's agreement it was co-located with attainment, most commonly as 'aspiration and attainment raising'. This suggests an understanding of the link between the two and a break from the assumption of a deficit of aspiration alone being an issue. The prevalence of the use of 'raising aspiration' suggests that the

institution still frames these as being in deficit. New Weston similarly co-located aspiration and attainment but also added progression as a concern. New Weston was one of the only post-92 institution to use this framing suggests that it is likely that there is a local effect here, potentially linked into collaboration between the institutions within their local networks as there seems to be a clear shared understanding. New Riverton also linked aspiration and attainment but saw this in terms of a contribution to work done by schools and colleges as opposed to addressing the issue independently. Whilst other institutions such as Old Riverton also mentioned attainment alongside aspiration, it was not the main co-located term.

8.4.3 Aspirations and awareness

Awareness raising was co-located with aspiration raising by both New Norton and New Overton. Attainment would be less of a barrier to entry in these less selective institutions, therefore ensuring individuals are aware of the institutions' offer is more likely to be a concern. However, it still placed the individual in a position of deficit and reified the idea that there is a lack of aspiration and negated the idea that not all aspirations may be able to be fulfilled by the institution. This is further complicated by the explicit link to recruitment, as New Overton explicitly state that there is

> …no distinction between our work to raise awareness and aspiration and our mainstream recruitment activity, because the former makes a vital and positive contribution to the latter.

The problematic combination of recruitment and widening participation has already been discussed in Chapter Five, and whilst research has shown that a large proportion of students do study locally (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018a), to frame a positive aspiration in terms of what is on offer by a specific local institution is fundamentally detrimental to a young person being able to realise their individual aspirations where the two do not align.

8.4.4 Why does this matter to institutions?

Whilst all of the sample institutions highlighted 'raising aspirations' as key to widening participation, this was for varied reasons. For many, both pre-92 and post-92, it was about increasing the applicant pool. However, it was based on the premise that 'the best jobs' are only accessible to graduates. For example, Old Middleton:

> Students are encouraged to think about their future education and career path in order to make informed decisions about progression to university, and to help motivate them to succeed at school and achieve their potential.

There was an implicit assumption here that if individuals did not go to university or did not choose a career path involving higher education that their potential would be unmet. There was also the implication that, reflecting on the local nature of such provision, where a career path did not match the offer available locally it could be similarly framed to be something in need of raising, despite it being a positive aspiration for the individual. The space for elaboration and the ability to probe the meanings behind discourses within a published document was limited and as has been seen these conceptualisations are relatively narrow. However, given that these are the institutional framings of 'raising aspirations', it would be expected that this should parallel to some extent the way in which practitioners conceptualise the term and the analysis focused on the practitioner interviews.

8.5 What does 'raising aspirations' actually mean in practice?

Whilst there was variation in the way in which 'raising aspiration' was framed by the institutions, pre-92 institutions commonly aligned high aspirations with application to selective institutions. In the case of post-92s when the term was used, it was more focused on raising awareness. Despite 12 of the widening participation practitioners working in three teams[62], the individual definitions of

---

[62] fig 7.1 (p.170)

raising aspiration in the interview data did not seem to follow any local patterns or to be aligned with the type of institution they worked in. Within the overall sample of practitioners, most (12) struggled to define what it meant to 'raise aspirations' and many rejected the idea. For Mel (post-92), she felt:

> … It's the expectation that if you are a WP kid you have no aspirations and that's not true. I think some young people have aspirations, but they don't know how to realise them, so they don't have the awareness. Some people have very high aspirations, but they don't have the attainment that would mean that they could realise those aspirations immediately.

Similarly, Sophie (pre-92) alluded to there being a problem in claiming a need to 'raise aspirations'; she thought that 'they come with those aspirations. I don't think they'd be applying to the programme if they weren't aspiring to come'. However, some practitioners did feel that 'raising aspirations' was something they could define and this was often framed as 'being aware you can go for the big stuff' (Hannah, pre-92) or 'Opening doors in people's minds' (Lucy, pre-92). Like the rest of the definitions however, these readings suggested that aspiration may not be the issue that they were describing but expectations or awareness. In fact, in analysing all sixteen responses to the question of what the term 'raising aspirations' meant to them, there were four key overlapping themes; confidence, realising aspirations, expectations, and awareness.

8.5.1 Confidence

In describing what 'raising aspirations' meant, Rebecca (pre-92) suggested that 'it's kinda making people feel more confident in themselves.' This theme of confidence ran through responses. It fed into ideas of 'pushing yourself harder' (Alice, post-92) and 'helping young people believe that they can progress to something that previously they didn't believe' (Samantha, pre-92). Confidence underpinned several of the other themes, but certainly was predicated with the idea that individuals came with aspirations but were not confident they were achievable.

8.5.2 Realising aspirations

Related to the idea of confidence was the framing of 'raising aspirations' in terms of helping individuals to realise their aspirations.

> It's more like realising aspirations. It's something that I prefer to think about in that way so that if you've got an aspiration great, we can help you achieve that and if you're not sure what to do, we can make sure that you are looking at all the options available to you to allow you to think that it could be a possible outcome for you.

> Emily (pre-92)

Other practitioners also used similar terms such as Rob (post-92) who talked about 'illuminating aspirations' but all were underpinned by the assumption that individuals already had some form of aspiration. Whilst work to support aspirations is important and Archer et al. (2014) have argued for the 'value in preventing the 'closing down of aspirations'' (2014 p.78), this realisation of aspiration is describing something distinct from the need to 'raise aspirations' framed in policy.

8.5.3 Raising expectations

The notion of raising expectations featured in nearly all of the responses, whether these were expectations of progression to the Russell Group in the narratives of Samantha and Andrea (both pre-92) or more generally as in Carol's (post-92) who used a ladder metaphor:

> So kind of on the ladder its getting them, wherever they fit whether it's academically, skill based, it's getting them to think about the one above where they are now, so like pushing them that extra.

Whilst a minority view in the study sample, Alice (post -92) also used a frame of raising expectations:

> So I guess it means being able to look above and beyond what is immediately around you. So being able to consider careers and

opportunities that aren't what other people in your community have done which you're not just going to the local university because everybody else does or because it's the easiest thing to do. You think about what's right for you and if you know that you're not understanding yourself. So if you know you can do really well at school then you know pushing yourself as hard as you can so you can aim for the best university that will take you that will give you the best possible life chances.

This close tie between aspiration and expectation is supported in the literature (Harrison and Waller, 2018, Khattab, 2015, Polesel et al., 2017). However, as studies related to youth transitions show (e.g. Connolly and Neill, 2001, Macdonald and Marsh, 2005) expectations may be contingent on many other factors in a young person's life. Yet Alice's description seemed to follow quite closely the need to 'raise aspirations' espoused in policy, one distinctly shaped by middle-class values and possibilities. This therefore privileges certain outcomes as more desirable even if specific constraints limit the possibility of these being realised. It also assumes innate talents that are unrealised and in need of support, something that aligns with luck egalitarianism outlined in Chapter Three. In contrast, other practitioners based their understandings of expectation on the ideal that what is realistic for the individual is of central importance:

When I'm working with young people, I always think that you need to make an informed decision. So, if they want to be a builder then that's good because if you stuck them into architecture that might be completely not suitable for them.

Carol (post-92)

This viewpoint also aligned with the idea of democratic equality, that idea that all individuals have equal moral worth which match their own interests and skills, as opposed to being seen as inferior through possessing different skills to those most valued within a neoliberal framing (Anderson, 1999). These different framings of expectations could be seen to be closely aligned with differing understandings of what equality means. If equality is about ensuring everyone realises their own *modus vivendi*, then the types of things raising expectations may focus on are very

different to if equality narrowly focuses on supporting disadvantaged individuals to access elite higher education. Furthermore, Carol (post-92) also highlighted a key fourth factor as coming into play, the role of information.

8.5.4 Awareness and information

Many practitioners saw raising awareness or providing information as central to what 'raising aspirations' meant to them. This viewpoint seemed more prevalent from the practitioners working in pre-92 institutions.

> it's just making sure that someone realises that there aren't barriers, especially to higher education, and it's making sure that they've got all the support and the information that they need to you know aspire to come to university.

Sophie (pre-92)

The tendency for those practitioners in pre-92 institutions to foreground the role of information in raising aspirations, suggested a narrower definition of what it meant to raise aspiration than found in other research (Harrison and Waller, 2018). Samantha (pre-92) and Andrea (pre-92) specifically highlighted a concern with progression to Russell group institutions. Whilst the notion of 'diversifying and informing aspirations' (Archer et al., 2014, p. 79) is something prior research has argued for, this seems to be a focus on narrowing, as opposed to diversifying aspiration. What the data does not suggest is that on the whole practitioners believe that work is taking place to address a poverty of aspiration. This was further explored through questioning participants directly on their feelings about the possibilities for low aspirations.

8.6 Do practitioners think that there are low aspirations?

Whilst the majority of the participants challenged the presence of a deficit of aspirations, five participants felt that some young people had low aspirations. There was no link between this assertion and the type of institution they worked in; two coming from pre-92 institutions and three from post-92 institutions. Nor was there a link with the practitioner classification outlined in Chapter Seven.

Though these narratives were a minority view amongst the participants, their presence still merits further analysis as there was some divergence in explanations which may explain why these exist in a counter discourse to that found in the growing body of research relating to aspirations. In unpicking these narratives, there are several different issues that intersect, namely the culture in schools, educational disengagement and the assumption of geographical mobility.

8.6.1 'It's not cool to have aspirations'

Firstly, Rebecca (post-92) talked about the culture that can form around aspiration in schools, specifically how 'If you have low aspirations a lot of your friends have them because it's not cool to have aspirations'. This response is worth further exploration as the vocalisation of aspiration and existence of an aspiration are distinct issues. Whilst a deficit of aspiration has been repeatedly disproven in survey based studies (e.g. Anders, 2017, Platt and Parsons, 2017) it is clear that some practitioners are still invested in this idea. One explanation could be the disconnect between what is said in anonymous surveys and within groups of peers. This may distort practitioner perceptions of what young people's aspirations actually are. Similarly, Andrea (pre-92) felt that the fact there was evidence of low aspiration in some of the young people she worked with was due to their inability to articulate future plans. She stated that 'a lot of children when they first come to a day here would say they don't know what they want to do'. Andrea's role was mainly with primary aged children (years 5 and 6). At this age children are unlikely to have strong ideas about future career goals and this alone would not be a useful judge of whether or not they have aspirations. Whilst the previous two responses can be framed in terms of a lack of ability to separate what people say and what they think, another narrative of low aspirations was given by Rebecca (post-92) who felt that 'some kids just don't feel like university is for them'. Arguably this framing of aspirations was a narrow one, focused on the primacy of aspirations requiring a university degree. She elaborated with the fact that 'They set their sights almost too low because they don't think they can do it'. This, however, was a more complex statement than a lack of aspiration and seems to refer to a lack in confidence that university will help them develop a positive future trajectory. In contrast Rob (post-92) explained that:

Their aspirations might be low compared to what we think they should be, so it's like I want to be a painter decorator. That's great, be the best painter decorator, you should aspire then to be the best painter decorator. Now someone aspiring to the best painter decorator I don't feel it's our job to raise their aspirations to be a doctor, that's not our job, you know we need painter decorators, we also need doctors.

This is a very different interpretation of the same issue, based upon a more nuanced framing of aspiration and draws back on arguments previously made in this chapter that a person's *modus vivendi* is key in understanding their individual aspirations which are complex and contextual. It is also potentially rooted in issues of experience offering more frames of reference to draw upon as highlighted in Chapter Seven.

8.6.2 'We as WP professionals don't actually meet those kids that often'

Lucy (pre-92) and Alice (post-92) also linked the idea of low aspirations with another key issue, disengagement from education. Alice was very clear in the fact she felt that whilst there are low aspirations that:

… we as WP professionals don't actually meet those kids that often and that's probably part of the problem because they are being, they're not being brought to us or we aren't going to them. […] I am a governor of a multi academy trust in [local area] and through doing that you do meet those students with low aspirations who are school refusers who through various problems at home have switched off already, who either maybe they do see the point of going to school and they don't care or they genuinely don't see the point, who have kind of given up already, and that might not be their fault but they might have low aspirations for themselves.

Alice (post-92)

This assertion was not from experience of having spoken to these young people about their aspirations, but instead was based on a stereotypical framing of

educational disengagement related to a deficit of aspiration. Like Travers (2017) finding of low aspiration in the peers of white working-class boys, these claims were based on speaking for an 'other'. The realities of this are likely to be more complex as shown in more detailed research with these groups. Macdonald and Marsh (2005) argue that disengagement can be related to a perception of 'educational irrelevance' (p.62). Where future imagined pathways were not predicated on qualifications, disengagement was common. This is not necessarily evidence of low aspirations, but more the lack of expectations or opportunities for realising them. As the longitudinal data shows, there is little support for a poverty of aspiration and therefore it is likely that these disengaged young people may have had their aspirations frustrated through other factors, especially when considered in terms of opportunities open to them within their local areas (Boyask et al., 2014, Connolly and Neill, 2001). As Macdonald and Marsh (2005) highlighted, in Teesside at the time of their study, 'there was little substantial difference between the post-school careers of the most and least qualified' (p.64).

8.6.3 Somewheres and Anywheres

The final practitioner who felt that there were young people with low aspirations was David. This response was the most extensive and is worth further discussion.

> I think there's quite a lot of kids with low aspirations. They don't see it. Although, lower aspirations, academically, certainly and it's usually because if you go into a primary school in [deprived area of city] and ask them what they want to be when they grow up, a lot of them will say they want to work in Tesco, not because they've sat down and looked at the options and gone actually that's what suits me, that's my skillset but because that's where their parents are so that's all they know.

> David (post-92)

Whilst this narrative seemed to mirror the ideas of meritocracy and aspiration as the driver of success, it could be questioned how much this interpretation was an oversimplification of the link between aspirations and future career choices. Aspirations can be frustrated due to lack of local opportunity and a perception

that education does not open doors to future success. Coming from the same institution, Mel (post-92) interpreted the same issue differently:

> I think again it's kind of the expectation that if you are a WP kid you have no aspirations that's not true, I think some young people have aspirations, but they don't know how to realise them, so they don't have the awareness. Some people have very high aspirations, but they don't have the attainment that would mean that they could realise those aspirations immediately.

This demonstrated a greater understanding of the complex intersection of factors related to aspiration. I argue that it is not the institutional context that is shaping David's reading. David's (post-92) rationale for why he feels that low aspirations are an issue offers some insight:

> If we didn't have an issue with low aspirations then you could go into basically a school in a privileged area and a school in a deprived area and the kids would have the same ideas as where they want to go because on average they should be able to, so yeah, I think you do have low aspirations when it's all you know.

This reading was quite reductive and ignored some practical and psychological barriers to aspiration. As Reay et al. (2005) noted from their study on degree choice, some students fall into the category of what they term 'contingent choosers' (p.119) whose choice is more contingent on practical concerns than aspiration. David was a relatively mobile individual; like many people he moved away to university before returning for to his home city to work. Arguably, he matched the notion of the 'Anywheres' that Goodhart (2017) describes. Goodhart frames these as people with 'portable 'achieved' identities based on educational success which makes them generally comfortable and confident with new places and people' (p.3). If we contrast this to the identities more likely to be held by the young people who are the targets of these interventions, the 'Somewheres' they are often 'rooted and have ascribed identities - Scottish farmer, working class Geordie, Cornish housewife- based on group belonging and particular places' (*ibid*.). This type of locally bound identity is often more prominent outside of London, where the spheres of opportunity may be narrower. In many ways, this

matches more closely Mel's own narrative, coming from a local town and upon graduation not following a career in publishing due to that requiring relocation to London. Through this lens we can see how a constrained aspiration, limited by local opportunity could thus be viewed as one in deficit, even though the desire to retain ties to their community may be stronger than those to gain the economic returns of a middle-classed notion of what it means to have a 'high aspiration', a position potentially more closely understood by Mel. During her upbringing we can see that the aspiration was for her more about being in employment and happiness, something that locally may not have been compatible with university participation:

> I guess my mum always said as long as you're not on the dole, I don't care what you do. If you want to be a hairdresser you could, and I always say to her, would you really have been happy with me being a hairdresser and she said if that's what you wanted to do then that would be ok.

In describing their typical students, practitioners that worked in London also mentioned similar notions of 'Somewheres' describing many of the young people they worked with as not wanting to leave their boroughs. However, in London the range of employment possibilities are likely to be greater than smaller towns.

I argue that the participants describing low aspirations are not giving a narrative that contradicts the extensive evidence rejecting a poverty of aspiration model but instead are conflating a number of issues which do not actually represent a lack of aspiration. These issues are more closely aligned with an inability to realise aspirations. This is certainly an issue that needs addressing but in order to do so, we need to correctly name the issues, not conflate a number of competing issues under the umbrella of 'low aspirations'. Additionally, in some cases a lack of understanding of the role of social and geographical constraints that shape an individual's sense of a future self may give a sense of 'low aspiration' when these sit in opposition to an aspiration framed through professional or managerial careers predicated on higher education participation. As Archer (2007) argued in her three-stage model of reflexivity, structural circumstances objectively shape options open to individuals. An individual's personal concerns will also act as a

subjective lens and the actual course of action becomes a reflexive deliberation between the two. She argued that these deliberations help decide 'what course(s) of action should this subject adopt in order for the concerns she cares about most to be realised in an appropriate *modus vivendi*?' (p.88). I argue therefore that practitioners' awareness of the role of both objective structural barriers and subjective elements of choice shape their practices in a way that is more nuanced than policy framings of this work.

