

Editorial – Volume 26, Number 3

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We are thrilled to welcome readers to the latest edition of the *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning Journal*. Those of us working, researching and studying in higher education (HE) will understand just how much pressure the sector is under: pressure on student numbers and recruitment; pressure to ensure the student experience and its outcomes are equitable across all demographics; pressure on institutional finances and students' own budgets; and pressure to accept and embed the increasing advent of technology. The articles in this edition reflect these pressures and have challenged us as co-editors to think more deeply about the role widening participation policies and practices have in responding to both external and internal pressures, to foster access to HE and to support the life-changing opportunities for under-represented groups that universities still provide. The authors have raised important questions in their articles and provided analysis leading to potential solutions, while challenging existing structures, policies and practices. We are confident their work will spark debate and further research and will encourage you as practitioners and policymakers to reflect on these issues, continuing the debates in your own settings.

The articles in this edition explore the themes of access to HE, factors impacting on student experience and student outcomes. 'Student experience' has evolved into a complex space, which will not surprise readers researching and working in HE. A focus on marginalised student communities, essential to navigating this complex space, is embodied in this issue, which presents 12 articles that further our understanding in this field: seven full research articles, two innovative practice articles, two research notes and a discussion piece.

In the first of the full research articles, Baines considers how 'staying local' can support transition for students from socio-

economically deprived localities in Staffordshire (a county in the English midlands). What influences young people to reside at home while studying at university is explored through a Bourdieusian lens, drawing out how conceptions of habitus and capital can be used to explain students' decision-making process in choosing to 'stay home'. The authors emphasise that the transitions of working-class students must be better understood by practitioners who deliver activity to support students' successful entries into HE.

Still within the broader theme of the student experience, Shepherd's research shifts our focus towards supporting students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds studying Biosciences and Psychology, and who are either first in their family to study in HE and/or are from a low-income family. The author identifies ten themes, illustrating the complexity of the lived experience amongst the sampled students. The themes are organised to follow the student life cycle and reveal the various pressures students are under in trying to reach university, in settling into new academic environments and balancing new and old commitments. The data reveal a sobering reflection amongst participants, with many questioning their identify as students, including whether they belong at this level of study. Shepherd provides practice-based insights and guidelines for us to consider along the whole student life cycle, from outreach activity, considering the pressures exerted by parents and schoolteachers related to access to HE, and the importance of personal tutors and teaching staff in breaking down perceived barriers to student support once at university.

Todman explores an under-researched area of the impact of university bursaries on low-income students. An interesting theme explores the potential links between bursary provision and retention, together with possible negative unintended consequences of bursaries resulting in feelings of 'difference' and lack of belonging. Realist methodology highlights that research can only give a partial insight into complex systems. Todman's article also explores students' negative reactions to the suggestion, drawn from other research in this area, that bursaries are associated with students feeling more valued. The application of a realist ontological perspective to evaluate the benefits of bursaries to low-income HE students was framed as coming with

the assumption that an intervention will work differently for different individuals and in varied circumstances. The authors seek to explore some of the reasons that these outcomes occur.

Another very important and under-researched area is explored in Agrawal's research into pupil-level targeting in which learners are identified and selected for WP initiatives by WP school leads to support their progress to university. The use of a 'figured worlds' lens enabled the exploration of theoretical constructs of improvisation, agency, artefact creation and interpersonal interaction. An insight into the nature of figured worlds is provided by Hoffman et al. (2017), where it is viewed as a socio-culturally constructed model that helps researchers to understand by the way in which individuals construct identities linked to roles they adopt within a particular community. A particular theme of enabling agency comes through in the University approaches to facilitating WP within school contexts, together with targeted action focused on reconstruction of learner identity. A key finding of the paper is that WP improvisations carried out by school staff were often creative and powerful, and underpinned by the key themes of principles, pragmatics, and predictions.

The experience of commuter students is the focus of Kenyon's research, reminding us of the awarding and experiential gap that these students face compared to students living on site. By drawing on empirical research of students' online learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, the author reveals how reducing spatial and access barriers positively impacted the learning engagement and outcomes of those students. Kenyon concludes that sectoral shift in residency location for university students confirms that policy, pedagogy and process must also adapt to support commuters.

Aspects of inequitable student experience are examined by Todd in a study into the academic and pastoral support received by students with parental responsibilities. Despite highlighting some good practice across the sector, the author finds that there are systemic failures in how student parents are supported, which places significant risk on their outcomes, especially their continuation and progression and success. Todd addresses and analyses these findings within the context of increasing sectoral regulation in England by the Office for Students (OfS). With

student parents having been added to the OfS's official Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR) in January 2024, this article is very timely in its critique of activity, institutions and a sector that is failing this specific demographic. In what will be valuable to practitioners and policymakers alike, especially those developing institutional Access and Participation Plans, Todd connects findings with the EORR's risk factors, thereby allowing for more nuanced development of pastoral and academic support for student parents.

