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Editorial

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Golden Years

Welcome to the autumn 2018 issue of *Widening Participation & Lifelong Learning*, our fourth of the year. I was discussing future editions with Sattie our editorial assistant, and I was delighted to learn we already have sufficient articles to fill every issue in 2019. This is indicative, as I suggested in the editorial for our first issue of the year, that research in widening participation and lifelong learning is flourishing, and that there is a real appetite amongst colleagues around the world to share and disseminate findings in order to enhance higher education (HE) practice. So forgive me another David Bowie reference, but I suggest we may be entering a period of golden years of publishing in this area. I look forward to increasing numbers of articles in the journal, driving ever more theoretically credible analyses of institutional and cross-institutional studies which help us understand, and therefore enhance, access, participation, success and lifelong learning.

In England, the Office for Students has recently been consulting on ways to improve the evaluation of WP activities in institutional Access and Participation plans. This feels a timely reminder of the importance of scholarly approaches which will enable credible claims to be made about the value of interventions to student access and success. If a more evidence-informed understanding of the potential role of WP and lifelong learning in the HE zeitgeist is to emerge, researchers need to engage with some of the radical ideas emerging at the moment. One good example are the 13 proposals in the new book by Sperlinger et al (2018) challenging the UK HE system's unresponsiveness to the shape of individual lives, and the circumstances that may interrupt someone's education. This is exactly the kind of work we should be publishing and debating in *Widening Participation & Lifelong Learning*, and is represented across our articles in this issue.

Introducing this edition

I am very pleased to publish nine articles and a book review in this edition, representing a very wide swath of academic interest in widening participation and lifelong learning. Many authors pick up the challenge of explicitly engaging with methodological decisions, and thus reflecting on research

choices made in a way which is vital if WP research is to be taken more seriously across the sector.

The opening article by Thiele et al offers an admirably thorough exploration of the use of mixed methods to evaluate widening participation initiatives. Helpfully offering both guidance and a clear framework, the article takes the reader through the challenges and benefits of combining qualitative and quantitative methods within one research design. Such approaches could contribute to a more robust evidence base, and thus help institutions and policy makers better understand what works (and what doesn't) in widening participation, (and, crucially, why). In addition, a specific practical study is described, based on evaluation of a regional WP project funded through the National Collaborative Outreach (NCOP) programme, one of a series of regional partnerships between universities, colleges and schools aimed at improving pupil attainment and awareness of HE. This illustrates one approach (pragmatism) aimed at enhancing understanding of complementary findings derived from groups and individuals involved in multiple interventions. The expansion of such approaches should help colleagues develop the evidence to better understand how to sustain wider participation in higher education.

The second article, authored by Johnson, takes a more tightly focussed lens in seeking to analyse the experience of mature learners from disadvantaged backgrounds as they progress from a community-based Foundation programme to undergraduate study at a highly selective 'elite' Russell Group university. The rich qualitative data enables astute insights into learners' lives to be generated, with a crisp picture emerging of class-related barriers around perceived differences between 'us and them'. This article exposes the challenge of universities engaging with so-called 'hard-to-reach' students, even when located in the same city. Descriptions of the utterly different worlds spanned by the students reminds us that university cultures can, very easily, amplify perceptions that higher education 'is not for the likes of me'. Johnson's research challenges that idea, identifying the need for universities to change significantly in order that participation (and subsequent success) can be widened in a meaningful way.

Third, an article by Sanders et al offers a timely contribution to a particularly contentious issue in England: that of policy-makers and government departments advocating for the use of randomised control trials (RCTs) in evaluations of WP activity. Those of us in England seeking to influence the work of the Office for Students (and before that, the Office for Fair Access) know that RCTs are considered by some policy makers as a 'gold standard' in evaluative research, but that the ethical issues in this space are not always fully considered. Sanders et al's description of a RCT evaluation contrasts with the mixed methods approach taken by Thiele et al, and particularly with the exploratory/narrative approach taken by Johnson. As such, Sanders et al represent one end of a continuum of views about what

constitutes effective WP research. We intend to blog about the methodological differences across these three articles, and would be delighted to receive articles supporting or challenging the approaches described.