8.7 Ladders of aspiration

Whilst the need to 'raise aspirations' was on the whole questioned, the study sought to develop a more nuanced understanding of what was a positive aspiration. This section focuses on the responses to the 'ladders of aspiration' task within the interview[63]. Understanding what the practitioners framed as 'good careers' was important as many of the interventions they ran focused on helping young people to consider their futures. These sessions were likely to be framed to some extent by the practitioners' perceptions. An ideology of meritocracy would suggest a 'hierarchical ranking of professions and the status it endorses' (Littler, 2018, p. 6). It would also be assumed that this might lead to a commonality in approach shaped by economic return, educational level and prestige. In contrast, the high variability of approaches to this task highlighted the varied individual conceptions of what was a 'good' job. All of the participants engaged with the task and all bar one created a hierarchy. Focusing first on the exception, Emily (pre-92) stated that:

> Well, I don't know if this is cheating but I guess if they could all be on level pegging I'd say they are all successful outcomes. If that's what- in terms of better, in terms of job, obviously if you are looking at payment or professionalism or access to certain things then you could say some are better than others but in terms of what I would see, they are all in employment.

---

[63] The questions related to this can be found in Appendix 1 (p.277)

When the issue was discussed further in terms of her approach to careers, she highlighted that:

> …one of the positive outcomes of them coming to our events or working with us is that they don't want to come to university. I see that as a positive outcome if that's an informed decision and they've thought actually I really want to go into trade, you know I want to be an electrician. I really enjoy practical working. If they come to us thinking they want to do engineering but actually think maybe I've not got the grades and actually I'm better doing that then that is absolutely fine.

Whilst over half of the participants highlighted the need for an individual focused approach to careers, this was addressed in relation to a specific question about there being good and bad careers. More commonly, the participants created a hierarchy based on a specific personal logic. These logics and the patterning of different jobs were varied. The two most common considerations were the value to society of the career (11) and economic returns (8). Some of the recurrent but less prominent themes were the need for education to do the role (7), prestige (4), job security (3) and happiness (2). These were patterned in many different ways, but none seemed to emerge as common to the type of institution by which the practitioners were employed nor to the classification of practitioner (fig 7.5). Whilst there was a slightly greater tendency for those working in post-92 institutions to prioritise value to society, this was not a clear point of difference. Furthermore, an equal number of practitioners in pre-92 and post-92 institutions valued economic returns as the primary consideration. It is worth examining some of the points of similarity and difference in more detail to understand therefore what is shaping perceptions of aspiration if it is not the type of institution within which they work.

8.7.1 'This guy here is gonna be rich but hate everything about his life'

Examining one of the jobs, the investment banker, prompted a lot of discussion. Whilst most put him towards the top of their ladder, mainly based on the high

levels of income, this was not without reluctance in some cases, highlighting that 'they are exceptionally overpaid for what they do' (Rebecca, post-92). The role of bankers in the current economic climate was another key concern. Whilst Rob (post-92) still placed him at the top based on salary, he mentioned wanting to 'throw them in the bin'. Likewise, Andrew (post-92) put him at the bottom. Lucy (pre-92) also wanted to put him at the bottom but felt it was 'unrealistic' due to the high salary commanded. In contrast, Katie (post-92) put him at the bottom due to a low perceived value to society. Karen (pre-92) balanced these by placing him firmly in the middle:

> Investment banker though, this guy here is gonna be rich but hate everything about his life so I'm going to put him on the middle because he probably goes into work and cries every day

This balancing of value to society, economic returns and happiness was repeated throughout the models. In contrast, some jobs were consistently placed on the upper steps. On the whole the doctor was ranked highly, based for most on either the prestige of the role or the value to society. Similarly, the prestige and salary of a lawyer caused them to also be valued highly. The conceptions of what were good careers was very much based on past labour market information, with only Rebecca (post-92) and Samantha (pre-92) basing their choices on future prospects. Rebecca talked about the potential future growth of the games design sector and prefaced this with the fact that she had friends working in the sector.

8.7.2 'I think it's a lot to do with whether you can kind of relate to some of those occupations'

The interview data highlighted ways in which practitioners' perceptions of value and careers is often shaped by their own personal and familial networks. As the title to this section from Karen's (pre-92) interview showed, she felt that knowing people in the roles shaped her responses. Carol's (post-92) father's employment as an investment banker led to a much less political view of the role than other participants. The place where this was clearest was the value ascribed to teachers. Karen (pre-92) highlighted that: 'coming from a teaching background and from

having worked in a school, I can see the real value of having good teachers'. This personal resonance of some careers seemed to create a greater affinity for them. Of all the practitioners who placed the teacher near the top nearly all of them either were related to teachers or had worked in teaching. In contrast, a number of participants placed the teacher on lower steps citing a lack of respect for them in society. For example, Mel (post-92) explained that she 'put the teacher quite far down but that's cos they don't get the recognition they deserve'. However, this sense of a lack of respect was not reflected in surveys of public attitudes. The 2016 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey found that 92% of their respondents reported having a great deal or some respect for teachers (Saunders, 2017). These feelings therefore can be seen to be more based in the perceptions as opposed to exemplary of a general attitude in society. In a similar vein to my data, this respect was greater in the BSA data for people who knew teachers. The only participant who ranked teachers lower and talked about personal links was Sophie (pre-92) who said:

> I think I've just got a bit of a negative look on teaching because I have so many friends that at the moment it's not sort of as fulfilling as it used to be.

8.7.3 'They're very often those occupations where people think that's what I'm going to do therefore I don't need to further my education'

A recurring theme was the role of education. As the title of this section from David (post-92) alludes, those jobs not requiring higher education were ranked lower down the ladder. In fact, for all bar one participant, the two jobs that are emblematic of non-HE participation, the builder and decorator were consistently ranked on the lowest steps. Characteristic of many of the narratives was Rob's (post-92):

> … I'd probably say that [the painter decorator] is somewhere maybe just a step beneath where the construction worker is because I'm assuming for that one you probably won't- In fact I'll put that two down because whilst

I'm not being a snob about it, in terms of access to that job, it's a reasonably medium to high experience but low skill in terms of a formal education to be able to do that job.

fig 8.1 – Rob's (post-92) Ladder of aspiration

The footballer was treated similarly, although he was often ranked much higher due to the potential salary or the respect they are afforded in society. The perception of footballers varied based on personal knowledge. For example, two of the practitioners worked in institutions who worked with local youth football academies. David (post-92) ranked the footballer in the middle but explained that:

It's great if you're successful as a footballer but so few are and there's so many points along the way that you can drop off. Again, I think it's one of those that it's too easy to go I'm going to be a professional footballer therefore it doesn't matter about anything else and then you suddenly find you're not going to be a professional footballer. Where is your fall-back plan?

He clearly understood that there was a potential for a good career there, but that it needed to be supported by alternative plans due to the competitive nature of the field. Similarly, from her personal experience, Katie (post-92) demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of what footballers do and that 'because I do work with [local football club] and I know that sometimes they have to do some form of community outreach'. This theme of 'hot' knowledge allowing for better understanding mirrors that found to be important in other areas of education such as school (Ball and Vincent, 1998) or university choice (Reay et al., 2005).

8.7.4 'Computer games designer, it must be a real job, I've never met anyone who does it'

As highlighted in Chapter Seven, the range of work undertaken by widening participation practitioners meant that they are often not fully trained to support careers advice. This was acutely demonstrated by Carol (post-92) whose institution did not offer medicine and yet she worried that:

> … there could genuinely be a school that we are working with that we don't offer a medicine taster but they'll never access the likes of [other universities in the city] because that is so far out of their reach so are we doing them a disservice but then should you- and that's where it's difficult because we don't get that IAG planning where we don't get that IAG training or careers training we haven't got a qualification.

This theme recurred. For example, Alice (post-92) in discussing the computer games designer stated:

> … it must be a real job, I've never met anyone who does it so I always worry when students say that they want to do that because like perception is that it is very competitive and you have to be able to combine lots of different skills at a very high level that are quite unusual so creativity and also computer science and maths skills as well.

Andrea (pre-92) and Andrew (post-92), similarly struggled with a lack of knowledge surrounding games design. This lack of knowledge surrounding particular careers was stark when examined in light of Platt and Parsons (2017) analysis of data from the Millennium Cohort Study, where being a software developer was the second most popular job for boys. It could therefore be assumed that a proportion of those students who these practitioners were working with aspired to be computer games designers and yet practitioners were unsure of the value of the job or even if it is indeed a viable career option. Therefore institutions are unlikely to be able to support these aspirations, instead framing them as unsuitable. In contrast, Rob (post-92) had a good knowledge of different

fields, allowing him to offer a more detailed understanding of how to support aspirations:

> In the same way that people think construction, oh he's going to be a hod carrier or he's just going to be driving a digger around but actually within that they'll be project managers, surveyors and all sorts of professional jobs but you get to wear boots and a hard hat.

This demonstrated how, with suitable knowledge, practitioners were more able to channel aspirations within individuals' spheres of interest. However knowledge was not the only issue. Beverley (pre-92) highlighted a discord within her interview. As might be expected from someone with careers training, she saw the value of finding the right job for an individual, even if it did not follow a specific model of aspiration.

> There's nothing wrong with you being a day labourer if that is what you want to do so similarly you can be an investment banker and be the unhappiest person on the face of the planet.

And yet, whilst she acknowledged the importance of people doing the careers that are right for them as individuals, the ability to support this was limited:

> We work with large numbers of students. They come on particular streams of programmes, so you will either be on the dentistry stream or you'll be on the arts and sciences stream or you'll be on the English languages stream, but we don't have the capacity and the resource to kind of stick with students individually and kind of figure out is this really what you want to do?

This approach relied on students already having a formed aspiration and yet like all of the institutions in the study, they claimed to be 'raising aspirations'. This again suggests they did not address the issue of career aspirations per se, but focused on those with an aspiration to a particular type of institution or course on offer.

8.8 Summary

This chapter has argued that varied conceptions of aspiration combined with muddiness in the definition and operationalisation of the notion of 'raising aspirations' result in tensions between policy and practice. Returning to the research questions, whilst there is a clear divergence of experiences between practitioners, this does not appear to be shaped solely by the institution within which they work. Instead it is a much more embedded relationship contingent on personal experiences and values. In contrast there is a clearer divide based upon institution type when considering the framing of aspiration in policy. Through analysing access agreements and exploring these issues in depth with practitioners, this study shows that that whilst enduring, the interpretations and operationalisation of the concept is diverse. This presents two challenges: Firstly, that institutions are claiming to do something that on the surface seems to have no basis of support from previous research which has disproven the deficit of aspiration model. Secondly, the variability with which the term is interpreted, with definitions conflating aspiration with application to their institution, awareness of higher education, expectations, and attainment. Whilst practitioners in both pre-92 and post-92 institutions seem to be aware that a deficit of aspirations is not the issue. As Sophie (pre-92) stated: 'you wouldn't apply to a programme like ours or to university if you didn't have those aspirations'. This suggested that buried within a policy discourse of 'raising aspiration' were a range of activities in many cases designed to drive a market of individuals already focused on higher education to specific institutions. Building on the arguments from Chapter Six related to targeting, this meant that in many cases these projects and programmes are not actually widening participation.

This chapter has also highlighted that practitioner framings of aspiration and their resistance to a deficit model in many cases circumvents and ameliorates the tension of delivering this work in marketised institutions. This is not universal and as was shown, five of the practitioners were still invested in the notion of 'low aspirations'. I argued that this was often related to their lack of 'hot' knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998). In many cases, there was also a lack of concrete understanding of the realities of some careers. The understanding of the

possibilities for realisation of aspirations also shaped their perceptions. Therefore, in order to ensure that widening participation work adequately supports individuals to realise aspiration there is the need to develop the knowledge base of many practitioners and to provide support for participants' own aspirations as opposed to those framed by institutions. As argued in Chapter Seven, experience and education possessed by some practitioners can ameliorate some of these issues but as of yet there is no consistent or rigorous approach to this in the sector.

Furthermore, a wider question could also be raised as to why despite the extensive literature and previous rejection of a deficit framing in the *National Strategy for Access and Student Success* (HEFCE and OFFA, 2014), the need to raise aspirations appeared to be creeping back into government policy. Drawing back upon the morphogenetic approach (Archer, 1995) utilised in this thesis[64], this supports the argument that despite changes in individual practices, policies have been unaffected in this case due to a lack of sociocultural interaction between T_2 and T_3.
As has been alluded to several times, this thesis is partially a product of history. Within her framing of the post-18 review of education funding, the Prime Minister, Theresa May argued that 'through education, we can become a country where everyone, from every background, gains the skills they need to get a good job and live a happy and fulfilled life' (May, 2018). This position on aspiration, framed around the right educational route for a job that leads to individual fulfilment is arguably more nuanced than previous rhetoric that has emphasised participation in higher education as the ultimate goal. Framing the problem as ensuring young people find the most suitable pathway for them is clearly a step change from the policies that have informed the access agreements analysed in this study, but as this chapter has shown may not be as distant from the positions held by many practitioners. Furthermore, a failure to acknowledge that aspirations often involve balancing personal aspirations relating to family and well-being with economic based aspirations endures. Despite the changes that have happened in tandem to this study with regulation, it appears many of these

---

[64] fig. 3.1 (p.45)

issues relating to aspiration will endure and the concluding chapter that follows sets out some practical solutions to address these.

Chapter 9: Conclusions and policy recommendations

9.1 Introduction

This study sought to identify the similarities and differences in widening participation practices in pre-92 and post-92 institutions. As demonstrated over the course of the thesis, whilst there are key differences based on institutional type, the individuals involved in enacting policy also play a key role in these differences. The preceding four chapters explored a wide range of issues relating to policy and practice and this concluding chapter draws these together in the context of the initial research questions. It is evident that shifts in policy matter as these shifts change original policy intentions and impact the potential effectiveness of interventions' ability to widen participation. Highlighting these issues is only part of the solution and this chapter also demonstrates ways in which these issues might be addressed by national policymakers, institutional senior management teams and widening participation teams. Maintaining resonance with practitioners has been a central concern throughout the project and as such the initial recommendations were refined following presentation of these to practitioners (Rainford, 2018b).

9.2 Research questions

Five research questions have been addressed across the four thematic chapters (fig 9.1) and this concluding chapter, draws together the threads to focus on each of the research questions in turn. As the thematic chapters have demonstrated, these questions are not discreet, and issues overlap and recur.
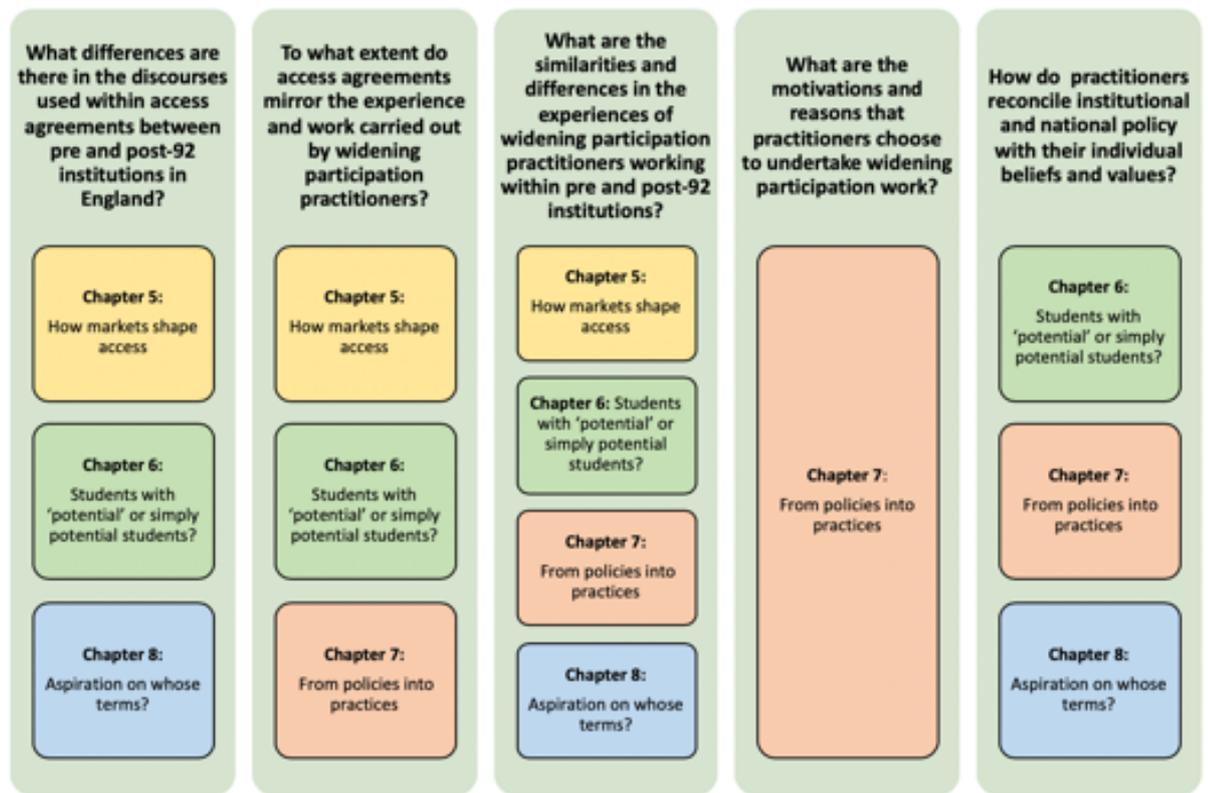
fig 9.1 – Structure of thesis and research questions

i. What differences are there in the discourses used within access agreements between pre and post-92 institutions in England?

This thesis has highlighted differences in the framings of who and what university is for, shaped by institutions' ideological positions (Chapters Five and Six). Pre-92 institutions focused upon the 'brightest and the best' students, identified by prior academic attainment. For post-92 institutions the framing is to a much wider group of individuals, with 'potential' more reliant on local geography. Therefore, who is classed as a potential student by each type of institution is distinct. However, increased market pressures mean that some post-92 institutions (e.g. New Overton) have raised entry tariffs to increase their perceived prestige in global markets at the expense of widening access, so who institutions benchmark themselves against is also key to understanding these differences.

The framing of suitable benchmark institutions exemplifies how performance was legitimated through a narrowed lens of who mattered. For the post-92 institutions this benchmarking was commonly against the whole sector (Chapter Five), but for

the pre-92 institutions it was a narrower group of other elite institutions. Despite the binary divide between pre-92 and post-92 institutions being abolished in 1992, pre-92 institutions were not comparing their performance to the whole sector in most cases. The underlying ideological positions of each type of institution were also distinctly evident in understandings of what positive aspirations are (Chapter Eight). Pre-92 institutions narrowly focused on progression to themselves or similar elite institutions. In contrast, for post-92 institutions aspiring to study in higher education was enough. This framing was shaped primarily by ideology, not the needs of individual participants in widening participation interventions.

ii. To what extent do access agreements mirror the experience and work carried out by widening participation practitioners?

The extent to which access agreements mirrored practices was variable. Partly the time lag between when they were written and when they were enacted played a role in this. As Chapter Two alluded, the speed of change in policy direction and governmental priorities meant that the current government agenda was different to that when the agreements were written. For example, between the time of authorship of the agreements analysed and the 2016-17 academic year, raising academic attainment, had become a concern for institutions as highlighted in the interviews, yet was not a distinct theme in those access agreements.

Furthermore, front-line practitioners in the sample institutions were rarely involved in the formulation of the access agreements, meaning those who wrote institutional policy documents were rarely those who enacted them. Chapter Seven highlighted various ways in which translating policy into practice led to shifts between what was proposed in access agreements and what happened on the ground. As Ball et al. (2012) argued in relation to schools, effectiveness of policy relies on practitioner commitments to the same agendas as those writing policies. These translations took place on different levels and through the implementation staircase[65] I argued that this shift can be understood by considering each level of translation in terms of a number of factors. Translation of

---

[65] fig 2.1 (p.36)

policy involves people and their accompanying personal agendas can shape how they make sense of the same policies. Drawing on Archer (1995, 2003, 2007b), I argued that individuals' personal experiences shaped their reflexive actions in relation to policy enactment. Practitioners sometimes had ideological positions that were at odds with the institutional framing of certain issues such as who has 'potential', creating tensions. Furthermore, teachers also played a key role in targeting work (Chapter Six) and their pre-conceptions about which institutions are right for which students can also lead to shifts between policy and practice.

The challenges faced by each institution also shaped translation of access agreements. This played out in two distinct ways. Firstly, the predication on 'potential' being driven by high academic grades in pre-92 institutions restricted who was targeted. As highlighted in Chapter Six, inequality has been shown to have a direct impact on prior attainment (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2015, Sammons et al., 2014) hence certain groups were unlikely to be able to benefit from this work by its restricted design, even if on paper they were framed as targets. Secondly, the demand for the activities on offer in pre-92 institutions often meant that, particularly in oversubscribed subjects such as medicine, activities were actually focused on a much narrower group of individuals than was set out in the access agreement; the issue of cream skimming that McCaig (2015b) has highlighted previously.

The financial imperative for widening participation also often shaped who was targeted. In some institutions this created a mismatch between what was planned and what was delivered. For example, the access agreement of Carol's (post-92) institution highlighted white working-class boys as a key target but in her interview (early in the 2017-18 academic year), she mentioned that they were still in the process of thinking about how to work with this group. Furthermore, there were also challenges in enacting some of the plans set out in the agreements. For example, whilst further education colleges were often mentioned in access agreements, practitioners emphasised the complexities of accessing FE students which often prevented this being realised.

iii. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of widening participation practitioners working within pre and post-92 institutions?

All of the individuals interviewed were interested in addressing issues of social justice but this was often constrained by the institutional commitment to this mission. In all institutions in which the interviewees worked, the widening participation outreach teams seemed to exist on the periphery of the institution. When discussing collaboration, practitioners talked about having to collaborate with other parts of the institution. This was notable, as often this was framed as being as equally challenging as external collaboration across both pre and post-92 institutions. Both pre and post-92 institutions highlighted the central role of schools in targeting pupils (Chapter Six). Therefore, differences in experiences are also shaped not only by the institutions themselves but by the perceptions of teachers about which pupils should be engaging in the interventions on offer, highlighting the complex interrelationships that exist in moving from policy to practice.

The differences in practitioners' experiences seemed to relate primarily to the priority placed on the widening participation agenda by each institution. On the whole this followed the pre / post-92 divide, one of the core differences related to team sizes. Within post-92 institutions, the typical team size within both the sample and those institutions I tried to gain access to was usually in single figures; in one case just two people. In contrast pre-92 institutions had much larger teams; between 15 and 20 practitioners in the two-phase two institutions. Yet there did not seem to be as distinct a difference in terms of the scope or volume of work expected and this meant that many of the teams in post-92 institutions were more stretched, leading to less time to reflect and plan and less focused practitioner roles that involved simultaneously juggling a number of very different types of jobs. Additionally, the data showed differences within institutions of the same type. Practitioners (e.g. Katie (post-92)) who had worked in two different post-92 institutions highlighted this in their narratives.

The focus of pre-92 practitioners on recruitment to their institutions was more overt compared with post-92 practitioners who seemed more focused on providing information and supporting choice. Much of this was shaped by understandings of what positive aspirations were (Chapter Eight). Whilst individuals framed this differently, institutional type played a role in framing these attitudes. As I argued in Chapter Five, institutional doxa (Davey, 2012) is a useful lens through which to understand how this shapes practice. Whilst post-92 institutions were more likely to be reliant on needing to boost student numbers, the pre-92 institutions were often concerned with ensuring those students deemed of having 'potential' from under-represented groups progressed to them, as opposed to a competitor institution. Practitioner reflexivity also played a distinct role. Through the classification of practitioners set out in Chapter Seven, I argued that institutional positions can be both complied with and resisted against, creating differences in practices even within the same institution.

iv. What are the motivations and reasons that practitioners choose to undertake widening participation work?

Whilst the study only offered a snapshot into these as it only involved sixteen practitioners, for the practitioners in the study there was a desire to make a difference with their work. They all seemed to be driven by a *modus vivendi* (Archer, 2007b) and clearly their work was about more than paying the bills. For some, this was a personal quest motivated by their own life circumstances. Issues such as their own ethnicity (e.g. Rob (post-92), and Samantha and Beverley (both pre-92)) or class background (e.g. Mel (post-92) and Hannah (pre-92)) motivated them to help others also benefit from the transformative experience higher education had been for them. For others, the motivation was a more philanthropic endeavour. Having been brought up in quite privileged backgrounds, they wanted to address the inequalities of society. What both groups shared was the way in which personal concerns were driving their *modus vivendi* and that their reflexive deliberations over what they do was driven by these motivations. For all the practitioners, there were some issues of resonance felt with widening participation students. Karen and Lucy (both pre-92) described privileged upbringings but felt out of place in university and thus felt they had some shared

understanding with the individuals they work with. I would argue that for all of them, there was an element of their personal concerns, what they saw as issues, that they wished to address in their careers.

v. How do practitioners reconcile institutional and national policy with their individual beliefs and values?

The role of an individual's own experiences and values in shaping practice was explored in depth in Chapter Seven. The practitioners in this study all fit within a concept of 'good' people doing 'good' work. However, this work takes place within constraints; constraints of the context within which they work and their own training and understanding. This may mean that their practices had unintended consequences, the effects of which were explored in Chapter Six and Eight. There is also a distinct role played by personal experiences and as demonstrated through the classification of practitioners set out in Chapter Seven (fig 7.5), through time, and experience practitioners may become more focused on what is right for individuals as opposed to being primarily driven by institutional agendas. For some practitioners their motivations for working in widening participation and the implications of this are in tension with institutional agendas and led to different types of practice emerging. With time and experience, more transgressive practices resulted; working within institutional constraints but in a way that felt more morally acceptable. Within larger teams, there was also the possibility for roles to be focused on specific interests. For example Samantha and Beverley (both pre-92) had distinct projects that resonated with their personal concerns relating to the access and success of BAME students.

Additionally, for some practitioners there was a clear adoption of a more pragmatic position in relation to some of the tensions they experienced. Beverley (pre-92), coming from a careers advice background, valued the one-to-one support that many of their target students needed to help identify the correct career and educational pathways but was constrained by what could be achieved within the framework of the programmes her institution offered. Similarly, the problematic use of the term 'raising aspirations' was highlighted in Chapter Eight. Whilst the term was highlighted as problematic, it was not resisted *per se* but interpreted in

varied ways based on what they felt was the issue relating to the aspirations of the young people they worked with; more commonly a focus on realisation of aspirations as opposed to a raising of them.

9.3 What does this mean for the future of widening participation practice?

This study has demonstrated that there were differences in practices both between institutions and also at a practitioner level within institutions. The data showed that practices even within the same institution are heterogenous; one of the distinct contributions of this study to the literature. Understanding how and why policy shifts occurred and the part people play in these shifts is important in order to better ensure widening participation policy addresses its primary concern, improving the life chance of individuals from under-represented groups. Simply identifying these differences, whilst important, is unlikely to impact upon practice and the policy recommendations that follow attempt to encourage greater consistencies in practice. Whilst I am not arguing for a homogenisation of practice removing agency from practitioners, it is not acceptable that access to impartial advice that best meets an individual's needs is a lottery. The understanding of the gaps between policy and practice developed in this study offers some insight into what can be done to narrow them.

There are three key reasons why there are gaps between policy and practice, namely: conflict (between what an individual feels is morally right and what is possible within their context), interpretation (how individuals understand both the focus of policy and the meaning of individual terms) and implementation (what is actually possible to do in terms of time and resources). These can occur at multiple levels, for example in the translation of national policy into access agreements or translating theoretical framings of target groups into targeting strategies to recruit participants to interventions (Chapter Seven). Returning to the idea of the implementation staircase, each step creates another opportunity for policy shift. Through developing better common understandings and shared agendas, this shift could be narrower. For example, as highlighted in Chapter Six,

differing interpretations of who and what the targets of pre-entry widening participation work should be, are shaped by individual understandings of what is 'good and right' and often dislocated from the original policy intentions. Adopting clearer national framings and reducing the scope for misinterpretation could ensure that policy endures less shift. Within the following section, I will highlight a number of key practical ways in which some of the issues foregrounded by the research questions may be addressed.

9.4 Recommendations

The thesis has highlighted throughout where practices and policies need to be examined more critically and this section distils some of those critiques into a set of recommendations focusing on the most pertinent. These recommendations place the greatest emphasis on the national and institutional levels. However, previously argued in Chapter Seven, there are ways in which practitioners can also address some of these issues themselves. This is not extensive and supplementary issues have also been highlighted in the four substantive chapters. The overall recommendations have been developed into a comic format (fig 9.2) to make them accessible to as wide an audience as possible.

fig 9.2 – Study recommendations

9.4.1 National change

Some issues cannot be solved in isolation by individual institutions. This may be in terms of structural issues that need addressing or the fact that regulatory pressure may be the only way to ensure that all institutions enact this change.

Give institutions credit for widening access to higher education more generally

In both the access agreements and the interview data, the framing of targeting of widening participation is clearly driven by institutional priorities. These are focused primarily on widening participation to the institution in question. The data also shows that outreach work is highly localised in most cases and yet, the market is allegedly predicated on choice. Without offering incentives to institutions for widening access to the sector more generally, they will continue to focus on who can and would consider studying at that institution. Shifting the focus of metrics to also acknowledge the role institutions play in widening access to higher education more generally is likely to allow institutions to offer advice most suited to those they work with and less bounded a focus on working with local people they are most likely to recruit. This would potentially address some of the issues of disconnect between the advice that can be given pre-16, which is often more holistic and the advice post-16 which currently has a distinct recruitment focus across the sector. Whilst initiatives such as NCOP are encouraging collaboration, this is still taking place in a marketised environment with institutions still primarily judged on their own student demographics, meaning that even within collaborative work there is an element of competition. This issue was exemplified in schemes which offered lowered entry grades reported to often focus on the same select group of students, limiting their reach.

Move towards nationally set targets

Institutional ideologies can be seen to shape who is seen as a 'potential' student. Where institutions are the primary drivers in setting their targets in relation to access, these targets are shaped by those ideologies and legitimated through the benchmarks they choose. Whilst this allows the more selective institutions to frame their success in more positive terms, it masks the significant issues of inequality that still exist in more selective higher education. In setting national

targets, it would allow for a better comparison across the sector and increased focus on truly widening participation as opposed to chasing after a few students who may be from under-represented groups but are already highly likely to go to university. This would also address some of the issues highlighted in Chapter Six related to institutional conceptualisations of who has 'potential' to succeed in higher education by forcing institutions to consider their performance in relation to a wide range of providers. In doing so this may allow a better focus on addressing underlying issues that limit access such as needing to ensure institutions are adapting to fit a more diverse student body as opposed to just trying to recruit from a small pool of under-represented students who are already achieving academically.

Ensure that students in further education colleges have access to widening participation outreach activities

Whilst access agreements mentioned targeting further education colleges, through the interview data it was clear that this was problematic. The need for FE colleges to retain students from level 3 to higher education provision to remain financially stable often limited the access given to widening participation outreach practitioners. Additionally, where work was taking place it was more challenging to organise due to the more dispersed nature of colleges in terms of their structures as opposed to schools. This is a major issue given that in 2016-17 there were more students aged 16-18 in FE provision than in state schools (Association of Colleges, 2017). If this group is continually omitted from this work, then policy is only ever likely to be partial in this area. Changing this landscape is crucial, yet also challenging due to the complex market issues created by the removal of the student number cap (Chapter Two) that placed FE Colleges in competition with universities. Therefore it is likely to require intervention from the Department for Education and the Office for Students to ensure FE students across the country have access to widening participation in all colleges.

Professionalise the role of practitioners

This study has demonstrated that whilst practitioners are nearly all driven by a social justice agenda, their understandings of the complexity of the lives of those

they work with is variable. Furthermore, over the years, the role of a widening participation practitioner has developed into one which involves: being expected to develop interventions that raise attainment, provide impartial information advice and guidance and rigorously evaluate interventions. To date no nationally mandated training exists to support these individuals. In order to teach in a state school, there is an expectation that staff will go through in-depth training to gain qualified teacher status, yet there is no such expectation of those delivering widening participation work. Whilst organisations such as NEON[66] and universities such as Sussex[67] have developed training and academic qualifications to support this work, there is no national framework meaning training is inconsistent. It should not be a lottery as to whether you get a practitioner who has training in careers or pedagogy. This should be a standard. It may be, however, that this is not a one size fits all model and a portfolio-based qualification that takes into account previous experience as in the case of HEA accreditation, may be a better model to explore. Alongside this, considering a national framework for career progression to help institutions and individual practitioners to see how they can remain working in this field would be invaluable. Within a review of pre-16 evaluation, Neil Harrison et al. (2018) have recommended the creation of a PgCert to support evaluations which I both welcome and would argue for a similar approach to be adopted for more fundamental sociological and careers training. Stakeholders and institutions in Stevenson et al. (2019) research also felt that targeting minority ethnic groups was an area which would benefit from more training, something which I also argue extends to other forms of targeting based on socio-economic class.

Develop a better national picture of who is working in this area

Training is just one issue that needs addressing and in order to train practitioners, they first need to be identified. At a basic level, this could be done through annual monitoring processes, but this would be helpfully supplemented by a census of

---

[66] NEON have an annual Access Academy programme of training
https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/programmes/access-academy-training/

[67] University of Sussex have a specific widening participation strand on their Education MA course
http://www.sussex.ac.uk/education/pgstudy/wpstrand

staff working in this area to understand not only what skills they possess but also those gaps in training that they feel need fulfilling. This study has highlighted the importance of people in enacting widening participation policy and without understanding these individuals, it is unlikely that further, faster change is likely to take place as setting more ambitious targets is only likely to be effective if those practitioners targeting and delivering work have the skills and knowledge to do so.

9.4.2 Institutional change

A number of the solutions to issues highlighted by this study rest on the institutions. Whilst policy can mandate certain changes, institutions and their management need to critically examine the ideological positions that shape local practices.

Shift thinking from individual deficit models to institutional deficit

Within pre-92 institutions in the study, interventions were often focused on individuals who were positioned as needing remedial work in preparation for entry to the institution. This work was focused on academically highly able students that may not be able to meet the exact entry requirements, producing schemes which evidence this ability to allow lower offers. The premise is that the individual needs to be improved to fit the institution. I argue that instead institutions should be more focused on adapting entry pathways to better meet the needs of diverse students. Evidence has shown that academic attainment in formal schooling is correlated with inequality and therefore institutions need to rethink what it means for an individual to have 'potential'. This means considering the ways in which alterations may need to be made to the curriculum to adapt to the more varied starting points of a diverse student body. Whilst foundation years can address this, marking out these students as different has the potential to increase their feelings of isolation and reinforce their concerns about belonging.

Place widening participation teams as core to the work of institutions

Within the interviews in both types of institutions practitioners talked about their feeling of separation from the university. In a symbolic sense, through the need to form collaborations with academic departments, often framed as being as challenging to maintain as external collaborations. Also, in a physical sense, as they were often located in separate buildings in administrative offices. Their work was often felt by them to be additional to the work of the university, as opposed to being at the core. Some practitioners struggled to reconcile the institutional commitment to access with the limited capacity and budgets they were given to carry out their work. Given the scale of investment in this area purported by these institutions, this suggests a dislocation between the institutional level planning and those delivering the work. Furthermore, once students gained access to the institution there was little contact with these students. Where institutions are trying to diversify their student bodies the expertise of these teams and the in-depth knowledge of the challenges students from under-represented backgrounds face, could be better utilised to support successful transitions into the institution.

Value quality of work over quantity

It was clear from the interviews that across both types of institution, there was an increasing pressure to deliver greater volumes of interventions annually. This was often at the expense of giving practitioners time and space to reflect upon what they were doing and to improve its effectiveness. Whilst there is an argument for the numbers game to make greater progress, those individuals from under-represented groups often need support to help find the right pathways for them. This requires intensive, quality intervention and practitioners who can work reflectively and have the knowledge and skills to tailor sessions to those they work with. In order to do this, time and space needs to be afforded to high quality evaluation and to reflect on the findings of that evaluation and implement change. If doing more is valued more highly than making practice more effective, this practice is less likely to create transformational change for those individuals who are the target of these interventions.

Resource the system effectively

Resourcing of pre-entry widening participation work needs to not just focus on costs of delivery but also on the time and training needed to ensure high calibre practice. Widening participation practitioners need to be given the time and encouragement to carry out reflective practice. However, it is not only practitioners who deliver interventions. There are huge swathes of student ambassadors and numerous other staff in universities involved. Working with under-represented groups, as I have argued in Chapter Seven extensively, requires a certain level of understanding of the challenges many of them face. As such, offering some baseline training similar to that offered by many universities on Health and Safety or Equality and Diversity should be seen as a key way to do this. Whilst this may seem like another pressure on already limited budgets, understanding the complexity of the lives of many under-represented groups will have knock on benefits in terms of the levels of retention and progression across the whole institution. This builds on the previous recommendation of valuing both this work and those who deliver it, seeing it as core to the institution's missions. Only then is it possible to create real transformational change. In many cases, especially where teams are under resourced, positive results are frequently despite what the institution is doing, rather than because of it. By adopting this alternative framing, it is likely to catalyse further faster change that the sector is striving for.

9.4.3 Individual change

Whilst many issues this study has raised are at a national or institutional level, individual practitioners have agency in some elements of their work, therefore it is important for them to realise what they can and in many cases are doing.

Understand what you are doing

All the practitioners interviewed in this study were motivated by a moral purpose. Yet, this did not mean that their work was always directed in the most appropriate way. There were significant misunderstandings of what area-based measures of higher education progression (such as POLAR) actually meant. There also seemed to be a limited understanding in some cases of the constraints faced by some

under-represented groups. Developing this understanding is something that training would address, however there is an onus on the individual to engage with this agenda more widely. Developing capacity to engage critically with policy is vital for ensuring that the work being done with individuals from under-represented groups is in the interests of those groups themselves. This requires a shift in thinking in some cases, away from a reliance on the mass media and institutionally mediated updates, to practitioners engaging directly with research and policy.

Reflect, Challenge and Resist

Following on from the call for improvement in knowledge and engagement with policy is a plea to take advantage of opportunities for reflective practice. Time is pressured and there is a temptation to comply with requests to focus on quantity of engagement over quality. It is up to practitioners to resist this to a certain extent and to take the time to reflect on their practice. Not just to *do* evaluation but to *engage* with the evaluative process and use it to improve practice in order to maximise the life chances of those individuals they work with.

9.5 Limitations

The scale of this study resulted in a number of key limitations. Whilst many of the issues emerging in the analysis, recurred across a number of settings and the session with practitioners at the 2018 NEON conference identified that many of the issues were faced by a wider group of practitioners, the coverage of a study this size cannot be comprehensive. It covered a sample of a small number of institutions and missed some of the complexity of the sector, areas with only one institution for example may focus practice very differently, as may small specialist providers, alternative providers and Oxbridge. The institutions were also primarily in urban settings which misses some of the differences in the challenges faced by institutions targeting more rural populations.

It is important to also acknowledge the role I may have played in shaping the data collected. All of the participants were aware that I worked within widening

participation. Reflecting on my own research diary, this seemed to result in detailed, impassioned answers. In some cases, notably Lucy (pre-92), I feel that this may have limited her responses potentially due to feeling like I may have judged her based on my own experiences compared to her relative inexperience in the sector. It is, therefore, important to consider how my positionality may have both generated data as well as restricted what was said. Being known to some of the gatekeepers also facilitated access to the institutions within which the interviews were conducted. Other cold contacts were less productive and thus issues of access may have shaped the perspectives the research is able to foreground. For example, in most cases the practitioners did have access to national networks and had attended conferences. This was especially true of the additional four practitioners recruited through the Action on Access mailing list. This may not be representative of all practitioners.

9.6 Contribution to knowledge

This thesis makes a number of distinct contributions to knowledge which can be separated into four key areas which I outline below:

9.6.1 Understanding of widening participation practices

This study has focused on a group that is absent in much literature and builds on the work of Wilkins and Burke (2013) to foreground in detail the intersection between policy and practices. To date the limited research in relation to widening participation policy has focused on those involved in developing policy as opposed to enacting it (e.g. Graham, 2011, Harrison et al., 2015). It is the first extensive study of the experiences of practitioners that explores not only the differences across institutions but also within teams working in the same institutions. It has drawn together experiences from a wide range of practitioners across two distinct types of university and thus offers insights into the heterogenous practices that occur. Furthermore, it has highlighted not only the respective roles of institutions in structuring practices but also the agency of individual practitioners who in some cases work in tension with their institutions, highlighting the important role that personal experiences can bring to practice.

Additionally, this study has taken emerging understandings and explored them with a wider group of practitioners to develop concrete recommendations that could inform practice. This study therefore does not simply make an academic contribution to the understanding of practices but has begun to act as a basis for more reflective discussions about the ideas that underpin widening participation practices and the challenges and opportunities these create.

9.6.2 Contribution to wider field

Through exploring issues related to widening participation practices, this study has built on the literature on aspirations that was explored in Chapter Eight and added a distinct contribution to understandings of the role of these practitioners in helping develop aspirations with young people. Whilst there is a large body of literature critiquing a deficit of aspiration framing, to date the primary focus has been on young people's perspectives. Understanding how this informs policy and practice offers a key contribution to enable future work to try and counter the 'raising aspirations' discourse. Given the increased emphasis placed on schools to offer careers education and the way in which this is often partially fulfilled through engagement with outside professionals, such as widening participation practitioners, these understandings are of vital importance within these debates.

This study has also taken a detailed look at how framings of potential can shift intended policy to meet other agendas. It has highlighted the role this not only institutional policy level but how the complexities of enacting these policies can impact upon who is seen as having potential to progress to higher education. It has foregrounded the ways in which varied understandings of practitioners and other gatekeepers, such as teachers reproduce or resist institutional framings. These shifts are often poorly understood and as such this study offers insights for both policymakers and practitioners into why work aimed at particular groups does not always have the desired impact.

9.6.3 Methodological contribution

In using a number of creative methods within this study both within data collection and within dissemination, it has foregrounded some of the potential opportunities for their use within research with adults. Use of creative methods within research has become increasingly common (e.g. Bagnoli, 2009, Brown, 2019, Kearney and Hyle, 2004, Mannay, 2010, Schubring et al., 2019), however, the use of drawing has been less common when researching with adult participants (Kara, 2015). Therefore, in using Lego and Drawing and being able to explore their relative success and limitations, this study developed understanding of how these potential barriers can maximise the effectiveness of creative methods, especially those that are currently under researched such as drawing which require higher levels of skill. Whilst there is limited space to explore this in depth in the thesis, exploration of these issues will be a focus of related outputs for publication[68].

In addition to the contribution to understanding the value of creative methods of data collection, the use of the comic as a form of dissemination to practitioners and policymakers highlighted the role that visual outputs can play in making research accessible to wider audiences. Building on other recent use of comics in higher education research (Vigurs et al., 2016), this is a contribution to an emerging area of scholarship.

9.6.4 Theoretical contribution

Within the emerging body of research related to widening participation, engagement with theory is often limited. This study has drawn heavily on theory to begin to explore how and why policy does, or in some cases, does not translate to practice. Where theory is used, there is often an overreliance on the work of Bourdieu to explain some of the phenomena being studied. What I have done, however is to question how far this accounts for the agency of practitioners and have drawn strongly on the notion of temporality to theorise why policy is often not impacted upon by practice in this context. Through the integration of diverse

---

[68] These ideas have been developed through conference papers delivered in June and July 2018 listed in Appendix 11 (p.292)

theoretical concepts such as institutional doxa, the policy implementation staircase and the morphogenetic cycle, I have developed a way of thinking about the policy-practice interactions that allows adequate space for the power of structures to shape practice but also for agency of individual practitioners and an emerging understanding of why these agentic practices often do not transform institutional narratives.

9.7 Further areas for research

This study foregrounded a number of issues within the sample institutions. Within the limits of the study, the resonance of these issues was tested with a wider group of practitioners and at a number of academic conferences and seminars (Appendix 11). For a fuller picture of the sector to be given, there are other institutions worth conducting further fieldwork in. Whilst the focus of this study was solely on the pre-92 and post-92 institutions, it would be important to see the extent to which these issues are recreated in small specialist institutions or Oxbridge institutions. Whilst local geographies did not seem to create any distinct differences, there are institutions that serve particular areas, such as in the East of England (e.g. University of East Anglia or the University of Lincoln), the North East (e.g. Hull) or the South West (e.g. Plymouth University) that occupy the role of a local anchor institution and perform a distinct civic role (Coffait, 2017). In these cases, there may be differences in practice that this study has not been able to capture that warrant further investigation.

One of the most pressing areas for further research is to document a national picture of who and where widening participation practitioners are located across the sector. This study has shown the variability in size of teams and the multitude of roles undertaken by practitioners, but no comprehensive data on this exists. Many of the recommendations proposed would be hard to take forward without better understanding the number and concentration of widening participation practitioners. Moreover, the recruitment phase for this study demonstrated that in some institutions, widening participation has become decentralised and it is important to develop a better picture of why and where this is happening. As Alice's (post-92) interview highlighted, simply examining resource allocation in

access agreements and annual monitoring does not offer an accurate picture of this due to the lack of transparency around to whom and to what this spend is allocated.

Methodologically, there is further scope to explore what makes creative methods effective with adult participants. The data generated through the LEGO task and the participants' reactions to this was extremely positive, suggesting a real value in exploring further use of creative methods with adults. However as has been previously discussed, the typical student task identified the limitations of reliance on creative methods to generate data. Whilst the LEGO was effective, the limitations, such as surrounding the ethnic representation in LEGO (Cook, 2017, Johnson, 2014) and the costs involved in doing this mean that it may be worth exploring other creative methods that could elicit similar rich data. Therefore, developing research on maximising the effectiveness of creative tasks in interviews with adults would be a useful way to develop research in this area.

Training for practitioners and space for reflective practice were key recommendations. There are many ways this could be achieved. This, therefore, adds scope for researching what training makes the most impact on practice and how best to facilitate this reflective practice. OFFA recently undertook work to increase research conducted by practitioners (Stevenson et al., 2018a). It could, therefore, be useful to explore the effectiveness of a programme like this on practice with more unstructured opportunities for reflection to better understand the resource implications of how best to support reflective practice.

The data clearly threw up some discrepancies in targeting practices. The study offered only a partial view of this, focusing the lens on practitioners. It would be useful to explore the complexities of targeting from the perspective of teachers. This may allow for deeper understanding of how to make this work more effectively targeted as it is not only the practitioners who are involved in this process. In relation to aspiration, there also is a need for further research with under-represented groups to understand what constraints and enablements shape the realisation of aspirations. Related literature (e.g. Allen and Hollingworth, 2013,

Archer et al., 2014) has demonstrated that a lack of aspiration is not the key issue, and this resonated with most of the practitioners' experiences. Therefore, further research to understand why aspiration may become frustrated would be extremely valuable in focusing interventions on supporting the maintenance of these aspirations to the point of realisation.

9.8 Concluding comments

This thesis makes a number of distinct contributions to the study of policy and practice in widening participation. Offering empirical data on the experiences and perspectives of those at the coal face that has until now been absent in previous research, the thesis has highlighted both the differences between institutions and also within practitioners working within the same institution. Chapter Seven outlined a model for classifying types of practitioners and I argued how this might inform thinking around how practitioners can be equipped to engage more critically in their practices. This understanding, together with the recommendations relating to the training of practitioners, may contribute to increased effectiveness of practice. Methodologically this thesis has also contributed to the literature on the use of creative methods with adult participants demonstrating some of the challenges and opportunities that this creates. It has also contributed to a growing body of literature on the use of comics to disseminate research to non-academic audiences.

This study took place at a particular juncture in the evolution of the English higher education system. Therefore, many of the issues in access agreements this thesis highlighted are now historical. The new proposals for the future of access and participation (Office for Students, 2018) adopt an alternative approach, one which already encapsulates some of the recommendations made in this chapter, such as a move towards nationally set targets and a greater focus on institutional adaptation to meet the needs of under-represented groups through the increased focus on attainment gaps. This is likely to remove some of the institutional self-interest and focus on issues that are easier to address as opposed to more challenging structural issues. However more still needs to be done to address issues such as

the conflict between working in a marketised environment and working for the best interests of the individuals from under-represented backgrounds. Moreover, institutions, supported by the Office for Students, need to ensure practitioners are more effectively and systematically trained and supported to fulfil the complex roles they engage in. The slow progress in improvements to access and success are key concerns of the new Director for Fair Access and Participation, Chris Millward (2018). I argue that this is partly because issues such as the role individuals play in enacting this work have often been side lined. Hopefully, some of the recommendations from this study will be given serious consideration by policy makers. If we want to see further faster change then increasing the knowledge and skills of practitioners and the consistency of this across the country is vital.

References

Abrahams, J. and Ingram, N. (2013) 'The Chameleon Habitus: Exploring Local Students' Negotiations of Multiple Fields', *Sociological Research Online,* 18(4), pp. 21. Available at: http://www.socresonline.org.uk/18/4/21.html

Adams, M. (2006) 'Hybridizing Habitus and Reflexivity: Towards an Understanding of Contemporary Identity?', *Sociology,* 40(3), pp. 511-528, DOI: 10.1177/0038038506063672

Adams, R. (2017) 'Almost half of all young people in England go on to higher education', *The Guardian*, 28 September 2017. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/sep/28/almost-half-of-all-young-people-in-england-go-on-to-higher-education (Accessed: 3 September 2018).

Ahmed, S. (2007) ''You end up doing the document rather than doing the doing': Diversity, race equality and the politics of documentation', *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* 30(4), pp. 590-609, DOI: 10.1080/01419870701356015

Ahmed, S. (2017) *Living a feminist life.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Allen, K. and Hollingworth, S. (2013) ''Sticky Subjects' or 'Cosmopolitan Creatives'? Social Class, Place and Urban Young People's Aspirations for Work in the Knowledge Economy', *Urban Studies,* 50(3), pp. 499-517, DOI: 10.1177/0042098012468901

Althusser, L. (2008) *On ideology.* London: Verso.

Anders, J. (2017) 'The influence of socioeconomic status on changes in young people's expectations of applying to university', *Oxford Review of Education,* 43(4), pp. 381-401, DOI: 10.1080/03054985.2017.1329722

Anderson, E. S. (1999) 'What Is the Point of Equality?', *Ethics,* 109(2), pp. 287-337, DOI: 10.1086/233897

Andrews, J., Robinson, D. and Hutchinson, J. (2017) *Closing the gap? Trends in educational disadvantage*, London: Education Policy Insititute. Available at: https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Closing-the-Gap_EPI-.pdf (Accessed: 7 July 2018).

Archer, L. (2007a) 'Diversity, equality and higher education: a critical reflection on the ab/uses of equity discourse within widening participation', *Teaching in Higher Education,* 12(5-6), pp. 635-653, DOI: 10.1080/13562510701595325

Archer, L., DeWitt, J. and Wong, B. (2014) 'Spheres of influence: what shapes young people's aspirations at age 12/13 and what are the implications for education policy?', *Journal of Education Policy,* 29(1), pp. 58-85, DOI: 10.1080/02680939.2013.790079

Archer, L. and Hutchings, M. (2000) ''Bettering Yourself'? Discourses of Risk, Cost and Benefit in Ethnically Diverse, Young Working-Class Non-Participants' Constructions of Higher Education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 21(4), pp. 555-574, DOI: 10.1080/713655373

Archer, L., Hutchings, M. and Ross, A. (2003) *Higher education and social class : issues of exclusion and inclusion.* London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Archer, L. and Yamashita, H. (2003) ''Knowing their limits'? Identities, inequalities and inner city school leavers' post-16 aspirations', *Journal of Education Policy,* 18(1), pp. 53-69, DOI: 10.1080/0268093032000042209

Archer, M., Decoteau, C., Gorski, P., Little, D., Porpora, D., Rutzou, T., Smith, C., Steinmetz, G. and Vandenberghe, F. (2016) *What is critical realism?* Available at: http://asatheory.org/current-newsletter-online/what-is-critical-realism (Accessed: 8 February 2018).

Archer, M. S. (1995) *Realist social theory: the morphogenetic approach.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. S. (2003) *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. S. (2007b) *Making our Way through the World.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. S. (2010) 'Routine, Reflexivity, and Realism*', *Sociological Theory,* 28(3), pp. 272-303, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9558.2010.01375.x

Association of Colleges (2017) *College key facts 2016-17.* London: Association of Colleges. Available at: https://indd.adobe.com/view/2ecfd04e-047c-49cc-91d3-18f9bdb9ca73 (Accessed: 12 July 2018).

Atherton, G., Dumangane, C. and Whitty, G. (2016) *Charting Equity in Higher Education: Drawing the Global Access Map*, London: Pearson. Available at: https://www.pearson.com/content/dam/one-dot-com/one-dot-com/global/Files/about-pearson/innovation/Charting-Equity_WEB.pdf (Accessed: 3 September 2018).

Atkinson, W. (2011) 'From sociological fictions to social fictions: some Bourdieusian reflections on the concepts of 'institutional habitus' and 'family habitus'', *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 32(3), pp. 331-347, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2011.559337

Bagnoli, A. (2009) 'Beyond the standard interview: the use of graphic elicitation and arts-based methods', *Qualitative Research,* 9(5), pp. 547-570, DOI: 10.1177/1468794109343625

Baker, W. (2016) 'Aspirations: the moral of the story', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, pp. 1-13, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2016.1254540

Baker, Z. (2018) 'Reflexivity, structure and agency: using reflexivity to understand Further Education students' Higher Education decision-making and choices', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, pp. 1-16, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2018.1483820

Ball, S., Maguire, M. and Braun, A. (2012) *How Schools Do Policy: policy enactment in secondary schools.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Ball, S. J. (1990) *Politics and Policy Making in Education.* London: Routledge.

