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Assessing English Widening Participation Policy (2016-2021): Trends, Devolution, and Collaborative Partnerships

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Assessing English Widening Participation Policy (2016-2021): Trends, Devolution, and Collaborative Partnerships

This paper analyses recent trends in English Widening Participation (WP) policy over a six-year period from the introduction of the Higher Education and Research Bill and the formation of the Office for Students, up to the completion of Phase 2 of the Uni Connect project. It will draw upon the history of WP policy in England especially the 1997 Dearing Report to assess whether recent policy measures have come closer to addressing the omnipresent inequality that is present within higher education. The paper will follow the journey of WP policy as it moves through a process of devolution into collaborative partnerships. This period can be defined by the planning and execution of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) and this paper will consider the efficacy of this programme within its immediate policy context. The authors will explore the successes and shortcomings of the policies that define this period and whether the developments discussed have brought England closer to the vision of participation set out by Dearing and by the needs of the contemporary context. It is concluded that the redirection of resources from WP to recruitment diminishes intervention effectiveness, thereby perpetuating inequality. Therefore, clearer WP strategies are required involving broader partnerships to counter market forces and ensure sustainable impact.

Keywords: widening participation; social mobility; national collaborative outreach program; higher education; inequality.

Introduction

'Widening participation' (WP) is the collective term for initiatives and interventions designed to reduce demographic inequality in higher education (HE) (Evans, Rees, Taylor, and Wright, 2019). However, while this is one definition, the concept of WP has been subject to extensive academic debate. Stevenson, Clegg, and Lefever (2010) argued that the discourse surrounding WP has been contradictory and complex, while over a decade later, little has changed as policy has further evolved. Jones (2021)

examines how contemporary policy texts construct definitions and assumptions representing the ‘problem’ of WP, and while raising aspirations is identified as a dominant WP interpretation, Jones (2021) calls to attention the importance in recognising that WP should encompass the entire student lifecycle. As further illustrated by Gale and Parker (2014), an issue within HE is the focus on how students are expected to transition and conform with existing institutional requirements, but this neglects to consider how WP should involve ensuring that teaching practices and the curriculum reflect the needs of marginalised groups. Therefore, we take the position that WP incorporates raising aspirations and lessening demographic disparities across the entirety of the student experience, encompassing readiness for HE application and enrolment, receiving academic support to ensure successful completion, and progressing to postgraduate studies or employment.

Within Great Britain, only 26% of those from socially deprived backgrounds (from low-income families and entitled to free school meals) study in HE, compared to 43% of their better-off peers (Social Mobility Commission, 2019), and this is worse for young people in care, with some countries barely recognising these students as potential HE participants (Cameron, Jackson, Hauari, and Hollingworth, 2012). WP activities are designed to redress this social inequality by reducing social deprivation and have coincided with the need to upskill the workforce to compete in a global economy (Doyle and Griffin, 2012; Day, 2013; Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016), and while WP activities are developed and implemented by education sector stakeholders, they often stem from government policy agendas (Evans, Rees, Taylor, and Wright, 2019). Much of this agenda described in political documentation invokes images of escapism and transgression for those young people, who wish to liberate themselves from their cultural restrictions and achieve social mobility (Spohrer, Stahl, and Bowers-Brown,

2018). However, WP initiatives prior to 2016 had limited success, stemming largely from a lack of understanding of why students failed to participate (Day, 2013).

Therefore, successive governments have attempted to develop policy through funded programmes and initiatives to reveal the complex picture which underpins social inequality in university admissions. However, in what Adnett and Tlupova (2008) term as the policy trilemma, government policy internationally faces a balancing act between increasing HE participation, WP, and increasing the emphasis of HE funding to be passed onto students and their families.