James, Braund, Larsen, Conradie and Keating provide insights into an under-researched area of how a social innovation (SI) perspective is useful to inform understanding of enabling education programmes and HE access initiatives in the Australian context. This conceptual paper draws on existing literature, taking a unique approach to examining equity of access to the Australian university sector. The study is based on the methodological lens of theory adaptation (Jaakkola, 2020) which is informed by drawing on the theoretical lens of SI. It discusses three positive outcomes, namely that enabling education programmes are a form of SI in action contributing to a solution to the 'wicked problem' of HE access in Australia; enabling education programmes can encourage students to take an SI mindset; and students empowered as social innovators can in turn drive social change. It then goes on to consider how these positives might encourage a more SI-driven approach to enabling programmes, with the aim of encouraging a new perspective for future programmes. An empowerment theme comes through strongly in the article linked to the presentation of a view of enabling educators as 'agents of change' and equity students as 'catalysts of change' within the context of enabling programmes which serve as 'incubators of change'.

The first of two innovative practice articles is contributed by Bicsák and Hoskin-Campion and explores school data sharing, aligned with the Office for Students' (OfS) priority of enhancement of attainment in schools linked to Higher Education Provider (HEP) outreach provision. This study exemplifies the potential of research to break down barriers in communication between different sectors. Initial perceptions held by school-based colleagues at the start of the project, which viewed data sharing as highly problematic, were challenged through the

development of relationships between schools and HEP. The project also facilitated the development of enhanced procedures enabling more effective data sharing, illustrating the potential of research to act as a catalyst for change.

The second innovative practice study by Helm, Poliah, Gilbert, Woolley and Yates provides fascinating insights into the power of a small-scale intervention in the form of a Summer Programme to provide transformative opportunities to under-represented groups of undergraduate students to develop research skills, with a view to entering a career in research as a form of WP. The lessons learned from the study were beneficial to inform future practice, particularly regarding further enhancing inclusivity. The impact of the project on participants is evidenced through the Research Excellence Framework (REF) criteria for impact, namely significance and reach (Hourneaux and Sandes-Guimarães, 2020). Significance was evidenced through students progressing to postgraduate study having engaged with the Summer Programme and reach through commitment from the University to progress this innovative scheme in future years.

The first of the two research notes in this issue, presented by Sanders and Vallis, provides insight into how a quantitative statistical lens within the context of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) can inform understanding of 'what works' in WP and progression, set within the context of the OfS's regulatory access and participation landscape. Unlike the other methodological designs, which focus on gaining in-depth understanding of issues through qualitative analysis, this article explores the use of randomised controlled trials with the aim of attributing cause and effect (OHID, 2020). Sanders and Vallis signpost the increasing focus on RCTs to evaluate the impact of policies and practical interventions, set within the context of the establishment of the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO).

The second research note is contributed by Efemini, Forster, Gallagher, Hardill, Heslop, Littlefair, Marsden, Meller, Ó Tuama, Toyne and Johnson and explores enabling access to HE through overcoming barriers, a core principle for many operating within the fields of WP and lifelong learning. The article analyses the obstacles faced by the most marginalised in our society,

highlighting the often-ignored pervasive socio-economic conditions that limit applications to university and that can exclude individuals. Efemini et al. highlight that issues such as financial shortages and spatial challenges that both communities and institutions face can limit access, but they also identify successful programmes across the sector that have fostered access, while underscoring the risk should these activities cease to run. As the authors conclude, collective action, advocacy and partnership are paramount to supporting the true levelling up of communities.

The final article in this issue is a discussion piece by James and Andrews, which offers a challenge to consider the integration of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), and specifically Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT, into education programmes. Potential benefits include the reduction of educational gaps between a variety of so-called WP groups, such students for whom English is not their native language, students with disabilities and students from other socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, and their peers. Reflecting within their Australian context on 'enabling' programmes (i.e. access or transition activity), the authors posit that if carefully embedded, GenAI, and specifically LLMs, can enhance language skills and generally lead to more equitable learning experiences. Their use of 'levelling the playing field' suggests the potential power of GenAI and their provocation puts the onus on and policymakers to review what role it can play in empowering students while reducing inequity in the student experience.

This edition showcases some examples of the rich variety of methodological lenses that can be adopted to provide insights into access to HE and some of the factors impacting on student experience and attainment. Crucially, student-centred research should be the foundation for developing new institutional policies and practices that address inequities across the student life cycle and privilege students' experience, particularly those from under-represented backgrounds (Farenga, 2021). It is proposed that an enabling and empowering research design facilitates the enhancement of rigour through framing the role of the researcher as mediator of expression of participant voice, underpinned by a commitment to authenticity (Patterson et al., 2023). A thread of

empowerment through researcher mediation can be seen woven through the articles in this edition.

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