Ball, S. J. (1993) 'What is policy? Texts, trajectories and toolboxes', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education,* 13(2), pp. 10-17

Ball, S. J. and Vincent, C. (1998) ''I Heard It on the Grapevine': 'hot' knowledge and school choice', *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 19(3), pp. 377-400, DOI: 10.1080/0142569980190307

Barkat, S. (2017) 'Widening access to selective universities: an evaluation of the academic enrichment programme'. Available at: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511114005/https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/University-of-Birmingham-Selective-Universities.pdf (Accessed: 7 July 2018).

Bathmaker, A.-M. (2015) 'Thinking with Bourdieu: thinking after Bourdieu. Using 'field' to consider in/equalities in the changing field of English higher education', *Cambridge Journal of Education,* 45(1), pp. 61-80, DOI: 10.1080/0305764X.2014.988683

Bathmaker, A.-M., Ingram, N., Abrahams, J., Hoare, A., Waller, R. and Bradley, H. (eds.) (2016) *Higher Education, Social Class and Social Mobility*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Baxter, A., Tate, J. and Hatt, S. (2007) 'From Policy to Practice: Pupils' Responses to Widening Participation Initiatives', *Higher Education Quarterly,* 61(3), pp. 266-283, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2273.2007.00355.x

Bayes, C. (In press) 'Blurred boundaries – Encouraging greater dialogue between student recruitment and widening participation', in Forum for Access and Continuing Education (ed.) *Transformative higher education - Access, inclusion and lifelong learning*. London: Forum for Access and Continuing Education.

Berger, P. L. and Luckmann, T. (1967) *The social construction of reality*. New York: Anchor books.

Bhaskar, R. (1975) *A realist theory of science*. Leeds: Leeds Books Ltd.

Bhopal, K. (2018) *White Privilege: The myth of a post-racial society*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Blackmore, J., Hutchison, K. and Keary, A. (2017) 'School principals speaking back to widening participation policies in higher education', *Journal of Educational Administration and History,* 49(2), pp. 108-127, DOI: 10.1080/00220620.2017.1284766

Blair, T. (2006) *Text of the Labour leader's valedictory speech to the party conference*: Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2006/sep/26/labourconference.labour3 (Accessed: 3 March 2018).

Bland, B. (2018) 'It's All About The Money: The Influence Of Family Estrangement, Accommodation Struggles and Homelessness On Student Success in UK Higher Education', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning,* 20(3), pp. 68-89, DOI: 10.5456/WPLL.20.3.68

Boliver, V. (2011) 'Expansion, differentiation, and the persistence of social class inequalities in British higher education', *Higher Education,* 61(3), pp. 229-242, DOI: 10.1007/s10734-010-9374-y

Boliver, V. (2015) 'Are there distinctive clusters of higher and lower status universities in the UK?', *Oxford Review of Education,* 41(5), pp. 608-627, DOI: 10.1080/03054985.2015.1082905

Boliver, V. (2017) 'Misplaced optimism: how higher education reproduces rather than reduces social inequality', *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 38(3), pp. 423-432, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2017.1281648

Boliver, V., Gorard, S. and Siddiqui, N. (2017) 'A more radical approach to contextualised admissions', in HEPI (ed.) *Where next for widening participation and fair access? New insights from leading thinkers*.

Bolton, P. (2012) *Education: Historical statistics*. London UK Parliament. Available at: http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/22771 (Accessed: 3 September 2018).

Bourdieu, P. (1989) 'Social space and symbolic power', *Sociological theory,* 7(1), pp. 14-25

Bourdieu, P. (1990 [2014]) *The logic of practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1998 [2001]) *Practical Reason*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. (2004) *Sketch for a self-analysis*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2010 [1984]) *Distinction*. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J.-C. (1992) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage.

Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992) *An invitation to reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bowers-Brown, T., McCaig, C., Harvey, L. and Stevens, A. (2016) *National evaluation of Aimhigher: Survey of higher education institutions,further education colleges and work-based learning providers* HEFCE. Available at: http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/Harvey%20papers/Bowers-Brown%20et%20al%202006%20AimHigher.pdf (Accessed: 12 Jan 2018).

Bowl, M. and Hughes, J. (2014) 'Fair access and fee setting in English universities: what do institutional statements suggest about university strategies in a stratified quasi-market?', *Studies in Higher Education*, pp. 1-19, DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2014.927846

Boyask, R., Rees, T., Gristy, C. and Knowler, H. (2014) 'Implications of localism in educational policy on the aspirations of young people in Cornwall', *Social and Public Policy Review,* 8(2), pp. 19-31. Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/4908

Bradley, H. and Waller, R. (2018) 'Gendered and classed graduate transitions to work', in Waller, R., Ingram, N. & Ward, M.R.M. (eds.) *Higher Education and Social Inequalities*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 210-230.

Britton, J., Dearden, L., Shephard, N. and Vignoles, A. (2016) *How English domiciled graduate earnings vary with gender, institution attended, subject and socio-economic background*: IFS Working Papers. Available at: https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/173940 (Accessed: 26 July 2018).

Brooks, R. (2017) 'The construction of higher education students in English policy documents', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, pp. 1-17, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2017.1406339

Brown, N. (2019) 'Identity boxes: using materials and metaphors to elicit experiences', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, pp. 1-15, DOI: 10.1080/13645579.2019.1590894

Browne, J. (2010) *Securing a sustainable future for higher education: an independent review of higher education funding and student finance [Browne report]*. London: Department for Business, Innovation & Skills. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/422565/bis-10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf (Accessed: 31 December 2017).

Bryman, A. (2008) *Social Research Methods*. 3rd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Buddel, N. A. (2017) ''Teaching' the path towards university: understanding student access through storied-futures and meritocratic grand narratives', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, pp. 1-16, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2017.1302315

Burchfiel, A. (2017) *An investigation into the beliefs and experiences of widening participation practitioners from higher education institutions in England in 2017*. unpublished MA Thesis MA, University of Bristol.

Burke, C. T., Emmerich, N. and Ingram, N. (2013) 'Well-founded social fictions: a defence of the concepts of institutional and familial habitus', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34(2), pp. 165-182, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2012.746263

Burke, P. J. (2012) *The right to higher education.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Butcher, J., Corfield, R. and Rose-Adams, J. (2012) 'Contextualised approaches to widening participation: a comparative case study of two UK universities', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning,* 13(-1), pp. 51-70, DOI: 10.5456/WPLL.13.S.51

Cable, V. and Willetts, D. (2011) *Guidance to the Director of Fair Access.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment _data/file/32404/11-728-guidance-to-director-fair-access.pdf (Accessed: 3 March 2018).

Campbell, T. (2017) 'The relationship between stream placement and teachers' judgements of pupils: Evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study', *London Review of Education,* 15(3), pp. 505-522, DOI: 10.18546/LRE.15.3.12

Canning, A.-M. (2017) *#toptip Just politely ask 'who shouldn't go?' when folks say too many people are going to university.*: Twitter. Available at: https://twitter.com/amcanning/status/927859777715220481?s=21 (Accessed: 7 November 2017).

Case, J. M. (2015) 'A social realist perspective on student learning in higher education: the morphogenesis of agency', *Higher Education Research & Development,* 34(5), pp. 841-852, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2015.1011095

Chowdry, H., Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Goodman, A. and Vignoles, A. (2013) 'Widening participation in higher education: analysis using linked administrative data', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society),* 176(2), pp. 431-457, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-985X.2012.01043.x

Clark, S., Mountford-Zimdars, A. and Francis, B. (2015) 'Risk, Choice and Social Disadvantage: Young People's Decision-Making in a Marketised Higher Education System', *Sociological Research Online,* 20(3), pp. 9. Available at: http://www.socresonline.org.uk/20/3/9.html

Clarke, C. (2004) *Guidance to the Director of Fair Access.* Available at: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100210152510/http://www. dcsf.gov.uk/hegateway/uploads/OFFA%20final%20guidance%20letter%2 0October%202004.pdf (Accessed: 3 March 2018).

Clarke, P. and Beech, D. (2018) *Reaching the parts of society universities have missed: A manifesto for the new Director of Fair Access and Participation.* London: HEPI.

Coffait, L. (2017) *Hull: a city and a university raising its head.* London: WonkHE. Available at: https://wonkhe.com/blogs/hull-a-city-and-a-university-raising-its-head/ (Accessed: 19 October 2018).

Collini, S. (2012) *What are universities for?* London: Penguin.

Complete University Guide (2018) *Methodology.* Available at: https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/methodology/ (Accessed: 18 April 2018).

Connolly, P. and Neill, J. (2001) 'Constructions of locality and gender and their impact on the educational aspirations of working-class children', *International Studies in Sociology of Education,* 11(2), pp. 107-130, DOI: 10.1080/09620210100200070

Cook, R. T. (2017) 'Ninjas, Kobe Bryant, and Yellow Plastic', in W. Irwin, S.B.a.R.T.C. (ed.) *LEGO® and Philosophy.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Coulson, S., Garforth, L., Payne, G. and Wastell, E. (2018) 'Admissions, adaptations, and anxieties: social class inside and outside the elite university', in Waller, R., Ingram, N. & Ward, M.R.M. (eds.) *Higher Education and social inequalities.* London: Routledge.

Crawford, C., Meschi, E. and Vignoles, A. (2011) 'Post-16 Educational Choices and Institutional Value Added at Key Stage 5. CEE DP 124', *Centre for the Economics of Education (NJ1),*

Croxford, L. and Raffe, D. (2015) 'The iron law of hierarchy? Institutional differentiation in UK higher education', *Studies in Higher Education,* 40(9), pp. 1625-1640, DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2014.899342

Cummings, C., Laing, K., Law, J., McLaughlin, J., Papps, I., Todd, L. and Woolner, P. (2012) *Can changing aspirations and attitudes impact on educational attainment?* , York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at: https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/education-attainment-interventions-full.pdf (Accessed: 28 April 2018).

Davey, G. (2012) 'Using Bourdieu's concept of doxa to illuminate classed practices in an English fee-paying school', *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 33(4), pp. 507-525, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2012.662823

Dean, J. (2017) *Doing reflexivity.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Denzin, N. K. (2001) *Interpretivist Interactionism.* 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Department for Business Innovation and Skills, Department for Business, I.a.S. (2011) *Students at the Heart of the System* London: The Stationery Office Limited.

Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2015) *Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* London.

Department for Education (2017a) *Destinations of key stage 4 and key stage 5 students, England, 2015/16.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/651012/SFR56_2017_Main_Text.pdf (Accessed: 7 July 2018).

Department for Education (2017b) *Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England, 2015 to 2016*, London: Department for Education. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/584473/SFR03_2017.pdf (Accessed: 12 July 2018).

Department for Education (2017c) *Students aged 16 to 18 achieving 3 A grades or better at A level.* Available at: https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/a-levels/draft-percentage-of-students-achieving-3-a-grades-or-better-at-a-level/latest (Accessed: 12 July 2018).

Department for Education (2017d) *Unlocking talent, fulfilling potential: A plan for improving social mobility through education.* London: HMSO.

Department for Education and Skills (2003) *The future of higher education.* Norwich: The Stationery Office.

Department for Education and Skills (2016) *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice.* Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills Publications. Available at: https://www.spa.ac.uk/resources/schwartz-report (Accessed: 18 July 2018).

Department of Business Innovation and Skills (2016) *Success as a Knowledge Economy:Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice.* London.

Donnelly, M. and Gamsu, S. (2018a) *Home and away: Social, ethnic and spatial inequalities in student mobility.* Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-

content/uploads/2018/02/Home_and_away_FINAL.pdf (Accessed: 14 April 2018).

Donnelly, M. and Gamsu, S. (2018b) 'Regional structures of feeling? A spatially and socially differentiated analysis of UK student im/mobility', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, pp. 1-21, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2018.1426442

Doyle, M. and Griffin, M. (2012) 'Raised aspirations and attainment? A review of the impact of Aimhigher (2004–2011) on widening participation in higher education in England', *London Review of Education*, 10(1), pp. 75-88, DOI: 10.1080/14748460.2012.659060

Duggan, J. R. (2014) 'Embedded research: contextualizing managerialization in a local authority', in Gunter, H.M., Hall, D. & Mills, C. (eds.) *Education policy research: Design and practice at a time of rapid reform*. London: Bloomsbury.

Dupriez, V., Monseur, C., Campenhoudt, M. V. and Lafontaine, D. (2012) 'Social Inequalities of Post-Secondary Educational Aspirations: Influence of Social Background, School Composition and Institutional Context', *European Educational Research Journal*, 11(4), pp. 504-519, DOI: 10.2304/eerj.2012.11.4.504

Dyke, M., Johnston, B. and Fuller, A. (2012) 'Approaches to reflexivity: navigating educational and career pathways', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 33(6), pp. 831-848, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2012.686895

Education Act 1944, Available at: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/7-8/31/enacted (Accessed: 23 October 2018).

Education datalab (2015) *Seven things you might not know about our schools* London: Education datalab. Available at: http://www.educationdatalab.org.uk/getattachment/Blog/March-2015/Seven-things-you-might-not-know-about-our-schools/EduDataLab-7things.pdf.aspx (Accessed: 2 December 2016).

Education Reform Act 1988, Available at: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/pdfs/ukpga_19880040_en.pdf (Accessed: 1 October 2018).

Else, H. (2017) *Les Ebdon: 'nuclear option' fears kept universities in line*. Times Higher Edcuation. Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/les-ebdon-nuclear-option-fears-kept-universities-line (Accessed: 12 April 2018).

Emirbayer, M. and Mische, A. (1998) 'What Is Agency?', *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(4), pp. 962-1023, DOI: 10.1086/231294

Emmerson, C., Frayne, C., McNally, S. and Silva, O. (2006) *Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge: a policy evaluation using the Labour Force Survey*: Department for Education and Skills. Available at: http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/7775/1/RR813.pdf (Accessed: 19 October 2018).

Equality Act 2010, Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents (Accessed: 1 July 2018).

Equality Challenge Unit (2017) *Degree attainment gaps*. Available at: https://www.ecu.ac.uk/guidance-resources/student-recruitment-retention-attainment/student-attainment/degree-attainment-gaps/ (Accessed: 2 October 2017).

Esmond, B. and Wood, H. (2017) 'More morphostasis than morphogenesis? The 'dual professionalism' of English Further Education workshop tutors',

Journal of Vocational Education & Training, 69(2), pp. 229-245, DOI:
    10.1080/13636820.2017.1309568

Fairclough, N. (2003) *Analysing Discourse.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Fairclough, N. (2010) *Critical Discourse Analysis: The critical study of language.*
    Second edn. Abingdon: Routledge.

Finlayson, R. (2018) *Richer data tells us more about students in higher education.*
    Bristol: Office for Students. Available at:
    https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/news-and-
    blog/richer-data-tells-us-more-about-students-in-higher-education/
    (Accessed: 1 June 2018).

Forrester, G. and Garratt, D. (2016) *Education policy unravelled.* 2nd edn. London:
    Bloomsbury.

Further and Higher Education Act 1992, Available at:
    https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/13/contents (Accessed: 2
    December 2018).

Gabb, J. (2010) 'Home truths: ethical issues in family research', *Qualitative Research,*
    10(4), pp. 461-478, DOI: 10.1177/1468794110366807

Gartland, C. (2015) 'Student ambassadors: 'role-models', learning practices and
    identities', *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 36(8), pp. 1192-1211, DOI:
    10.1080/01425692.2014.886940

Gauntlett, D. (2007) *Creative explorations: New approaches to idenities and audiences.*
    Abingdon: Routledge.

Gauntlett, D. and Holzwarth, P. (2006) 'Creative and visual methods for exploring
    identities', *Visual Studies,* 21(1), pp. 82-91, DOI: 10.1080/14725860600613261

Gicheva, N. and Petrie, K. (2018) *Vocation, Vocation, Vocation: The role of vocational
    routes into higher education*: Social Market Foundation. Available at:
    http://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/SMF-Vocation-
    Vocation-Vocation.pdf (Accessed: 1 July 2018).

Giddens, A. (1979) *Central problems in social theory: Action, structure, and
    contradiction in social analysis.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Giddens, A. (1986) *The constitution of society : outline of the theory of structuration.*
    Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gillborn, D. and Youdell, D. (1999) *Rationing education: Policy, practice, reform, and
    equity.* McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Goodhart, D. (2017) *The road to somewhere.* London: Penguin Books.

Goodman, A. and Gregg, P. (2010) *Poorer children's educational attainment: how
    important are attitudes and behaviour? ,* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
    Available at:
    https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/poorer-
    children-education-full.pdf (Accessed: 10 January 2018).

Gorard, S., See, B. H. and Davies, P. (2012) *The impact of attitudes and aspirations on
    educational attainment and participation*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
    Available at:
    https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/education-
    young-people-parents-full.pdf (Accessed: 15 January 2018).

Gorard, S., Smith, E., May, H., Thomas, L., Adnett, N. and Slack, K. (2006) *Review
    of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in
    higher education.* Available at: http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6204/1/barriers.pdf
    (Accessed: 2 March 2018).

Gosepath, S. (2011) 'Equality', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2011 Edition)* [Online]. Version. Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/equality/ (Accessed: 18 May 2018).

Graham, C. (2011) 'Balancing national versus local priorities: analysing 'local' responses to the national widening participation agenda in six case study HEIs', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning,* 13(3), pp. 12-26, DOI: 10.5456/WPLL.13.3.12

Graham, C. (2012) 'Discourses of widening participation in the prospectus documents and websites of six English higher education institutions', *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 34(1), pp. 76-93, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2012.692048

Greenbank, P. (2006a) 'The Evolution of Government Policy on Widening Participation', *Higher Education Quarterly,* 60(2), pp. 141-166, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2273.2006.00314.x

Greenbank, P. (2006b) 'Widening participation in higher education: an examination of the factors influencing institutional policy', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education,* 11(2), pp. 199-215, DOI: 10.1080/13596740600769123

Greenbank, P. (2009) 'Widening participation and social class: implications for HEI policy', *NEXUS Journal or Learning & Teaching Research,* 1, pp. 77-108

Guillemin, M. and Drew, S. (2010) 'Questions of process in participant-generated visual methodologies', *Visual Studies,* 25(2), pp. 175-188, DOI: 10.1080/1472586X.2010.502676

Gunn, A. (2018) 'Metrics and methodologies for measuring teaching quality in higher education: developing the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)', *Educational Review,* 70(2), pp. 129-148, DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2017.1410106

Harrison, N. (2012a) 'Implementing and measuring widening participation in the post-2012 higher education world', *Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE)*, Derry, 4-6 July 2012.