English WP policy is overseen by the Office for Students (OfS), formerly the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and has been since the 1997 Dearing report (Greenbank, 2006). However, stakeholders working with HEFCE to tackle social inequality have changed, and this is the most significant difference between pre-2016 and post-2016 WP policy. The OfS strategy to meet WP goals is the Uni Connect programme, formerly known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), which has, since 2017, attempted to improve outcomes and reduce inequality. They have done this by sharing accountability for success between a wider range of agencies and having a more flexible approach to implementation. However, the successes and failures of NCOP are seldom documented in academic literature with WP policy lacking in evaluation and critique. Therefore, this paper addresses the following research question:

‘How has the English WP policy context influenced widening participation practice from 2016 up until July 2021?’

To answer this research question, this paper will explore the English policy narrative leading up to the implementation of NCOP, what NCOP was and how it was implemented, and the successes and failures of NCOP will be outlined. However, this

paper will not focus on the inherent value of the WP agenda generally. WP policy post July 2021 will not be considered as, at the time of writing, phase three is not complete and therefore, has not received a full and complete evaluation. The authors acknowledge that many other activities conducted within schools and universities are tied into the WP agenda, including Schools Partnership work and independent university-led outreach, however these are often subject to evaluation at an institutional level and are therefore difficult to evaluate on this scale. For this paper, the authors will focus on independently evaluated programmes devised and monitored by Office for Students during the period of study but with some acknowledgement of the complexity and crossover between these and other WP mechanisms at play. Additionally, while this paper aims to contextualise the situation in England within global trends, the focus of the paper is on an English policy narrative only. Other researchers may wish to apply the same policy evaluation methods of WP for in other countries in future research.

A Brief History of English WP Policy

English WP finds its roots in the 1960s as part of a sector-wide reform of English HE (Harrison, 2011), where the need for a more equitable system of university recruitment was identified (Hayton and Paczuska, 2002). However, little progress was made in the following decade, and by 1979, the Conservative government brought a more laissez-faire attitude to HE. Individual choice, competition and market forces were seen as legitimate drivers for university recruitment and inequality was the natural and expected result (Loxley and Thomas, 2001).

Social justice and inequality were largely absent from the English policy narrative until the 1997 Dearing Inquiry which suggested young people from poorer backgrounds faced several barriers to HE (Greenbank, 2006), much like other policy

reports soon after (Spohrer, Stahl, and Bowers-Brown, 2018), with issues including poor grades, aspiration levels, and limited choices. The Dearing report largely neglected academic literature, reflecting the more general features of the research base and policy environment for HE at the time (Parry, 1999). It was the first of many reports neglecting the voices of communities affected (Robertson, 1999; Loxley and Thomas, 2001). It began the process of 'victim blaming' that would resurface in WP research and reports commissioned by the Conservative government for three decades (Stevenson, Clegg, and Lefever, 2010). Nevertheless, policy documents published under Labour soon after had a similar rhetoric. For instance, through an analysis of policy documentation between 2003-2011 (seven published under Labour), it was suggested the language of aspiration placed a 'moral obligation' for students to invest in their human capital (Spohrer, Stahl, and Bowers-Brown, 2018), and strategies used by government regarding raising aspirations were key drivers for promoting social mobility and educational success in young people (Spohrer, Stahl, and Bowers-Brown, 2018). Hence, in many cases, the impetus was being placed on students.

Following the Dearing report, recommendations were overseen by HEFCE and implemented by universities as the report emphasized the need for universities to 'develop and manage their own widening participation strategy' (Dearing Report, 1997, p. 107). Although the Dearing report was published under the Labour government, it would not be until the 'Future of HE' (2003) report and the Higher Education Act (2004) that Tony Blair's government would make their mark on HE policy (Spohrer, Stahl, and Bowers-Brown, 2018). At this point, access to HE and WP moved from peripheral concerns to a more central component of government thinking (Jones and Thomas, 2005), where it was identified the reach of HE should be wider and fairer (Harrison, 2011). Implementation of this agenda began with a raft of policies designed

to meet labour market demands for skilled workers, such as the development of foundation degrees (Greenbank, 2006). However, there were concerns about how WP policy was developed and who it was really for (Jones and Thomas, 2005). As the Higher Education Act (2004) led to the introduction of variable fees within England for HE, concerns surfaced around students from lower income families and whether they may be further excluded or discouraged from entering HE due to increased costs (Gallacher and Raffe, 2012). This led to greater calls for evidence into the impact and effectiveness of WP policy (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016). Some authors maintained modest improvements had been made since the 2004 Higher Education Act.

