

## Editorial – Volume 26, Issue 1

### Special Edition – The Open University’s 7<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference on Access, Participation and Success

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As Joint Chair of the Open University’s Biennial Access, Participation and Success (APS) Conference 2023, and Depute Director at The Open University in Scotland, I am delighted to provide an editorial for this APS Conference Special Edition. While the majority of articles were written from work presented at that conference, this edition also includes some related articles.

The Open University’s 7th Biennial International Conference on Access, Participation and Success, April 2023, focused on ‘Through the looking glass: how higher education is using the lens of access, participation, and success to create equity for all students’. The conference invited attendance from academics, policymakers and practitioners at all points in their careers, and very importantly students from across the United Kingdom and internationally. Contributors to the conference were invited ‘to improve access, participation and success for students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups’.

The choice of the word ‘equity’ and using the three terms ‘access, participation and success’, and the invited attendance, are important signals built upon by several articles in this edition. Equity and the triple lens of access, participation and success highlight that it is necessary, but insufficient, to provide everyone with access to the same opportunities. These three lenses together summarise equity in the context of tertiary education. That is, ensuring everyone has the same opportunities to be successful means treating people according to their needs. This can be challenging for ‘the academy’. It demands a shift from a supply driven one-size-fits-all perspective. The language of ‘under-represented and disadvantaged groups’ – often used in the context of access, participation and success, perhaps needs to be challenged, with future conferences invited to focus on

improving equity and inclusion. This shifts the focus from individuals and groups and the deficit perhaps implied linguistically by the prefixes 'under' and 'dis' to language that focuses on removing barriers within organisations and systems.

It is also interesting that in a UK context the regulators and funding bodies tend to implicitly define success with metrics that are driven by completion, progression and graduation outcomes. This is perhaps inevitable for organisations in receipt of public funds, but fails to acknowledge that every student will have their own definition of what success means to them.

This edition provides a rich and varied contribution to scholarship, research, policy and practice in widening participation and lifelong learning. Lifelong learning and equitable access to the opportunities it affords become ever more important given drivers such as increasing technological change and the rising pension age (in a UK context), and I am grateful to contributors and the editorial board for their efforts in continuing to advance our knowledge in this vital area.

This edition comprises four research articles, four examples of innovative practice, two discussion pieces and one book review. Several of the contributions are set within the context of the English regulator's Access and Participation Plan (APP); however, the insights they provide are of relevance to a wider geographic audience.

Spacey, Sanderson and Zile's article is very much focused on an exploration of equity in the context of students with caring responsibilities. It posits that the academy is 'care-less', characterised by 'competitive individualism within which students are assumed to be unencumbered by the responsibilities of care' (Lynch 2010; Moreau 2016). It could be interesting to repeat this study to explore whether the academy is built on other assumptions which result in missed opportunities for equity, particularly given the increased diversity of many student bodies.

The impact of a 12-week group mentoring programme on 13- and 14-year-olds in England is explored by Hanson, Blake and Clark. This work powerfully demonstrates the value of interaction with wider communities in career development and widening access. It implicitly demonstrates the need for a systemic

approach to change that recognises the value provided by education institutions and also the need to look outside and harness the power that exists within communities to achieve a more equitable and inclusive future.

Law and Sheen explore the experiences of foundation year students integrating into first year. This builds on O'Sullivan *et al.*'s 2019 work, which showed the sense of belonging, and academic voice and academic confidence increasing during this foundation year. Strengths and challenges were identified based on a qualitative investigation of 18 students using semi-structured interviews and an online interview. Practice and research recommendations are highlighted.

This edition's final research article focused on students who commute and explores the important topic of identity across home and campus spaces. Teaching and learning, as so many other aspects of society as we knew it, was forced to pivot during the COVID-19 pandemic. This temporary disruption continues to influence societal behaviours. Identity beyond solely campus spaces may become more relevant to more students, not only to those who would identify as 'community students'.

One of the strengths of this journal is its focus on innovative practice.

Mander, Fensham-Smith, Connolly and Reeve's 'A View Through the Looking Glass: Co-Creation and Innovation for Student Voice and Wellbeing in Distance Education' describes how 're-conceptualising existing student voice activities can generate more creative and fulfilling ways of meeting national and institutional objectives of mental health and wellbeing policies and strategies'. It advocates all students as equal partners, using this to destigmatise mental health. Given the much-reported increase in mental ill health in students this is an article that offers higher education institutions a model for co-production and invites policy makers to re-evaluate existing student-voice and wellbeing strategies and practices. This approach appears to implicitly be an example of changing the system to unlock the power of diversity rather than increasing the burden on specific student groups.

Morrison and Robinson's innovative practice focuses on the development of a toolkit for those who are teaching sensitive

topics at a distance learning university. The scope of this toolkit includes both visible sensitive topics such as suicide, as well as encouraging tutors to consider 'invisible sensitive topics' which may be unproblematic for many students, but may still be sensitive to some, with motherhood being cited as an example. It is encouraging to see that the intent is to develop and make openly available a course on Open Learn, the Open University's free online learning platform [www.open.edu/openlearn](http://www.open.edu/openlearn), focusing on both the teaching and learning of sensitive topics. It is also noteworthy that the resource has been adapted with a subtly different focus to cover 'Teaching challenging topics' such as migrations and 'Teaching contested topics' such as censorship.

McKenzie, Castle-Herbert, Verriès-Wade and Silk use the Theory of Change model to inform the design and evaluation of online induction aiming to build student communities to support success. A succinct one-page articulation of induction events using the Theory of Change model will be a helpful tool to anyone looking to use this model in their practice. The conclusion usefully reflects on not only those who attended events, but importantly those who did not attend, and recognises that further research would be needed to explore why this is the case. The final paragraph of this article is a welcome corrective to the suggestion of a 'care-less academy'.

Yuskaitis, Thompson and Lueddeke explore the impact of the extended project qualification (EPQ). The paper is useful in providing an evidence base that has the potential to encourage greater uptake of this qualification which develops key or essential skills which are vital to student success. It is noteworthy that this work is positioned as one part of an institutional approach taken by the University of Southampton to create a fairer future. It is recognised that further research on the impact of EPQ on students is vital and that there has been a commitment to that through the University's Access and Participation Plan.

This edition includes two discussion pieces. Whewell, Waters and Dobson's study focuses on the lived experiences of attainment and progression in Level 5 sport and exercise science students. Given the debates around the use of deficit terminology it is interesting to note the use of Global Ethnic Minority

students. The use of vignettes is an innovative and insightful methodology used to explore five overarching and secondary concepts of transition, emotions, communication, balance and support.

Bayfield and Smith's piece, 'The Bridge Between School and University', focused on improving access to higher education for care-experienced students. This is a great example where research has been translated into action in the form of a website focused on providing information, advice and guidance to care-experienced students and those who support them. A fascinating reflection is provided on the challenges and ultimate value of 'collaboration between professional services and academic staff to further access and participation goals in a university setting'. An interesting example of the importance of how we name things is the finding from focus groups that 'although professionals liked the name Uni:Care, care-experienced members...were strongly against it, and wanted a name that did not include "care" in the title'.

The book review contained in this edition considers *The Education Debate*; fourth edition (2021) through a 2024 lens 'considering the rapid increase in income inequality and neoliberalism in English education policy and wider social policy'. It also references the recent changes in global geopolitics and is therefore a reminder of the wider context within which efforts to widen participation occur. The reviewer makes some observations of what they would like to see in a fifth edition as well as noting that the fourth edition makes no call for action nor suggestions on how to improve the education system for the better. Assuming there is a fifth edition of *The Education Debate* it would be interesting to compare it to the current edition, and this review through a 2024 lens, and to consider the impact of the education system on achieving the ultimate goal of inclusion, where the power of diversity is unlocked by removing barriers that prevent people from fulfilling their potential at work and in society (reference : OU Allyship Programme).

Taken collectively this edition overall provides me with hope. While the journey towards equity and inclusion may not be where we would like it to be, this edition challenges our thinking, provides us with evidenced insights, and shares research

methodology and innovative practice. Above all it demonstrates that there are researchers and practitioners who are actively exploring how institutions and systems can evolve to better support all of their students to achieve their full potential, an aspiration that is never more needed given the current global context.