Harrison, N. (2012b) 'The mismeasure of participation: how choosing the 'wrong' statistic helped seal the fate of Aimhigher', *Higher Education Review,* 45(1), pp. 30-61. Available at: http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/17900

Harrison, N. (2017) 'Patterns of participation in a period of change: Social trends in English higher education from 2000 to 2016', in Waller, R., Ingram, N. & Ward, M.R.M. (eds.) *Higher Education and Social Inequalities*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Harrison, N. and Hatt, S. (2012) 'Expensive and failing? The role of student bursaries in widening participation and fair access in England', *Studies in Higher Education,* 37(6), pp. 695-712, DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2010.539679

Harrison, N. and McCaig, C. (2014) 'An ecological fallacy in higher education policy: the use, overuse and misuse of 'low participation neighbourhoods'', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, pp. 1-25, DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2013.858681

Harrison, N. and Waller, R. (2016) 'The Aspirations-Expectations-Attainment Nexus in Widening Participation', *British Sociological Assocation*, Birmingham, 6th April 2016.

Harrison, N. and Waller, R. (2018) 'Challenging discourses of aspiration: The role of expectations and attainment in access to higher education', *British Educational Research Journal,* 44(5), pp. 914-938, DOI: doi:10.1002/berj.3475

Harrison, N., Waller, R. and Last, K. (2015) *The evaluation of widening*

participation activities in higher education: A survey of institutional leaders in England. Available at: http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/26590/1/Report%201%20-%20Institutional%20Survey%20-%20June%202015.pdf (Accessed: 17 April 2018).

Hart, C. S. (2012) *Aspirations, education and social justice.* London: Bloomsbury.

Hatt, S., Baxter, A. and Tate, J. (2009) ''It was definitely a turning point!' A review of Aimhigher summer schools in the south west of England', *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* 33(4), pp. 333-346, DOI: 10.1080/03098770903266034

Hazelkorn, E. (2018) 'Reshaping the world order of higher education: the role and impact of rankings on national and global systems', *Policy Reviews in Higher Education,* 2(1), pp. 4-31, DOI: 10.1080/23322969.2018.1424562

HEFCE (2015a) *Differences in degree outcomes: The effect of subject and student characteristics.* Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England. Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/2015/201521/HEFCE2015_21.pdf (Accessed: 7 January 2016).

HEFCE (2015b) *POLAR - participation of local areas*: Higher Education Funding Council for England. Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/POLAR/ (Accessed: 13 September 2015).

HEFCE (2017a) *Alternative providers.* Bristol: HEFCE. Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/HEinEngland/providers/aps/ (Accessed: 3 September 2018).

HEFCE (2017b) *Policy Guide: National collaborative outreach programme (NCOP).* Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/sas/ncop/maps/ (Accessed: 28 December).

HEFCE (2017c) *Policy Guide: National networks for collaborative outreach.* Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/sas/nnco/ (Accessed: 28 December 2017).

HEFCE (2018a) *Gaps in young participation in higher education.* Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/gaps/ (Accessed: 20 February 2018).

HEFCE (2018b) *National networks for collaborative outreach.* Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/sas/nnco/ (Accessed: 18 April 2018).

HEFCE and OFFA (2014) *National Strategy for Access and Student Success*, London: Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Office for Fair Access.

HESA (2016) *Changes to the UK Performance Indicators.* Available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/changes#ns-sec-applicable-table-series-t1a-t1c-200203-200809-200910 (Accessed: 12 July 2018).

HESA (2018) *What are HE students' progression rates and qualifications?* Available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/outcomes (Accessed: 26 May 2018).

Higham, L. and Gagnon, J. (2017) *White Working Class Males in British Higher Education: Pre and post-entry perspective*, Southampton: Southern Universities Network. Available at: https://www.sunoutreach.org/file/ReportWhiteBritishWorkingClassmaleresearch5March.pdf (Accessed: 3 February 2018).

Higher Education Act 2004, Available at: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/8/pdfs/ukpga_20040008_en.pdf (Accessed: 2 December 2018).

Higher Education and Research Act 2017, Available at: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/contents/enacted (Accessed: 2 December 2018).

Hillman, N. (2014) *A guide to the removal of student number controls*, Oxford: Heigher Education Policy Institute. Available at: https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Clean-copy-of-SNC-paper.pdf (Accessed: 26 July 2018).

Hobsbawm, E. J. (1968) *Industry and Empire.* Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Pelican.

Hodges, L. (2001) 'Education: student numbers - Tony Blair's university challenge; the problem used to be getting students out of bed, but now you can't even get them to apply for college. Are our universities in crisis', *The Independent*.

Holford, A. (2015) 'Take-up of Free School Meals: Price Effects and Peer Effects', *Economica,* 82(328), pp. 976-993, DOI: 10.1111/ecca.12147

hooks, b. (1994) *Teaching to transgress.* New York: Routledge.

Hutchings, M. and Archer, L. (2001) ''Higher than Einstein': constructions of going to university among working-class non-participants', *Research Papers in Education,* 16(1), pp. 69-91, DOI: 10.1080/02671520010011879

Ibrahim, J. (2011) 'The New Toll on Higher Education and the UK Student Revolts of 2010–2011', *Social Movement Studies,* 10(4), pp. 415-421, DOI: 10.1080/14742837.2011.614110

Ingram, N. (2009) 'Working-class boys, educational success and the misrecognition of working-class culture', *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 30(4), pp. 421-434, DOI: 10.1080/01425690902954604

Ingram, N. (2018) *Working-Class Boys and Educational Success: Teenage Identities, Masculinities and Urban Schooling.* London: Palgrave macmillan.

James, D. (2018) 'Conclusion: social class, participation, and the marketised university', in Waller, R., Ingram, N. & Ward, M.R.M. (eds.) *Higher Education and social inequalities.* London: Routledge.

Johnson, D. (2014) 'Figuring identity: Media licensing and the racialization of LEGO bodies', *International Journal of Cultural Studies,* 17(4), pp. 307-325, DOI: 10.1177/1367877913496211

Johnson, J. (2016) *Letter of guidance from the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Minister of State for Universities and Science to the Director of Fair Access.* Available at: https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/11-02-2016-OFFA-Guidance.pdf (Accessed: 3 March 2018).

Jones, H. (2015) *Negotiating Cohesion, Inequality and Change.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Jones, I. (2014) 'Narratives of Widening Participation: questions and dilemmas in interviewing policy actors', *Researching Higher Education: Investigating Inequalities*, Institute of Education, London, 21st May 2014.

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

Jones, R. and Thomas, L. (2005) 'The 2003 UK Government Higher Education White Paper: a critical assessment of its implications for the access and widening participation agenda', *Journal of Education Policy,* 20(5), pp. 615-630, DOI: 10.1080/02680930500222477

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2015) *Free school meal status and educational attainment at age 16*. Available at: https://www.jrf.org.uk/mpse-2015/free-school-meal-status-and-educational-attainment-age-16 (Accessed: 13 July 2018).

Kaletsky, A. (2003) 'Off-Toff will cane pupils from good state schools', *The Times*, 25 September 2003.

Kara, H. (2015) *Creative Research Methods in the Social Sciences.* Bristol: Policy press.

Kearney, K. S. and Hyle, A. E. (2004) 'Drawing out emotions: the use of participant-produced drawings in qualitative inquiry', *Qualitative Research,* 4(3), pp. 361-382, DOI: 10.1177/1468794104047234

Kennedy, H. (1997) *Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education*, Coventry.

Khattab, N. (2015) 'Students' aspirations, expectations and school achievement: what really matters?', *British Educational Research Journal,* 41(5), pp. 731-748, DOI: 10.1002/berj.3171

Lareau, A. (2011) *Unequal Childhoods.* 2nd edn. Berkeley: University of California Press.

LEGO (2018) *Why some minifigures are different colours.* Available at: https://www.lego.com/en-us/service/help/bricks-building/brick-facts/why-some-minifigures-are-different-colors-408100000007856 (Accessed: 18 June 2018).

Leibowitz, B. and Bozalek, V. (2014) 'Access to higher education in South Africa', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning,* 16(1), pp. 91-109, DOI: 10.5456/WPLL.16.1.91

Lisiak, A., Krzyżowski, L., Loughran, T. and Mannay, D. 2018. Emotion and the researcher: Sites, subjectivities and relationships. Emerald Bingley.

Littler, J. (2018) *Against Meritocracy: culture, power and myths of mobility.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Lorde, A. (2018) *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. Penguin Modern* London: Penguin Books.

Loveday, V. (2014) 'Working-class participation, middle-class aspiration? Value, upward mobility and symbolic indebtedness in higher education', *The Sociological Review*, pp. n/a-n/a, DOI: 10.1111/1467-954X.12167

Lukes, S. (1974) *Power: A radical view.* London: Macmillan.

Macdonald, R. and Marsh, J. (2005) *Disconnected youth? growing up in Britain's poor neighbourhoods.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Maguire, M., Braun, A. and Ball, S. (2014) ''Where you stand depends on where you sit': the social construction of policy enactments in the (English) secondary school', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, pp. 1-15, DOI: 10.1080/01596306.2014.977022

Mahony, P. and Weiner, G. (2017) 'Neo-liberalism and the state of higher education in the UK', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, pp. 1-13, DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2017.1378314

Mannay, D. (2010) 'Making the familiar strange: can visual research methods render the familiar setting more perceptible?', *Qualitative Research,* 10(1), pp. 91-111, DOI: 10.1177/1468794109348684

Mannay, D. (2016) *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Marginson, S. (2011) 'Higher Education and Public Good', *Higher Education Quarterly,* 65(4), pp. 411-433, DOI: doi:10.1111/j.1468-2273.2011.00496.x

Mason, J. (2018) *Qualitative Researching.* 3rd edn. London: Sage.

May, T. (2018) *The right education for everyone.* London.

McCaig, C. (2015a) 'English higher education : the historical and political context for marketisation, differentiation and equity', *BERA Annual conference 2015*, Belfast, 15-17 September 2015.

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

McCaig, C. (2018) *The marketisation of english higher education: A policy analysis of a risk-based system.* Bingley: Emerald publishing.

McCaig, C. and Adnett, N. (2009) 'English Universities, additional fee income and Access Agreements: Their impact on Widening Participation and fair access', *British Journal of Educational Studies,* 57(1), pp. 18-36, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8527.2009.00428.x

McCaig, C., Stevens, A. and Bowers-Brown, T. (2006) *Does Aimhigher work? Evidence from the national evaluation*, Sheffield: Centre for Research and Evaluation. Available at: http://shura.shu.ac.uk/2382/1/Does_Aimhigher_work_CM_AS_TB_2007.pdf (Accessed: 27 December 2018).

McCaig, C. and Taylor, C. (2017) 'The strange death of number controls in England: paradoxical adventures in higher education market making', *Studies in Higher Education,* 42(9), pp. 1641-1654, DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2015.1113952

McCusker, S. (2014) 'Lego® Serious PlayTM: Thinking about teaching and learning', *International Journal of Knowledge, Innovation and Entrepreneurship,* 2(1), pp. 27-37

McDonnell, J. (2010) *Don't ever forget this day. It is the day education became no longer a right but a commodity to be bought and sold.*: Twitter. Available at: https://twitter.com/johnmcdonnellMP/status/12931553906655232 (Accessed: 17 November 2018).

Mendick, H., Allen, K., Harvey, L. and Ahmed, A. (2018) *Celebrity, aspiration and contemporary youth.* London: Bloomsbury.

Mercieca, M. (2017) 'We must accept that university education isn't for everyone', *The Times*, 18 April 2017. Available at: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/we-must-accept-that-university-education-isn-t-for-everyone-8nw5bk3cl (Accessed: 1 October 2018).

Midgley, R. (2015) 'General election: Nick Clegg heckled on campaign trail', *The Telegraph*, 5 April 2015. Available at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/general-election-2015/11517995/General-election-Nick-Clegg-heckled-on-campaign-trail.html (Accessed: 15 November 2018).

Milburn, A. (2009) *Unleashing aspiration: The final report of the panel on fair access to the professions*, London The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions. Available at: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http:/www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/227102/fair-access.pdf (Accessed: 3 March 2018).

Mills, C. W. (1970) *The Sociological Imagination.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Millward, C. (2018) *Matching ambition with outcomes for fair access and participation.* London: WonkHE. Available at: https://wonkhe.com/blogs/matching-

ambition-with-outcomes-for-fair-access-and-participation/ (Accessed: 19 October 2018).

Morgan-Klein, B. and Murphy, M. (2014) 'Access and Recruitment: Institutional policy in widening participation', in Trowler, P. (ed.) *higher education policy and institutional change*. Marston gate: Amazon.co.uk ltd.

Morris, M., Rutt, S. and Yeshanew, T. (2005) *Evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Pupil Outcomes One Year on*. Available at: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130323033617/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RR649.pdf (Accessed: 7 July 2018).

Naidoo, R. (2004) 'Fields and institutional strategy: Bourdieu on the relationship between higher education, inequality and society', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(4), pp. 457-471, DOI: 10.1080/0142569042000236952

National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education (1997) *Higher education in the learning society*: National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education. Available at: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/ (Accessed: 28 April 2018).

Neil Harrison, Katy Vigurs, Julian Crockford, Colin McCaig, Ruth Squire and Clark, L. (2018) *Understanding the evaluation of access and participation outreach interventions for under 16 year olds*. Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/a8ad5c94-7a33-4b53-8f09-824d0705f073/ofs2018_apevaluation.pdf (Accessed: 16 December 2018).

OFFA (2005) *2004-05 Annual Report and Accounts*, Bristol: OFFA. Available at: https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2006/07/Annual%20Rpt%20and%20Accounts%202004-05.pdf (Accessed: 18 May 2018).

OFFA (2014) *Access agreements for 2015-6: key statistics and analysis*, Bristol: Office for Fair Access (Accessed: 17 December 2015).

OFFA (2015a) *Access agreements for 2016-17: key statistics and analysis*. Available at: https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Access-agreements-for-2016-17-key-statistics-and-analysis.pdf (Accessed: 28 December 2017).

OFFA (2015b) *How to produce an access agreement for 2016-17*. Available at: https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/How-to-produce-an-access-agreement-for-2016-17-PDF1.pdf (Accessed: 28 December 2017).

OFFA (2017a) *Fair access to higher education in England: key facts and biggest issues*. Available at: https://sway.com/HbhYEOFcP78ewBlL?ref=Twitter&loc=play (Accessed: 1 October 2017).

OFFA (2017b) *Quick facts*. Available at: https://www.offa.org.uk/press/quick-facts/ (Accessed: 12 March 2018).

OFFA (2018) *Topic briefing: White British students from low socio-economic status groups*. Available at: https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-white-british-students/ (Accessed: 31 March 2018).

OFFA (n.d) *History*. Available at: https://www.offa.org.uk/about/background/ (Accessed: 28 December 2017).

OFFA (n.d.-a) *Glossary*. Available at: https://www.offa.org.uk/glossary/ (Accessed: 13 October 2016).

OFFA (n.d.-b) *Target groups - OFFA*. Available at:
https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/target-groups/ (Accessed: 31 November 2017).

Office for National Statistics (2017) *Statistical bulletin: Regional labour market statistics in the UK: September 2017*. Available at:
https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/regionallabourmarket/september2017 (Accessed: 11 October 2017).

Office for Students (2018) *A new approach to regulating access and participation in English higher education: Consultation* Available at:
https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/b6e62c0c-e056-40c3-a2bd-0a5a25678bf2/ofs2018_33.pdf (Accessed: 19 October 2018).

Osler, A. (2013) 'Education Policy, Human Rights, Citizenship and Cohesion', in Brooks, R., McCormack, M. & Bhopal, K. (eds.) *Contemporary Debates in the Sociology of Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ozga, J. (2000) *Policy research in educational settings. doing qualitative research in educational settings* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Parker, S., Naylor, P. and Warmington, P. (2005) 'Widening participation in higher education: What can we learn from the ideologies and practices of committed practitioners', *Journal of Access Policy and Practice,* 2(2), pp. 140-160

Peabody, M. A. and Noyes, S. (2017) 'Reflective boot camp: adapting LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® in higher education', *Reflective Practice,* 18(2), pp. 232-243, DOI: 10.1080/14623943.2016.1268117

Phillips, A. (2004) 'Defending Equality of Outcome', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 12(1), pp. 1-19, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9760.2004.00188.x

Pitman, T., Koshy, P. and Phillimore, J. (2015) 'Does accelerating access to higher education lower its quality? The Australian experience', *Higher Education Research & Development,* 34(3), pp. 609-623, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2014.973385

Platt, L. and Parsons, S. (2017) *The university and occupational aspirations of UK teenagers: how do they vary by gender?* , London: Institute of Education UCL. Available at: http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/shared/get-file.ashx?itemtype=document&id=3358 (Accessed: 2 March 2018).

Polesel, J., Leahy, M. and Gillis, S. (2017) 'Educational inequality and transitions to university in Australia: aspirations, agency and constraints', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, pp. 1-18, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2017.1409101

Potter, S. (2006) *Doing Postgraduate Research.* 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Prosser, J. and Loxley, A. (2008) *Introducing visual methods*, Southampton: National Centre for Research Methods Available at:
http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/420/1/MethodsReviewPaperNCRM-010.pdf (Accessed: 3 December 2018).

Puehretmayer, H. 'Critical realism, cultural studies and Althusser on ideology'. *IARC Conference, Roskilde, Denmark.*

Purcell, K., Elias, P., Atfield, G., Behle, H., Ellison, R. and Luchinskaya, D. (2013) *Transitions into employment, further study and other outcomes*. Available at:
https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/futuretrack/stage_4_report_final_30_10_2013.pdf (Accessed: 11 February 2018).

Pyke, N. (2003) 'Students rally over tuition fee increases', *The Guardian*, 27 October 2003. Available at:

https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/oct/27/uk.studentpolitics (Accessed: 11 November 2018).

Rainford, J. (2015) 'Who has the potential to benefit from Higher Education', *14th Annual School of Education Research Conference*. Available at: http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/2133/1/2015_final_proceedings.pdf#page=99 (Accessed: 28 November 2015).

Rainford, J. (2016) 'Targeting of widening participation measures by elite institutions: widening access or simply aiding recruitment?', *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, pp. 1-6, DOI: 10.1080/13603108.2016.1148645

Rainford, J. (2018a) 'Building ladders, breaking down boundaries', *Using Creative and Visual Methods in Comparative Research*, University of Surrey, 15 June 2018.

Rainford, J. (2018b) 'Equal practices? Findings from a comparative study of widening participation practices in pre- and post-92 institutions', *Critical perspectives on transitions into, through and beyond Higher Education*, University of Sussex, 15 October 2018.

Rainford, J. (2018c) 'Legitimating and Justifying what is done in Access Agreements: The Role of Evidence-based Practice throughout the Whole Student Lifecycle', in Atherton, G., Kendall, S., Naughton, M. & Webster, M. (eds.) *Widening Access throughout the Student Lifecycle*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 184-196.

Realising Opportunities (n.d.) *Prospective students - Realising opporunties*. Available at: http://www.realisingopportunities.ac.uk/prospective (Accessed: 4 July 2018).

Reay, D. (1998) ''Always knowing' and 'never being sure': familial and institutional habituses and higher education choice', *Journal of Education Policy,* 13(4), pp. 519-529, DOI: 10.1080/0268093980130405

Reay, D. (2004) ''It's all becoming a habitus': beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research', *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 25(4), pp. 431-444, DOI: 10.1080/0142569042000236934

Reay, D. (2012) 'What would a socially just education system look like?: saving the minnows from the pike', *Journal of Education Policy,* 27(5), pp. 587-599, DOI: 10.1080/02680939.2012.710015

Reay, D. (2017) *Miseducation.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2010) ''Fitting in' or 'standing out': Working-class students in UK higher education', *British Educational Research Journal,* 36(1), pp. 107-124, DOI: 10.1080/01411920902878925

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and James, D. (2013) *White Middle-Class Identities and Urban Schooling.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Reay, D., David, M. E. and Ball, S. J. (2005) *Degrees of choice: Class, race, gender and higher education.* London: Trentham Books.

Robertson, D. and Hillman, J. (1997) *Report 6: Widening participation in higher education for students from lower socio-economic groups and students with disabilities*: National committee of inquiry into Higher Education.

Russell Group (2017) *Informed Choices: A Russell Group guide to making decisions about post-16 education* Cambridge: The Russell Group of Universities. Available at: https://russellgroup.ac.uk/media/5686/informed-choices-2018-1-6th-edition-final.pdf (Accessed: 26 November 2018).

Sammons, P., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Siraj, I., Taggart, B., Toth, K. and Smees, R. (2014) *Influences on students' GCSE attainment and progress at age 16 Effective Pre-School, Primary & Secondary Education Project (EPPSE) Research Report*, London: Department of Education.

Saunders, C. (2017) *Attitudes to education and children's services: the British Social Attitudes survey 2016 Research brief*, London: Department for Education. Available at: http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/30579/1/Attitudes_to_education_and_children_s_services_-_BSA_2016_FINAL.pdf (Accessed: 1 October 2018).

Savage, M. (2015) *Social class in the 21st century.* Penguin UK.

Sayer, A. (2010) 'Reflexivity and the habitus', in Archer, M.S. (ed.) *Conversations about reflexivity.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Sayer, A. (2011) *Why things matter to people.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schubring, A., Mayer, J. and Thiel, A. (2019) 'Drawing Careers: The Value of a Biographical Mapping Method in Qualitative Health Research', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 18, pp. 1609406918809303, DOI: 10.1177/1609406918809303

Slack, K. (2003) 'Whose aspirations are they anyway?', *International Journal of Inclusive Education,* 7(4), pp. 325-335, DOI: 10.1080/1360311032000110016

Slack, K. (2009) *Exploring influences on post-16 choices and destinations of young people in a disadvantaged urban area: a life history approach.* PhD thesis, Staffordshire University [Online] Available at: http://www.staffs.ac.uk/assets/kim_slack_thesis_2009_tcm44-39101.pdf (Accessed: 1 November 2014).

Smith, E. (2011) 'Women into science and engineering? Gendered participation in higher education STEM subjects', *British Educational Research Journal,* 37(6), pp. 993-1014, DOI: 10.1080/01411926.2010.515019

Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013) *Higher education: Fair Access Challenge,* London: Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commision. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/206994/FINAL_Higher_Education_-_The_Fair_Access_Challenge.pdf (Accessed: 2 March 2018).

Somerset County Herald (1963) 'Mr. Leathem's doubts over Robbins Report', *Somerset County Herald* (2 November 1963 edn), p. 10.

Spohrer, K. (2011) 'Deconstructing 'Aspiration': UK Policy Debates and European Policy Trends', *European Educational Research Journal,* 10(1), pp. 53-63, DOI: 10.2304/eerj.2011.10.1.53

Spohrer, K. (2016) 'Negotiating and contesting 'success': discourses of aspiration in a UK secondary school', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education,* 37(3), pp. 411-425, DOI: 10.1080/01596306.2015.1044423

St. Clair, R., Kintrea, K. and Houston, M. (2013) 'Silver bullet or red herring?: new evidence on the place of aspirations in education', *Oxford Review of Education,* 39(6), pp. 719-738

Stahl, G. (2016) 'White working-class male narratives of 'loyalty to self' in discourses of aspiration', *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 37(5), pp. 663-683, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2014.982859

Steel, D. (2015) 'Six ways Nick Clegg steered the Liberal Democrats to disaster', *The Guardian.* Available at:

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/11/nick-clegg-liberal-democrats-disaster-coalition (Accessed: 15 November 2018).

Stevens, R. (2004) *University to uni.* London: Politico's Publishing.

Stevenson, J., Clegg, S. and Lefever, R. (2010) 'The discourse of widening participation and its critics: an institutional case study', *London Review of Education,* 8(2), pp. 105-115, DOI: 10.1080/14748460.2010.487328

Stevenson, J., McCaig, C. and Madriaga, M. (2017) *Evaluation of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCOs)* Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University. Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2017/Evaluation,of,the,NNCOs/2017_nncoeval.pdf (Accessed: 10 September 2018).

Stevenson, J., O'Mahony, J., Khan, O., Ghaffar, F. and Stiell, B. (2019) *Understanding and overcoming the challenges of targeting students from under-represented and disadvantaged ethnic backgrounds.* Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/d21cb263-526d-401c-bc74-299c748e9ecd/ethnicity-targeting-research-report.pdf (Accessed: 11 February 2019).

Stevenson, J., Tooth, R., Bennett, A. and Burke, P. J. (2018a) 'Writing together: practitioners, academics and policy makers', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning,* 20(3), pp. 7-13, DOI: 10.5456/WPLL.20.3

Stevenson, J., Whelan, P. and Burke, P. J. (2018b) 'Marketisation, Institutional Stratification and Differentiated Pedagogic Approaches', in Bowl, M., McCaig, C. & Hughes, J. (eds.) *Equality and Differentiation in Marketised Higher Education*: Springer, pp. 149-169.

Stich, A. E. and Reeves, T. D. (2016) 'Class, capital, and competing academic discourse: a critical analysis of the mission/s of American higher education', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education,* 37(1), pp. 116-132, DOI: 10.1080/01596306.2014.938221

Stuart, M. (2012) *Social mobility and Higher Education.* London: Institute of Education Press.

Supovitz, J. A. and Weinbaum, E. H. (2008) *The implementation gap: understanding reform in high schools.* New York: Teachers college press.

Sweetman, P. (2003) 'Twenty-First Century Dis-Ease? Habitual Reflexivity Or the Reflexive Habitus', *The Sociological Review,* 51(4), pp. 528-549, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-954X.2003.00434.x

Taylor, G., Mellor, L. and Walton, L. (2009) 'The politics of widening participation: A review of the literature', *Active Learning, active citizenship* Available: Sheffield Hallam University Available at: https://extra.shu.ac.uk/alac/text/Article%20The%20Politics%20of%20Widening%20Participation.doc (Accessed: 20 December 2018).

Taylor, Y. (2008) 'Good students, bad pupils: constructions of "aspiration", "disadvantage" and social class in undergraduate-led widening participation work', *Educational Review,* 60(2), pp. 155-168, DOI: 10.1080/00131910801934029

Temkin, L. (2000) 'Equality, Priority, and the Levelling-Down Objection', in Clayton, M. & Williams, A. (eds.) *The Ideal of Equality*: Macmillan, pp. 126-61.

The Committee on Higher Education (1963) *Higher education report of the committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the chairmanship of Lord Robbins,*

London. Available at:
http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/robbins/robbins1963.h
tml (Accessed: 10 April 2015).

Thomas, L. (2001) 'Power, assumptions and prescriptions: a critique of widening
participation policy-making', *Higher Education Policy,* 14(4), pp. 361-376,
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/S0952-8733(01)00026-5

Thompson, D. W. (2017) 'Widening participation research and practice in the
United Kingdom on the twentieth anniversary of the Dearing report,
reflections on a changing landscape', *Educational Review*, pp. 1-16, DOI:
10.1080/00131911.2017.1380606

Times Higher Education (2016) 'Elite universities 'going backwards' on widening
access'. Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/elite-
universities-going-backwards-widening-access (Accessed: 18 February
2016).

Timothy, N. (2017) 'Universities are not working, and we're all paying;
Higher education has become an unsustainable Ponzi scheme in need of a radical
shake-up', *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 August 2017.

Travers, M.-C. (2017) *White Working-class boys: Teachers matter.* London: UCL
Institute of Education Press.

Trowler, P. (ed.) (2014) *Higher Education Policy and Institutional Change.* Great
Britain: Amazon.co.uk.

UCAS (2015) *End of cycle report 2015*: UCAS. Available at:
https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/eoc-report-2015.pdf (Accessed:
27th December 2015).

UCAS (2017) *End of cycle report 2017*, Cheltenham: UCAS. Available at:
https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-
releases/ucas-undergraduate-analysis-reports/2017-end-cycle-report
(Accessed: 12 July 2018).

UNESCO (2017) *Policy paper 30: Six ways to ensure higher education leaves no one
behind*. Paris: UNESCO. Available at:
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002478/247862E.pdf (Accessed:
3 September 2018).

UniversitiesUK (2018) *Growth and choice in university admissions* London:
UniversitiesUK. Available at: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-
and-analysis/reports/Documents/2018/growth-and-choice-in-university-
admissions-final.pdf (Accessed: 7 June 2018).

Vasagar, J. (2011) 'Andy Burnham calls for Ucas-style applications system for
apprenticeships', *The Guardian*, 28 September. Available at:
https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/sep/28/andy-burnham-
ucas-apprenticeships (Accessed: 1 December 2018).

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

Walby, S., Armstrong, J. and Strid, S. (2012) 'Intersectionality: Multiple Inequalities
in Social Theory', *Sociology*, 46(2), pp. 224-240, DOI:
10.1177/0038038511416164

Walker, I. and Zhu, Y. (2013) *The Impact of University Degrees on the Lifecycle of
Earnings: some further analysis* London: Department for Business, Innovation
and Skills Available at:
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment

_data/file/229498/bis-13-899-the-impact-of-university-degrees-on-the-lifecycle-of-earnings-further-analysis.pdf (Accessed: 3 March 2018).

Wall, K. (2008) 'Understanding metacognition through the use of pupil views templates: Pupil views of Learning to Learn', *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 3(1), pp. 23-33, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2008.03.004

Warikoo, N. K. (2016) *The diversity bargain: and other dilemmas of race, admissions and meritocracy at elite universities.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Warikoo, N. K. and Fuhr, C. (2014) 'Legitimating status: perceptions of meritocracy and inequality among undergraduates at an elite British university', *British Educational Research Journal,* 40(4), pp. 699-717, DOI: 10.1002/berj.3108

Warnock, M. (1996) 'What a waste', *Times Higher Education Supplement*(18 October 1996). Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/what-a-waste/90969.article (Accessed: 23 October 2018).

Whitty, G. (1997) 'Chapter 1: Creating Quasi-Markets in Education: A Review of Recent Research on Parental Choice and School Autonomy in Three Countries', *Review of Research in Education,* 22(1), pp. 3-47, DOI: 10.3102/0091732X022001003

Whitty, G., Hayton, A. and Tang, S. (2015) 'Who you know, what you know and knowing the ropes: a review of evidence about access to higher education institutions in England', *Review of Education,* 3(1), pp. 27-67, DOI: 10.1002/rev3.3038

Wilkins, A. and Burke, P. J. (2013) 'Widening participation in higher education: the role of professional and social class identities and commitments', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, pp. 1-19, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2013.829742

Wintour, P. (2010) 'David Cameron presents himself as leader of 'aspiration nation'', *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/oct/10/david-cameron-leader-aspiration-nation (Accessed: 28 April 2018).

Wodak, R. and Meyer, M. (2016) 'Critical discourse studies: history, agenda, theory and methodology', in Wodak, R. & Meyer, M. (eds.) *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*. London: Sage, pp. 1-23.

Young, I. M. (1990) *Justice and the politics of difference.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Young, M. (1958) *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033: An essay on education and society.* London: Thames and Hudson.

Zizek, S. (2009) *First as tragedy, then as farce.* London: Verso.

Appendix 1: Participant information sheet

What's the project about?

Widening participation work has been a mainstay of Higher Education for nearly 20 years now and over this time practices have evolved differently across different institutions. As part of my PhD research, I am exploring the differences in widening participation and policy across a range of universities. This part of my research is seeking to understand the experiences of practitioners involved in delivering widening participation work.

Why have you been chosen?

The higher education sector is varied and through this project I hope to get a broad understanding of practices from a range of institutions and practitioners. As such, I will be involving up to 20 individuals from 4 different institutions and your institution has been chosen as one where I wish to gain an understanding of you and your colleagues' experiences in this area.

Risks and Benefits

This research is unlikely to pose any personal risks to you, the issues being discussed relate to the work you do and your understandings of widening participation. Any comments will be anonymised and will not be linked to your institution. If you decide to go ahead, you will be asked to sign a consent form to make sure that you fully understand what you are agreeing to. The research has been approved by the Faculty Ethics Committee at Staffordshire University. There are no personal benefits from taking part However, the outcomes of this research will potentially help to deepen understandings of widening participation practices and therefore will benefit the sector in terms of developing the effectiveness of future widening participation work.

What would taking part in the project involve?

Taking part will involve participating in an interview which will consist of a number of questions and some short tasks. This would be a face to face interview of approximately one to two hours and would take place at a time and location of your choice. The interview would focus on how you came to work in widening participation and the work you do in this area.

What will happen to the information you provide?

All the information you provide with be completely confidential and will only be accessed by myself and my supervisors. None of the information you provide will be passed on to

anyone outside the research team or attributed to you directly. Where quotes are used in research, they will not be identifiable to yourself on the institution.

Will I be identified in the report?

All the comments you make will be anonymised and will not be linked to any named institution within the final thesis or any publications and it is therefore very unlikely you could be identified in the research.

Who are the project team?

The research is being conducted by Jon Rainford, a PhD researcher based at Staffordshire University who is supervised by Dr Kim Slack based at Staffordshire University and Dr Cheryl Bolton based at Liverpool John Moores University. Jon also has worked within a widening participation context since January 2014.

If you have any questions about the project please contact:

Jon Rainford jon.rainford@research.staffs.ac.uk alternatively you may contact my principal supervisor Dr Kim Slack k.b.slack@staffs.ac.uk

Appendix 2: Consent form and demographic sheet

CONSENT FORM

NAME	DATE

Has the purpose of the research project been explained to you? **Yes/No**

Have you been given an information sheet about the research? **Yes/No**

Have you been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project? **Yes/No**

Do you understand that you are free to leave at any time without giving an explanation? **Yes/No**

Do you understand that you have the right to be debriefed about the project? **Yes/No**

Do you understand that you have the right to ask for the recorder to be switched off at any point, and that you do not have to answer anything you do not wish to? **Yes/No**

Sessions will be recorded for the purposes of the researcher alone. Access to recordings will be limited to the researcher and two research supervisors and will not be included in full in the final written record of the research. Quotations may be used in presentations or related documentation, but participants in the research will not be identified by name at any time.

I agree to take part in this research project.

Signed …………………………………………………………… Date…………………………………

Signature of researcher ……………………………………………

Gender

☐ Male   ☐ Female   ☐ Other   ☐ Prefer not to say

Age

☐ 18-24   ☐ 25-29   ☐ 30-34   ☐ 35-39   ☐ 40-44   ☐ 45-49

☐ 50-54   ☐ 55-59   ☐ 60-64   ☐ 65-69   ☐ 70-74   ☐ Prefer not to say

Ethnicity

☐ White

☐ White - Scottish

☐ Irish Traveller

☐ Gypsy or Traveller

☐ Other White background

☐ Black or Black British - Caribbean

☐ Black or Black British - African

☐ Other Black background

☐ Asian or Asian British - Indian

☐ Asian or Asian British - Pakistani

☐ Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi

☐ Chinese

☐ Other Asian background

☐ Mixed - White and Black Caribbean

☐ Mixed - White and Black African

☐ Mixed - White and Asian

☐ Other mixed background

☐ Arab

☐ Other ethnic background

☐ Not known

☐ Prefer not to say

Disability

☐ No known disability

☐ Blind/partially sighted

☐ Deaf/hearing impairment

☐ Wheelchair user/mobility difficulties

☐ Personal care support

☐ Mental health difficulties

☐ An unseen disability, e.g. diabetes, epilepsy, asthma

☐ Two or more impairments and/or disabling medical conditions

☐ Autistic Spectrum Disorder

☐ A specific learning difficulty e.g. dyslexia

☐ A specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or AD(H)D

☐ A social/communication impairment such as Asperger's syndrome/other autistic spectrum disorder

☐ A long-standing illness or health condition such as cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease, or epilepsy

☐ A mental health condition, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder

☐ A physical impairment or mobility issues, such as difficulty using arms or using a wheelchair or crutches

☐ Deaf or a serious hearing impairment

☐ Blind or a serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses

☐ A disability, impairment or medical condition that is not listed above

☐ Prefer not to say

☐ Not known

Appendix 3: Pilot interview schedule

1 – Tell me about how you came to work in widening participation

    a- Have you worked within other institutions before this one?
    b- If so, do you feel they had a similar ethos to WP?