The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was established to provide scrutiny and oversight to national WP efforts (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016), and requirements were set for universities to submit access agreements (Gallacher and Raffe, 2012). These access agreements outlined the institutions' plans and commitments to attracting and supporting students from underrepresented groups, such as those from low-income households, minority ethnic backgrounds, or with disabilities. OFFA monitored the progress of these agreements and ensured universities were meeting their WP targets. Additionally, OFFA played a central role in allocating funding to support WP initiatives across the HE sector. It worked closely with universities, colleges, schools, and other organisations to develop and implement outreach programs, summer schools, mentoring schemes, and other activities aimed at raising aspirations and attainment among underrepresented groups. Most of these improvements or initiatives, however, were concentrated outside of 'top universities' (Harrison, 2011). Some authors suggest 'elite' universities were encouraged to become more research intensive, as opposed to including a more diverse sector of the community (Jones and Thomas, 2005; Whitty, Hayton, and Tang, 2015), but this is perhaps unsurprising in a market-driven system,

heavily influenced by league tables and other ranking systems (Evans, Rees, Taylor, and Wright, 2019). Similarly, an analysis of twenty HEI access agreements revealed institutions were using access agreements primarily to promote enrolments to their own programs, as opposed to supporting sector-wide WP objectives (McCaig and Adnett, 2009). In 2002, it was considered that HEFCE, by working primarily with universities, were neglecting groups directly affected by WP policies in favour of ‘expert or professional’ opinion (Nixon, Walker, and Baron, 2002). Despite the Dearing report recommendations, the next decade did little to address the challenge of inequality.

AimHigher and Devolved Strategy

Regional strategies to combat this inequality were not a new thing by 2015 and Tony Blair’s government had started to explore this area as early as 2004 with the implementation of AimHigher. A product of the Higher Education Act, AimHigher was envisioned as a way to bring the knowledge and contacts of regional authorities into the WP process. This tailored approach was seen as a way to target low participation areas with interventions devised by agencies embedded in those communities and with the freedom to create work in the ways that those areas dictated.

The primary aim was that by 2010, 50% of those aged between 18 and 30 should have the opportunity to benefit from HE. This would include targeted activities with an emphasis on deprived groups (AimHigher, 2006). It was envisioned that, once formed, a partnership would evolve over time, and evaluative processes and impact methodology would emerge as the 42 eventual national partnerships adapted to the complex local contexts they were overseeing (Doyle and Griffin, 2012). This was a typical New Labour strategy as it promised complex solutions to complex problems, and this put the policy in the firing line of the Conservative/Lib Dem Coalition seeking to end profligate

and irresponsible policies (Watson, 2010). AimHigher was axed in 2011, as the government and HEFCE sought ways to put the financial and administrative burden of WP onto the university as the primary beneficiary of the work (Attwood, 2010). The government promised a way forward on this work, and in the meantime, it would rely on the scholarship programmes already in place at universities to combat disadvantage (Attwood, 2010). The devolved strategy would survive AimHigher, but a new system would be needed to make such a system cost-effective and take the burden of impact away from the government.

Another issue facing the government in devolving responsibility for WP outcomes, was the competitive nature of university recruitment. There was little impetus for universities to extend their costly outreach activities into territories unlikely to increase their market share of students significantly; this resulted in a shift in thinking from HEFCE to what McCaig and Squire (2022) refer to as a “dual economy of competition and collaboration”. HEFCE opted to inject £22 million funding into the creation of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) which, between 2014 and 2016, would set up regional networks to combat the aforementioned territory issue and although these were seen to be broadly effective upon evaluation, stark contrasts also emerged in the reach, scope and quality of work conducted in these different areas (McCaig and Squire, 2022).

From an ideological standpoint, AimHigher was seen to be a way to improve outcomes for disadvantaged young people by promoting collaboration between schools, FE Colleges and HEIs. The idea was, that by exposing young people to HEIs, employers, and other cultural experiences, aspirations would rise as a result of an increase in social capital (Passey, 2012). From this point on, the work on habitus and social capital by renowned French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would form the bedrock

of WP initiatives reaching the height of its zeitgeist around 2017 when access to HEIs themselves was considered the optimum way of generating the type of social capital needed to boost applications to those very institutions (Gaskell and Lingwood, 2017). During the temporal scope of this work, a new government would be elected, prompting yet another rethink of just how to support universities into taking responsibility for tackling disadvantage at HE level.

Conservative Government and the Formation of the Office for Students

The 2015 Conservative manifesto made no significant promises to increase equality, but it provided an extended rationale for the change from HEFCE to the OfS including the annexation of the OFFA (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016). The Higher Education and Research Bill of May 2016 was a significant step towards the marketisation of HE and set out to create this new agency with sweeping powers to reward universities seen to be increasing competition and choice; especially those seen as providing good value for money to their customers (Higher Education and Research Bill: Equality Analysis, 2016). Having passed the Houses, the resulting High Education and Research Act of 2017 contained a full section on access and participation and gave OfS the power to approve access and participation plans set out by universities if these plans met the funding criteria set out by OfS (Higher Education and Research Act, 2017, sec 29-37). This boost to the HE regulatory body could be seen as a government attempt to allow the OfS free reign in dictating and enforcing WP policy going forward. The Act effectively handed all responsibility for the WP agenda directly to OfS and moved it away from the Department for Education, with Ministers requiring only an annual report (Higher Education and Research Act, 2017, sec 37). As the decade advanced, more students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were entering

university. However, this rate was not increasing at the same pace as it was for those in better financial situations. According to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), this resulted in a record level of inequality despite the seemingly positive statistics (Hillman 2017). As previously mentioned, Universities were seen as a critical way to develop the social capital that students were seen to be needing, and so to have the policy and its success sit with those institutions made sense from that perspective. To achieve this, a wider and more complex set of programmes would be needed to tackle the equality and access challenges that would become the primary policy goal of the OfS (Office for Students, 2018a). The new powers provided by the 2017 Act would allow for complex programmes to emerge as long as they met OfS criteria and by extension, the OfS would become the drivers and the regulators of policy for as long as this government mandate remains in place.

The way that OfS chose to structure the 'plan' set out by the government would effectively fill this empty shell and become the new policy moving forward. The agency quickly formalised this planning application process and the primary policy engine for English WP would emerge as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP).

Planning and Implementing NCOP

The Dearing report (1997) included suggestions considered vital for WP in HE. This included public funding of institutions to take more account of student choice, a greater diversity of HE provision, the need for HE to expand to allow for WP, a greater focus on students' learning skills, and ensuring support for regional and local communities was at least comparable to that provided by HE in competitor nations. These issues resonated two decades later and remained important for policy development (Thompson, 2019). From 2016-17, the focus for HEFCE (later OfS), was to consider the Dearing recommendations more holistically with emphasis on 'support for regional and

local communities'. This was done by devolving responsibility for implementing the policy into 29 regional, multiple-stakeholder partnerships (NCOPs), with the overall aim of addressing WP problems previous policies failed to address.

NCOPs were managed and funded by universities of each region (CFE Research, 2019), and involved local FE colleges, and youth charities. However, specific arrangements of each partnership were different. For instance, most of Bristol's 'Future Quest' NCOP activities were run through the local youth charity South Bristol Youth with steering and cooperation from the main HE partners (Future Quest, 2021). However, Gloucestershire's 'GROWS' NCOP in the adjacent county was small, led by the University of Gloucestershire, and supported by five smaller HE providers (GROWS, 2021), while another NCOP, Aim Higher West Yorkshire (not to be confused with the national policy of the same name), had thirteen HE partners (Go Higher West Yorkshire, 2021).

NCOP expanded accountability for WP success beyond universities into a collaborative multiple-stakeholder regional effort. This allowed consortia to be formed based on local regional needs, with planning and allocation of resources tailored to the specific socio-economic challenges facing each region and backed by local charities and Local Enterprise Partnerships (UKCBC, 2017). Therefore, implementation of this highly flexible policy was open to interpretation, resulting in a range of activities and engagements, where the methodology, regional settings, school settings, and interventions all varied greatly. Nevertheless, much like pre-HE activities delivered by AimHigher, events were designed to provide 'encounters' with HE (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016), including taster lectures, activity days, and informative sessions dedicated to combating misinformation and providing fair and equal access to information about HE. These would be offered to pupils and interested parents. Schools

would be asked to participate in a set of interventions or activities planned by the NCOP team of each consortium and to provide a list of eligible students. Students would be taken to these events by the NCOP and given feedback forms to complete afterwards.

Developments in Targeting Groups

To begin to tackle the group of young people faced with the highest educational disadvantage, HEFCE decided to develop area-based measures where postcodes were used to identify “low participation neighbourhoods” (LPNs) in which applications to HEIs were particularly low (Harrison and McCaig 2014). HEFCE developed the first “Participation of Local Areas” or POLAR measure in 2005. The purpose of the system was to identify areas or ‘wards’ of low participation and sort them into quintiles ranging from the lowest to the highest participation. This would effectively provide a visual map of areas with especially low participation which could form the basis for targeted intervention. By the time OfS was formed, there was a need to adopt the 4th iteration of the system, dubbed POLAR4. POLAR4 was developed due to new data regulations set by the government and resulted in the reclassification of approximately 45% of households into new quintiles (HEFCE, 2017). This effectively shunted groups previously classified as disadvantaged into new quintiles receiving less resources. This disproportionately affected urban centres, and by extension areas of greater ethnic diversity (Austin, 2018). POLAR4 had no data-linking capacity and therefore relied solely on geographical data to target wards regardless of the individual make up of that ward (OfS, 2022). It was perhaps very telling that at the time of POLAR’s development more disadvantaged students were considered to live outside of POLAR identified LPNs than within them (Harrison and McCaig 2014). This issue only highlighted the government and HEFCE’s commitment to area-based measures of identifying need,

however improvements were badly needed as geographical location alone was not enough to identify and target the young people most in need.

Due to its limitations, POLAR was not destined to be the long-term solution for OfS who set about devising the Tracking Underrepresentation by Area (TUNDRA) measure. TUNDRA tracks General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE: 14-16 study as part of the National Curriculum) attainment and cross referenced it with postcodes identified as having low university participation. Unlike POLAR4, TUNDRA is also limited to state-school students in England alone (OfS, 2020).

To track the success of such a wide and flexible set of interventions, the OfS enrolled all NCOP Consortia onto the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT), which allowed consortia to record student details and their involvement in WP activities (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016). This data was used to underpin monitoring, tracking, evaluation, and evidence of activities carried out by consortia, with each activity mapped into low, moderate, or high intensity. This allowed NCOPs to map the quality and quantity of interactions on a student-by-student basis and allowed NCOP to overcome some of tracking and evaluation issues which plagued previous policy initiatives such as AimHigher (Doyle and Griffin, 2012), and by splitting accountability for the success of NCOP between 29 partners, the criteria for national success could be seen as the culmination of regional successes.

The Successes of Phase One NCOP

A Multiple-Stakeholder Approach

By developing a multi-stakeholder approach, the OfS was able to take some responsibility for delivering WP outcomes away from HEIs and into the hands of a collaboration with far greater reach and networking potential. NCOP consortia had

successful and impactful engagement with 1234 schools by the end of the first year (UKCBC, 2017). The primary mechanisms for measuring impact were a national longitudinal survey of learners in NCOP target schools and colleges and three randomised control trials designed and administered by partnerships (CFE Research, 2019). The CFE evaluation reports 28 out of 29 NCOPs were able to successfully engage parents, with 57% of NCOP staff reporting some positive impact on parent's knowledge and perception of HE (CFE Research, 2019). This result should not be understated in importance, as engaging parents is often lacking in many general WP activities. Parents play a significant role in shaping a young person's future, with some authors finding a positive association between a parent's education and a student's intention to go to university (Davies, Qiu, and Davies, 2014), so this is a great success for NCOP. Nevertheless, it is less clear from the evaluation report of phase one exactly how this engagement was achieved.

By working with local businesses and careers teams at schools and further education colleges, NCOP contributed to other national strategies, such as the Gatsby Benchmarks for Good Career Guidance (Gatsby, 2013). NCOP helped support the following Gatsby benchmarks:

- Encounters with employers and employees
- Experiences of workplaces
- Encounters with further and higher education

This is a good example of how a multiple-stakeholder approach allowed NCOP to intersect with another English education strategy. This was a major source of buy-in for schools, as NCOPs could help them achieve these benchmarks for free and without having to plan interactions themselves.

Greater Freedom and Creativity

NCOP addressed the Dearing report's concerns about the greater need for flexible, local, and regional solutions to issues of WP (Dearing, 1997). A regional response allowed for the creation of larger, better funded NCOPs in areas with the greatest number of eligible students. The OfS generated regional maps based on estimated rates of students in POLAR4 postcodes and areas of particularly low participation in HE and focused attention in these areas accordingly (Office for Students, 2021a).

Surveys were used in some NCOPs such as Lincolnshire's LiNCHigher, which allowed gaps to be identified at a school and year group level based on student responses, and these surveys provided a rationale that tailored interventions were feasible (Mallinson 2020). Practitioners were given freedom to alter the ways NCOP was implemented during phase one, highlighting what worked in practice.

The use of HEAT to map activity allowed for greater freedom in the evaluation of activity. By looking at intensity level rather than number of activities attended, NCOPs could invest in high quality interactions that, even if less frequent, could be considered high impact. In the context of understanding higher or lower quality interactions/activities, the method of analysis used by CFE Research (2021), follows a tiered approach. Type 1, "Narrative," includes basic criteria such as having a coherent strategy, the approach and activities underpinned by evidence, and a shared understanding of processes involved. Type 2, "Empirical Enquiry," encompasses the Type 1 criteria and includes elements such as developing aims before activities, having select indicators of impact, having pre and post activity data, and sharing of results. Finally, type 3, "Causal Claims," builds upon Type 2 by requiring a target group as well as a control or comparison group, may use an experimental or quasi-experimental design, and considers selection bias (CFE Research, 2021). Hence, those activities

meeting the criteria of causal can be considered higher quality interactions. However, it should be noted how lower quality activities were still beneficial to an overall rounded program of WP activity (CFE Research, 2021).

As agencies independent from either university or school, NCOPs were able to embed in schools, funded staff who would have a greater freedom to coordinate activity, engage school-based stakeholders, provide mentoring, and collect feedback. By the end of the second year of NCOP, 440 NCOP staff were embedded across England (Office for Students, 2019a).

Mentoring

Previous policies including Aimhigher saw particular value in one-to-one mentoring, and this had a substantial impact (Doyle and Griffin, 2012). For NCOP, mentoring of NCOP eligible students was a core part of the programme, with 6-8 weeks of interventions running alongside the events schedule. In schools, mentoring schemes were mostly conducted online, with externally employed mentors running these sessions. These 'e-mentoring' sessions ran into a degree of attrition from target students over the course of the 6-8 week period due to the length and frequency of sessions (CFE Research, 2019), but this was not the only mentoring model in use. Where an NCOP Coordinator was embedded into an institution, mentoring could be conducted in person with greater detail and access to teachers' thoughts and student records. It is uncertain how many institutions employed this model, but findings of the phase one evaluation suggested more positive outcomes are achieved from targeted mentoring programmes (e.g., older year groups, disadvantaged males) compared to programme-wide initiatives such as events (CFE Research, 2019).

The phase one report found bespoke measures proved more effective for the individual and addressing an entire ward's needs. However, bespoke measures took

longer to implement than generic NCOP initiatives. These findings were later supported in a report which suggested the interventions of mentoring, counselling, and role models had a positive impact (Robinson and Salvestrini, 2020).

The Failures of Phase One NCOP

Market forces in HEIs

One of the more significant hurdles facing the OfS in the rollout of their national collaborative programmes, was the inherently competitive nature of the HE sector itself. As with HEFCE before them, the OfS were in a position to steer the regulatory and funding structure of a university to ensure responsibility for widening participation lay with those individual institutions. However, as a business sector, the environment of competition for students worked against tackling issues of low participation at a national scale thus hampered coordinated collaboration (McCaig and Squire, 2022). NCOP was also subject to a contradiction in policy whereby HEIs were disincentivised to take on students with higher risks of non-completion while at the same time under pressure to increase their intake of disadvantaged students; paradoxically these students were often the same.

Data and Evaluation Issues

Since the Dearing Report, the government has predominantly used quantitative data to evaluate WP success, before, during and after the student's university journey (Greenbank, 2006). However, a key challenge for WP initiatives is evidencing their impact (Doyle and Griffin, 2012; Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016), but this quantitative approach continued into NCOP, despite difficulties in quantifying the engagement level or perceived benefits of HE encounters to a young person.

The first issue facing NCOP was data access. With different agencies involved in creating consortia, there were issues in accessing and sharing valuable data. Consortia had to rely on generated lists of eligible students based on POLAR4 data alone and this prevented NCOPs from being able to differentiate between certain groups of students within that broad data set. Data measures such as access to free school meals (FSM), young carer data, and care leavers were not available to NCOPs, and so due to a lack of cross data sharing in the POLAR4 measure, ward data would show all students the same regardless of actual deprivation markers (OfS, 2022). This is despite the extra pressures to access these groups, where FSM students are among the least likely to attend university aged 18-19 (Chowdry et al., 2013). However, eligibility for FSM has been found to be suboptimal for WP interventions (Davies, Qiu, and Davies, 2014). Meanwhile, young carers have pressures on time and resources due to their caring roles, and caring has been shown to be the biggest single factor to lessening participation (Adamecz-Völgyi, Henderson & Shure, 2020). These are the student groups who could benefit most from targeted interventions but are invisible within the broader POLAR data set.

Data issues are not specifically failures of NCOP, but the inevitable by-products of data protection regulations between agencies. Embedded staff is one way of overcoming barriers presented by a lack of student data, but without the ability to target students for initial engagements and bespoke activities, some benefits of NCOP's flexible remit were lost.

Evaluating NCOP activity data was problematic as the qualitative value of a bespoke approach is difficult to capture (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016). Although evaluation forms can collect participant data such as ethnicity or family background, they can be limited as a tool for demonstrating causal links between WP interventions

and progression to HE (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016). More recent research argues WP research should consider how data is collected which is more representative of student needs (Thompson, 2019). Furthermore, evaluation forms fail to capture feedback of non-participants, so there is work to be done to understand the reasons of why non-participants chose to not engage.

A major target for continued funding was the minimum engagement rate which was set at 20% engagement of eligible students (Office for Students, 2018b). However, the NCOP evaluation reports consider ‘numbers reached’ rather than percentages (Office for Students, 2019a), so there could be a discrepancy between numbers reported and percentages targeted, and this could form a basis for further work.

NCOPs were given the choice between highly centralised and coordinated models of operation and more devolved ones. Centralised models were more efficient and could replicate results more easily, whereas devolved models could be highly effective at combating specific local issues in a flexible way. Both models had pros and cons (CFE Research, 2019), but having two incompatible operational models creates difficulties in providing a clear and concise national evaluation. By running both simultaneously, the OfS seem to have been experimenting in which model worked best for their goals, and this may have factored into the planning of NCOP phase two.

Understanding the Target Group

A consistent criticism of WP is the failure of policy makers to take a ‘student-led’ approach to developing and implementing policies. WP research should consider the extent to how our knowledge and understanding is problematic, questioned, or how it can be extrapolated within such a heterogeneous climate (Thompson, 2019), but a ‘student-led’ approach is often lacking. It is reported that the impact of earlier policies such as AimHigher were limited by a lack of understanding of the constraints of those

who should benefit from such policies (Doyle and Griffin, 2012). However, despite its limitations, AimHigher was a significant steppingstone for WP, as prior to AimHigher, universities had rarely targeted underrepresented groups (Whitty, Hayton, and Tang, 2015). NCOP built upon this foundation and attempted to take a more student-led approach, but this was done in different ways and to different extents between the 29 NCOP partnerships. Feedback forms were used to gauge the effectiveness of individual events and interventions, but this approach was insufficient (CFE Research, 2019). This report encouraged future planners to consider ways to move beyond taking account of learner feedback on activities and put learner voices at the heart of planning and delivery so target groups could be better understood and targeted (CFE Research, 2019). Therefore, a key challenge facing NCOP phase two planners was whether to involve learners in the planning process, and if so, what format it should take.

The ‘top-down’ nature of WP policy has been an issue since 2002, and while there was evidence government and HEFCE were working with HEIs, there was still a lack of participation in policy making by particular groups, especially those directly affected by such policy. It was evident ‘professional’ or ‘expert’ opinion were emphasised at the expense of other forms of evidence (Nixon, Walker, and Baron, 2002). By 2006, policy was beginning to move away from adopting a deficit model that ‘blamed’ the working class for the disadvantages they face (Greenbank, 2006). Although this put the onus on institutions to consider how they might change, those changes did not extend to inviting the working class to participate in policy formation. It is from these long-term critiques the biggest issues with NCOP as a continuation of policy formed. With strategy and implementation still fully in the hands of ‘experts’, vital insights that would help NCOP coordinators understand and engage with the hardest to reach students were missed.

Reaching the Target Group

The first major barrier facing NCOP in reaching the most disadvantaged students was through using POLAR4. With its 'ward level' focus, POLAR4 is helpful in demonstrating persistent inequality regionally, but it can fail to consider different life circumstances of young people inside those wards which can be captured more effectively with other types of data, especially once prior attainment is considered (Whitty, Hayton, and Tang, 2015). It was known before POLAR4 and NCOP that existing postcode proxies could be effective at an extreme level, but they had much lower validity in the middle ranges (Harrison and Hatt, 2010). By cross referencing with HE participation, more of the middle ground was captured, but through this process the differentiation between richest and poorest in that ward range was lost.

The policy, despite its greater commitment to promoting engagement with HE early and often, failed to fully grasp the sociological pressures facing young people beyond their learning journey, which factor into their decision whether to apply to university. It is reported the immediate cause of unequal access to HE is a lack of prerequisites reflecting inequalities earlier in the educational pipeline (Adnett and Tlupova, 2008), with recent research suggesting some inequalities affecting HE admissions begin as far back as access to Early Years education, requiring up to 30 hours free entitlement for childcare a week to correct (Pascal et al., 2021). With such an early encompassing and prolonged inequality, it is unsurprising the interventions of NCOP, much later in a young person's journey, failed to engage their intended target, like the previous failings of Aimhigher (Doyle and Griffin, 2012).

Parents are an important factor in a student's decision to engage with a WP programme, NCOP included. