

Editorial – Volume 24, Issue 3

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Current social context for WP practitioners

Whilst we all wish it was behind us, we are still dealing with the current and aftereffects of the COVID 19 pandemic. International travel appears to have returned to pre-pandemic levels, citizens are encouraged to be out and about on the streets in cities, towns and villages, and many students have commenced or resumed their studies at higher education institutions (HEIs). In some countries such as the United States, England and Australia, however, international students have not returned to their studies at pre-pandemic levels. Consequently, the budgets of their host institutions are reduced, giving urgency to the need to enrol more local students to replace the international students who are responding to the pandemic by undertaking studies in their home countries.

As well as responding to the financial pressures mentioned above, HEIs have to comply with governments' widening participation and social justice requirements. While some of these such as Access Plans in England and Equity Plans in Australia can be seen as social justice policies, they also prompt HEI executives and decision-makers to focus on students from non-traditional backgrounds to fill the gap left by international students.

In addition, many countries are experiencing a shortage of skilled workers in professions, trades and governments. They look to HEIs and Further Education, or Technical and Further Education (TAFE), colleges to step up their enrolments to remedy this shortage. Once again, this turns our attention to the work of Widening Participation (WP) practitioners, and the research and strategies they develop to assist HEIs to attract and retain students from groups previously under-represented in tertiary education. In other words, the skills shortage places socio-economic status (SES) at the heart of what societies have to do to respond to the economic changes brought about by the pandemic.

In Australia, the Commonwealth Government has responded to this skills' shortage by providing an extra 180,000 fee-free TAFE and vocational education and training places at a cost of 1 billion dollars (O'Connor B, 2022). This is a reversal of a 2013 decision to impose tuition fees for TAFE, Vocational Education and Training students. While the new fee-free policy response is necessary if the skills shortage is to be overcome, it is not sufficient to solve all the access problems that students from low socio-economic backgrounds face in the tertiary education sector. It is worth noting that this policy initiative is also an example of how national and local governments, institutions and professional bodies can and do change policy very quickly – something which can make a WP researcher's work very challenging.

Digital Divide and Digital Poverty IP article

In an era when so many higher education and further education courses are offered online, the digital divide, sometimes called digital poverty, remains a barrier for many students. Several studies reported in this edition indicate that many students from low-income backgrounds have limited access to technology per se, do not have suitable technology at home nor do they have a quiet space within their homes in which to participate in online classes, tutorials and meetings with lecturers and mentors, etc.

Just as context is a central issue in widening participation circles in many places, it is also central to many of the articles in this edition of the journal – be it contextual admission practices, or research – which demonstrates the correlation between socio-economic deprivation and lower progression to higher education. These contextual issues combine to bring evaluation to the forefront of WP practitioners' minds, HEIs and governments, albeit for differing reasons. WP practitioners need evaluation techniques and frameworks to ascertain how well various WP programmes and interventions are delivering the desired outcomes. HEIs and governments need evaluation to determine whether the money they have invested in WP in many of its forms is well spent.

Policies, practices and philosophical constructs around evaluation are all explored in this edition of the Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning (WPLL) journal. As well as considering appropriate framework(s) for evaluating widening

participation initiatives and lifelong learning programs, evaluation methods for assessing the impact of outreach interventions are discussed. Clearly there is a need for top grade-research on evaluation methods and techniques – in other words we need reports on what actually works in the evaluation space.

New and innovative ways of assisting students from non-traditional backgrounds to succeed in their studies and continue to graduation are paramount. Although higher education researchers have been publishing their findings on transition programs, and the role preparation plays in students' success and retention for some time, more needs to be done on this topic. Inclusive language is another area which needs further research. In-depth studies which explore the impact of language HEIs use in their dealings with students from low socio-economic backgrounds could assist in making HEI's campuses a more welcoming and supportive space for these student groups.

Similarly, ensuring that the student voice is heard can provide researchers with important perspectives on programmes and initiatives in which students are involved, something which is not always recognised nor appreciated. The use of inclusive and precise language particularly on the part of HEIs can go a long way towards assisting students from non-traditional backgrounds to feel at home in new tertiary education environments. Whatever initiatives are implemented, they need to be evaluated from the perspective of excluded students such as the low socio-economic status (LSES) group. Essential information about what works for this group and its subgroups such as those with a disability, can be incorporated into WP evaluation frameworks if students' voices are included.

Browitt et al. discuss both evaluation and contextual admissions in their article, 'The Top-Up Programme: Two decades of Widening Participation provides evidence of impact on student success against a background of socio-economic disadvantage.' The programme, a pre-entry initiative for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds seeking access to higher education, has been conducted by the University of Glasgow, Scotland since 1999. Drawing on data collected over a twenty-year period, the authors examine the impact of this widening participation programme on students' success in gaining access to the

university. They look at the way successful completion of the Top-Up Programme has been used in contextual admissions and how it was later expanded to include students' continuation and graduation rates.

Evaluation of the Programme included monitoring conducted annually and encompassing feedback from students on their experience of transition their first year at university, and their success and retention outcomes. The initiative provides an interesting example of how a widening participation programme can be implemented and evaluated.

In Boliver and Powell's article, 'Rethinking merit? The development of more progressive approaches to university admissions in England', the authors argue that 'attempts to measure merit must be contextualised', that is, to be fair, admissions processes must take into account the socio-economic circumstances in which prospective students gained their qualifications. They note that in the early 2000s, English universities tended to use 'traditional meritocratic terms and concepts in their Access Agreements.' Consequently, they concentrated their access activities on the high achieving prospective students, seeing lower achievers through a personal 'deficit' lens, thus failing to acknowledge the impact of structural disadvantage on this cohort.

The authors investigated some of England's most academically selective universities' responses to the Office of Students 2019 requirement, that they rethink the way merit is judged in their admissions policy and practices. Recent data from Access and Participation Plans of twenty five of these selective institutions were analysed with some very interesting results. Some universities did not provide targeted support for students entering via contextualised admissions pathways, but many HEIs had implemented increased contextualised admissions practices, and demonstrated more nuanced understandings of the relationship between structural disadvantage and prior attainment than in the past – moves that gladden many a WP practitioner's heart!

In Clements' thought provoking and challenging article, 'Widening Participation, Evaluation and Performance: Using critical discourse analysis to explore performativity within English higher education Access and Participation Plan 2025 regularly

guidance and accompanying text', the author casts a critical eye over the concept of evaluation and ways it is characterised in the debates which surround it in England.

Currently, WP practitioners are required by English policy makers and Government departments to demonstrate the efficacy of their outreach initiatives in specific ways. The author critically analyses the regulator's guidance materials and argues that 'current discourses promote widening participation interventions designed for performative evaluation methods, rather than interventions designed by learners' needs. Clements questions whether the new regulatory frameworks mandated by the regulator are fit for purpose. WP practitioners intuitive or 'tacit' knowledge is discounted or ignored, and valuable and essential evidence which is 'grounded in the issues, challenges and dilemmas confronting practice' is overlooked. The author goes further stating that 'participants lived experience and voice for change within widening participation and higher education provision are valueless.' These are strong words indeed and add gravitas to the debates about evaluation and the various ways it can be conducted within widening participation circles.

'Engaging low-skilled adults in education and training exploring participation rates, challenges and strategies' by Helsinger et al. provides extremely interesting observations and statistics on lifelong learning opportunities which low-skilled adults can access via non-formal learning (NFE). This international study explores the different ways NFE is offered in Canada, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United States (US). The authors look at how NFE can provide an opportunity for reskilling those who have lost their jobs.

NFE, which takes different forms in different countries, includes training sponsored by employers, trade unions' education programs, folk high schools, study associations and circles.

Three research questions underpin this study:

- What proportion of 25-65 year olds' participated in NFE in the five countries?
- What proportion of these NFE participants had high literacy levels, and how many were from the low literacy group?

- What programs did the five countries develop to facilitate participation in NFE?

Several barriers to participation in NFE were identified. These included:

- previous negative experiences of education during early schooling
- the cost of education in terms of finances and time
- childcare and transport costs
- lack of support from family and friends
- courses not scheduled at convenient times
- difficult enrolment processes
- lack of confidence
- feeling too old to study, and
- lack of enjoyment in studying.

Amongst the findings were the need for NFE participants to obtain financial support, recognition of prior learning and the importance of considering students' family situation. The authors conclude that future research, which looks at the ways some of these issues are dealt with in other countries such as Australia is needed.

Like some of the articles described above, Rose and Mallinson's study, 'Assessing the impact of regional transformative outreach activities', aimed at widening university access and participation among under-represented groups in schools, is also centred on evaluation of widening participation programs. The authors explore outreach activities with a focus on aspirations and attainment raising in secondary schools in England and evaluate the success or otherwise of these initiatives.

They describe how an online student activity survey was used to assess the impact of five different aspirations and attainment-raising activities conducted by The Uni Connect Programme. This programme offers a variety of outreach activities to school students in areas of England 'with low HE participation rates and where participation in HE is much lower than could be expected based on students' success in national examinations taken at 15 years of age.'

Students at six case study schools in Lincolnshire were asked to give feedback and assess five outreach activities offered at

their school during the preceding year. These included campus visits, a Careers Fair, motivational speaker, workshops which included Masterclass, study skills, and employability, and a longer mid-intensity one-day workshop. The evaluation framework, Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI), to which Uni Connect is aligned, was used as a basis for the evaluation of this initiative.

Students' responses to the survey provided a wide range of detailed information, ranking some activities such as the more intense one-day workshops highly, while others such as the motivational speaker were not so well received. Analysis of this data also revealed the prevalence of some issues raised by other contributors to this edition, such as the digital divide and how having limited or no access to suitable technology works against students' access to full participation in education, be it secondary or tertiary levels.

There are two Innovative Practice pieces in this edition. The first from Houghton and Armstrong, is a Lancaster University-based program 'Learning together: Widening participation research with, for and by young researchers' is centred on a novel approach to increasing the confidence and skills of school students. The university's Researching Equity, Access and Participation (REAP) team developed a pilot study in which a piece of qualitative research was conducted by a group of school students aged between 16 and 17.

Called the Young Researcher Project, it was planned and delivered by widening participation practitioners, teachers, outdoor educators and researchers over a six-month period. It comprised four residentials, mentoring and a campus visit which included research training and guidance about how to access higher education and finally, two conference presentations on the research process they had undertaken, and what they had learnt during the project.

In the second Inclusive Practice piece, Ryan and Dancu pick up on the evaluation of WP initiatives' theme and look at the process of evaluating the impact of the Open Learning Champions Project in Scotland. A pre-access intervention setup in 2016, the Champions support young learners to access 'open educational' resources and use the Open University's free online learning

platform. The evaluation methodology is discussed in detail. The article is clear and easy to understand with many comments and opinions provided by students about their experiences of the program, thus providing an impressive example of the role the student voice can play in widening participation and evaluations of its programs.

Finally, we have two discussion pieces and a research note.

In the first of the discussion pieces, 'What is? What if? What next? Why institutions must urgently identify, support and celebrate their student-parents and imagining a world in which they do so', Andrea Todd reports that students who are parents are very rarely the subject of WP programs and research, nor are they considered in HEIs' policies and practices. This student group is also overlooked in official national data collections. The author describes the benefits which would flow to governments and HEIs if they were to modify their student data collections to include student-parents and offer targeted programs to support them to successful graduation – something which can have a positive effect on the future wellbeing of the students themselves and their children as well.

Tom Fryer's discussion piece, 'Are the Office for Students' standard of evidence appropriate? Why it matters for widening participation', is a stimulating and informative contribution to debates about evidence-based activities in the English higher education sector. He interrogates the topic in incisive fashion and recommends, *inter alia*, that 'the Office for Students should review its standards of evidence to ensure that they represent best practice in evaluation research.'

Research Note

Tom Lowe's 'Breaking down barriers to postgraduate study: Taking an access approach through the 'Get into Masters' Study' Initiative', opens the door on postgraduate access issues This overlooked topic needs much more attention, especially in view of the high costs associated with such programs.

As WP practitioners and researchers continue to work towards ensuring all students regardless of their life circumstances have equitable access to higher education, they do so in a fast changing HE environment. Just this week, Australia's new Federal

Minister for Education, Jason Clare (The Saturday Paper, Post (2022) announced a review of higher education. Inter alia, the former government’s Job-ready Graduates scheme, in which students in Humanities, Law and Business courses were charged \$15,000 per year, is to be discontinued. Keeping up with such short-lived policies is a continuing challenge for WP practitioners and researchers.

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