2- How do you think your background has impacted upon your approach to WP?

3- Task 1 – Typical Student (See separate sheet – possibly to complete before interview?)

    a- Tell me about what makes a potential target student for your institution
    b- How do you identify these students?
    c- What happens if a school wants to bring students who may not fit this notion of a typical student?

4- Task 2 – Aspirations ladders (task during interview – 10 LEGO minifigures representing different jobs and a LEGO ladder to place them on. Participant is asked to place them in order of which jobs they consider to be the best.

Jobs: Builder, Self-employed decorator, Lawyer, Computer programmer, Scientist, Investment Banker, Teacher, Artist, Footballer and Doctor

    a- Interrogate the choices
    b- Does this mean in some ways you feel there are good and bad careers?

5- Can you tell me a bit about what the term Raising Aspirations mean to you

6- Thinking about working beyond your institution, who else do you personally work collaboratively with?

7- Thinking about the work you do, what does your role typically involve?

8- What work are you involved with once students are studying at your institution?

9- In what ways to you keep up to date with policy and changes in widening participation?

10- Do you feel there are any tensions between what you are required to do and what you feel is right?

Appendix 4: Interview schedule

- Welcome them, explain the project in summary and re-iterate informed consent process. Ask if they have any questions and ensure consent form completed and recorder switched on.

Part 1 - Biographical element

1 – Can you tell me a bit about where you come from, your family and your educational background?

2- Tell me about how you came to work in widening participation

- Have you worked within other institutions before this one?

- If so, do you feel they had a similar ethos to WP?

- How do you think your background has impacted upon your approach to WP?

Part 2 - Typical Students

3- Typical Student task (See separate sheet)

- Tell me about what makes a potential target student for your institution

- How do you identify these students or schools as targets?

- What happens if a school wants to bring students who may not fit this notion of a typical student?

Part 3– Ladders of Aspiration

4- Task 2 – Aspirations ladders task

- Interrogate the choices

- Does this mean in some ways you feel there are good and bad careers?

-

5- Can you tell me a bit about what the term Raising Aspirations mean to you

Part 4–Exploring the policy-practice gap

6- Thinking about working beyond your institution, with whom else do you personally work collaboratively?

7- Thinking about the work you do, what does your role typically involve?

- Do you evaluate upon this work? Can you explain how?

- Do you reflect upon this work?

8- What work are you involved with once students are studying at your institution?

9- In what ways do you keep up to date with policy and changes in widening participation?

9a – Do you attend any events outside the institution, for example conferences? How many per year?

10- Do you feel there are any tensions between what you are required to do and what you feel is right?

11- Is there anything you want to add or cover that we haven't done already?

Appendix 5: Typical student worksheet

What are they studying now and where?

What will they study at University?

What sort of things will they do outside the classroom?

What might they do after graduation?

Who is your student and where are they from?

Tell me about what makes them a widening participation student

Appendix 6: Additional participant recruitment email

Dear Colleagues,

As part of my PhD research, I am exploring the differences in widening participation practices and policy across different types of universities in England.

I have already conducted a number of interviews over the last year and am looking to increase the diversity of institutions within which practitioners are located. I am therefore interested specifically in speaking to anyone who is involved in the delivery of widening participation work in a post 1992 university.

Taking part will involve participating in an interview which will consist of a number of questions and some short tasks. This would be a face to face interview of approximately one to two hours and would take place at a time and location of your choice (ideally between now and April 2018). The interview would focus on how you came to work in widening participation and the work you do in this area. All interview data will be anonymised.

If anyone is interested or would like more information, please email jon.rainford@research.staffs.ac.uk

Appendix 7: Participant information

Research Site	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	First in family	Parental occupations	Ethnicity	Disability	time in post	Job Role	previous employment background
Pre-92-A	Beverley	F	35 - 39	Y	Not stated	Black or Black British- African	N	9 mths	manager	charity youth sector and careers guidance
	Samantha	F	25 - 29	N	Careers Advisor / Telephone Engineer	Black or Black British- Caribbean	N	2 yrs	Outreach & in reach BME	FE Teaching and Voluntary Sector
	Karen	F	25 - 29	N	Teachers	White	N	18 mths	Evaluation	Teaching Assistant
	Lucy	F	25 - 29	N	Teacher / Ind. Engineer	White	N	9 mths	in reach	Public affairs at pre92 uni
Pre-92-B	Andrea	F	40 - 44	Y	Not stated	White	N	15 yrs	Outreach Pre-16	Careers service at post92 uni
	Emily	F	30 - 34	Y	Teacher	White	N	6 yrs	Outreach Post-16	Exam Board / recruitment team
	Hannah	F	25 - 29	Y	Not stated	White	N	9 mths	Outreach Pre-16	PhD
	Sophie	F	25 - 29	Y	teaching assistant	White	N	4 yrs	Outreach post-16	marketing and recruitment officer
Post-92-A	Mel	F	25 - 29	Y	cleaner and bin man	White	N	2 yrs	Outreach pre-16	university careers service and pre92 WP
	David	M	45 - 49	N	Not stated	White	N	17 yrs	Manager pre and post entry	FE college + Marketing officer post92
	Rebecca	F	25 - 29	N	Doctor	white	N	1 mth	Outreach pre and post-16	paralegal / WP officer post92

	Rob	M	35-39	N	Teachers (with PhDs)	Other Asian Background	N	4 mths	Manager	WP and recruitment pre92
Additional Post-92 Participants	Katie	F	20-24	N	Teacher / Nursery Nurse	White	N	1 yr	Outreach pre-16	WP post-92
	Carol	F	30-34	Y	Investment Banker / Housewife	White	Y	1 yr	Outreach pre and post-16	WP cross sector
	Andrew	M	35-39	N	Professor	Other White	N	4 yrs	Manager and evaluation	Publishing
	Alice	f	25-29	N	Quantity surveyor / Optician	White	N		Outreach	WP Pre-92

Appendix 8: Coding scheme

origins	role	target	potential	ACTION	aspiration	interaction	limitations	issue	collaboration	methods
FE	IAG	limitations	qualifications	self doubt	hapiness	recruitment	resources	institutional differences	3rd sector	creativity
personal journey	inreach	disability	G&T	silent working	passion	teachers	beyond remit	assumptions	internal	excitement
academic	outreach	Looked after child	5 x A-C	clarification	success	PGCE	oversubscription	value of WP	HEI	analysed
parents	collaborative	Carers	eligiblity for entry	contradiction	job security	ambassadors	engagement	social capital	cultural sector	
geography	pre-16	First in family	intellegence	LEGO	respect	academic staff	time	proof	corporate	
class	post-16	WWCB	expectations	communicative	confidence	support	capacity	STEM	council	
career	delivery	geography	preconceptions	reflection	high asp.		policy	evidence		
WP jobs	evaluation	cthinicity		self talk	low asp.		school timetables	definitions		
parental expectation	network	state		other positioning	perceptions		institutional priorities	tensions		
First in Family	policy	teachers		personal focus	economic			is uni right		
Accidental WP	admin	data		self presentation	cultural			cynical compliance		
	events	G&T		moral	prestige			practice as resistance		
	time in role	C/D			raising aspiration			measures of success		
	governance	FSM			gender			attainment		
	website	post-16			stress			geographical		
	admissions	pre-16			skill			knowledge		
	management	school level			possiblity			who delivers		
	training	pragmatism			risk			quantity-quality		
		EAL			progression			complexity		
		BTEC			reality			Political		
		FE			job satisfaction			competition		
		Gender			HE			team		
		16-19 bursary			moral value			personal expereince		
		household income			confidence					
		intersectionality			entitlement					
					personal background					
					definitions					
					expectations					
					societal need					

Appendix 9: Map of themes
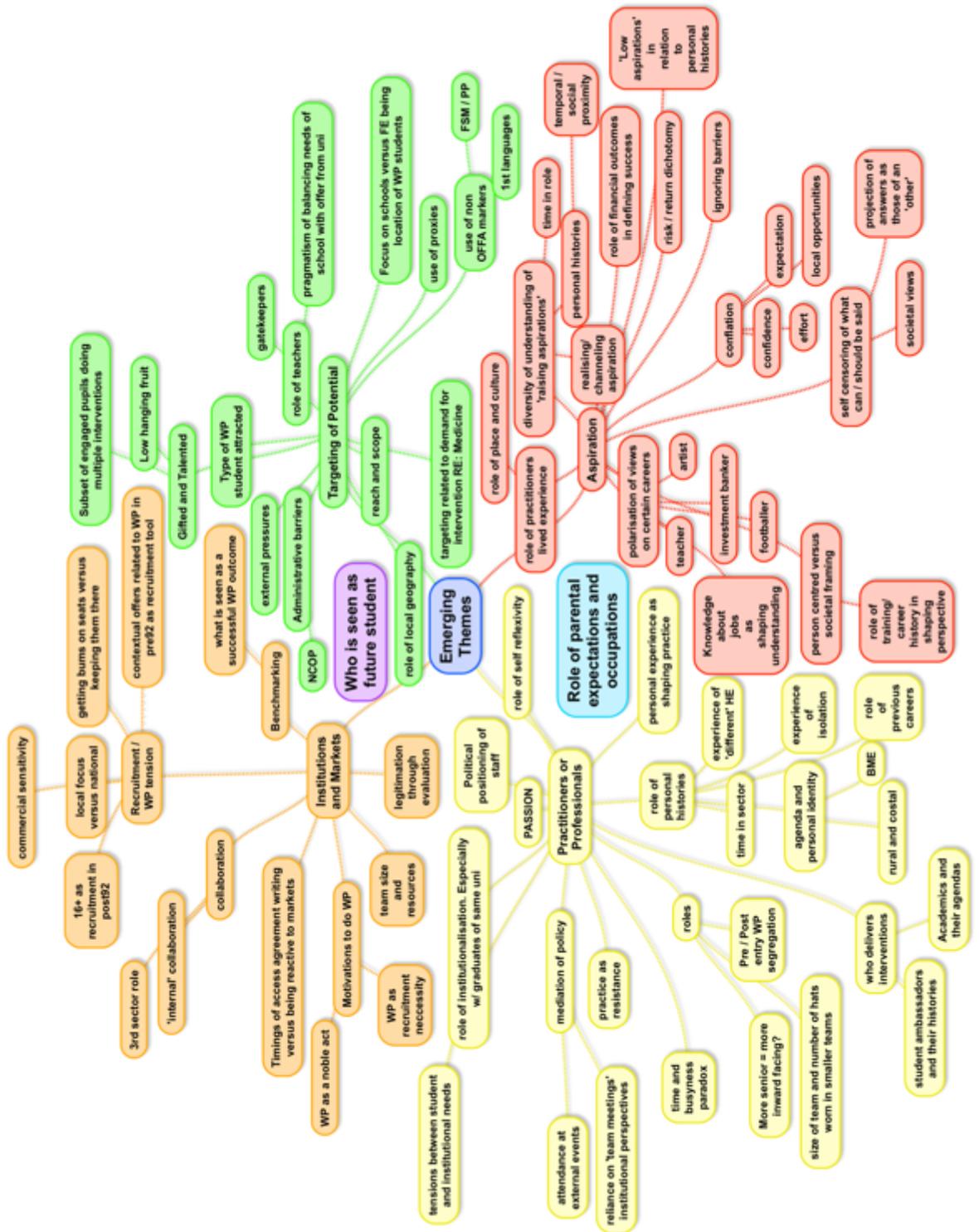
Appendix 10: Post-interview survey

Thank you for participating in my PhD research into widening participation practices. I have now completed all the interviews and am now in the process of writing up my thesis. If you could possibly spare a few minutes to answer a very brief survey about the interview, specifically the two creative tasks I would be very grateful.

Thank you once again for taking the time to participate and sharing your thoughts.

----

1) Thinking back to the interview, you were asked to complete a typical student task. Did you:
   talk about the answers / draw on the sheet / talk about your answers

2) Please comment why you chose this approach. If you chose not to draw, was there a specific reason?

3) The second task involved considering careers using LEGO. Did you enjoy this task?
   Yes / no / Don't know / Can't remember

4) Please briefly explain your answer:

5) Did the inclusion of creative tasks make the interview:
   More enjoyable / Less Enjoyable / No difference

6) How creative would you say you are? 0= not creative 10 = very creative

7) Do you normally enjoy creative tasks? Yes / No

8) Finally, please add any further comments about the interview experience:

Appendix 11: Related publications and presentations

Publications

Rainford, J. (2018) 'Legitimating and Justifying what is done in Access Agreements: The Role of Evidence-based Practice throughout the Whole Student Lifecycle'. In: Graeme Atherton, Steve Kendall, Michael Naughton, and Martin Webster (eds.), *Widening Access throughout the Student Lifecycle*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 184-196.

Rainford, J. (2016) 'Becoming a doctoral researcher in a digital world: Reflections on the role of Twitter for reflexivity and the internal conversation', E-Learning and Digital Media, 13(1-2), pp. 99-105, DOI: doi:10.1177/2042753016672380

Rainford, J. (2016) 'Making internal conversations public: reflexivity of the connected doctoral researcher and its transmission beyond the walls of the academy', Journal of Applied Social Theory, 1(1), pp. 44-60. Available at: http://socialtheoryapplied.com/journal/jast/article/view/14

Rainford, J. (2016) 'Targeting of widening participation measures by elite institutions: widening access or simply aiding recruitment?', Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education, pp. 1-6, DOI: 10.1080/13603108.2016.1148645

Rainford, J. (2015) 'Who has the potential to benefit from Higher Education', 14th Annual School of Education Research Conference. Available at: http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/2133/1/2015_final_proceedings.pdf#page=99

Conference Papers

Rainford, J. (2018) 'Equal practices? Findings from a comparative study of widening participation practices in pre- and post-92 institutions', Critical perspectives on transitions into, through and beyond Higher Education, University of Sussex, 15 October 2018.

Rainford, J. (2018) 'Challenges of Creative Research with Adults and the Role of Confidence in Creativity', International Sociology Association conference, Toronto, Canada, 17 July 2018

Rainford, J. (2018) 'Who You Are Matters: How Backgrounds of Widening Access Practitioners Shapes Practice', International Sociology Association conference, Toronto, Canada, 17 July 2018

Rainford, J. (2018) 'Practitioners care, but do institutions? The gap between policy and practice in widening participation', NEON Summer Symposium, University of Sussex, 21 Jun 2018

Rainford, J. (2018) 'Building ladders, breaking down boundaries, using creative methods in comparative research', University of Surrey, 15 Jun 2018

Rainford, J. (2018) 'Legitimating and Justifying what is done in Access Agreements: The Role of Evidence-based Practice throughout the Whole Student Lifecycle', NEON summit, 9 May 2018

Rainford, J. (2017) 'Widening access throughout the student lifecycle', BERA Conference, University of Sussex, 4 Sep 2017

Rainford, J. (2017) 'Using Creative Methods to Go beyond Common-Sense Understandings of 'Aspiration' and 'Potential' ', British Sociological Association conference, University of Manchester, 4 Apr 2017

Rainford, J. (2016) 'Visualising common-sense terms: going beyond the rhetoric of widening participation and aspiration', University of Birmingham doctoral conference, University of Birmingham, 26 Nov 2016

Rainford, J. (2016) 'How institutional doxa can shape choice within higher education', Eurostudents launch seminar, University of Surrey, 21 Sep 2016

Rainford, J. (2016) 'Making It Fit: Institutional Variations in Access and Success Policies', 3rd ISA forum of Sociology, Vienna, Austria, 13 Jul 2016

Rainford, J. (2016) 'Making internal conversations public: reflexivity of the connected doctoral researcher and its transmission beyond the walls of the academy', 3rd ISA forum of Sociology, Vienna, Austria, 11 Jul 2016

Rainford, J. (2016) 'Legitimating and Justifying what is done in Access Agreements: The Role of Evidence-based Practice throughout the Whole Student Lifecycle', NEON Summer Symposium, University of Leicester, 9 Jun 2016

Rainford, J. (2016) 'Variations on a theme: Institutional interpretations of what it means to widen access and success', Using research to inform higher education policy and practice SRHE / OFFA event, Bristol, 15 Apr 2016

Rainford, J (2016) 'The same but different: Institutional variations on widening participation policy', British Sociological Association Conference, Birmingham, 6 Apr 2016

Rainford, J. (2015) 'Equal practices? A comparative study of widening participation in pre and post 1992 higher education institutions [poster]', SRHE Newer Researchers Conference, Newport, 8 Dec 2015

Rainford, J. (2015) 'Who has the potential to benefit from Higher Education', 14th Annual School of Education Research Conference, University of Birmingham, 28 Nov 15

Rainford, J. (2015) 'Is the gap in widening participation practices narrowing? A comparison of the approaches in pre and post 1992 institutions', British Educational Research Association conference, Belfast, 15 Sep 2015

Rainford, J (2015) 'Perpetuating inequality: How conceptions of who is the right fit for an institution shape widening participation practices', European Sociological Association conference, Prague, 27 Aug 2015