The fourth article by Manktelow et al argues persuasively for the significance of sandwich placements in negating the effects of socio-economic background on graduates' employability prospects - and thus contributing to upwards social mobility. Taking a relatively under-researched theme, in which students from backgrounds associated with widening participation characteristics are tracked following the integration of a year-long work placement in their undergraduate degree, the authors identify a positive link to gaining graduate level employment. This is significant, not just for the students concerned, but for universities in the UK facing a metric in the Teaching Excellence Framework which scores against that data. The article can also be read as an example of Thiele et al's mixed methods approach, with statistical analysis of a national data set supported by interviews with 14 graduates at the authors' university - together establishing that WP students were less likely to take a placement year, but that if they did the impact on subsequent success was powerful.

Fifth is an article by Raven which tackles a hot topic in England - the lack of participation by white working class males in higher education. Importantly, Raven establishes that this is not a new problem, but one which has stubbornly persisted for at least a decade despite numerous attempts to raise aspirations in areas of educational and socio-economic disadvantage. His valuable research explores those who 'bucked the trend', a small number of young men from disadvantaged communities who determinedly overcame personal challenges to participate in HE. A key finding, generalisable across a range of settings, is the importance of 'a series of influences', suggesting university outreach should intervene early and engage with parents, peers and tutors in order to address the breadth and depth of support, and ensure support addresses challenges throughout the HE journey.

Sixth is an article exploring financial bursary support in England by Mbah et al. This exploration of WP student perceptions of financial assistance is particularly pertinent given the huge amount of funding committed by universities to enhance access, aid retention and increase success. Taking a mixed methods approach (again) the authors focus on a single institution to illuminate a broader point about the need for: clearer communication about financial support schemes; increased customisation for funding levels (for example, mature students with dependants); personalising how funds can be accessed according to individual need; and emphasising the need for non-financial support as well.

The seventh article offers a clear and original analysis of another under-researched topic: that of the campus-based science fair as an 'ambient' source of information and aspiration-raising about HE. Canovan and Luck use a

mixed methods approach to explore parental attitudes to, and knowledge of, university participation centred on an area of relative deprivation. The authors argue parents are more likely to trust information from attending a 'fun' activity, without the perceived recruitment baggage from conventional Open day activity. Interestingly, it was the parents from the most deprived areas who underwent the most significant shift in attitude towards university.

Our penultimate article, authored by Macer, tackles an important topic, the learning journeys of ex-military service personnel and the 'blind spot' around access to Higher Education Diplomas. The experience of transition from military to civilian life is increasingly relevant internationally, particularly for those leaving the lower ranks of the army with few formal qualifications. Macer identifies the need for much enhanced information, advice and guidance to support those leaving the military. This is critical, given the evidence that those who did engage with further FE-based preparation for HE alongside mature civilian peers felt well-supported in their re-adjustment to the civilian world.

Last, but my no means least, is a thought-provoking article by Eccles et al exploring the perceived risks around disclosure of disability in HE. This again has relevance internationally, and builds on the available evidence that there are still students who do not declare a disability at their application stage to university. This is of crucial importance in England given the massive increase in students reporting mental health issues and the challenges around accessing adequate support. By taking an interpretivist approach, Eccles et al embraced participatory research by utilising two students as field-workers and co-researchers in a series of focus groups. Results identify three important findings: some students do not categorise themselves as disabled at the point of application; some students are nervous about the implications of any disclosure, worrying how that information might be used; the issues of short term or as yet undiagnosed disabilities remain a grey area. Regrettably, some students perceive a stigma around disclosure, and thus are unable to access the support that universities can provide.

If all that is not enough food for thought, I am also delighted to publish a book review by Iain Jones, which I hope will stimulate a real interest in an important work: *The Civic University: The Policy and Leadership Challenges* edited by Godard et al. The editorial board were unanimous in wishing to read the book on the basis of this review, stimulated by thoughts of engaging with fundamental questions: what is higher education and what are universities for? What are the possibilities of widening participation - and why do these matter?

Coming up in 2019

I am delighted to recommend three editions of the journal in preparation for 2019. The editorial board are keen that future issues reflect more of an international flavour, and our first issue will feature a range of articles developed from papers presented at the 2018 Universities Association for Lifelong Learning conferences. Our second, due in April 2019, is a particularly exciting special edition devoted to research around refugee and asylum seekers, instigated by colleagues in Australia. Our third will be our 'general' autumn edition for 2019, featuring another wide range of stimulating articles.

References

- Sperlinger, T., Mclellan, J. & Pettigrew, R. (2018) *Who are Universities For? Re-making Higher Education*: Bristol University Press.

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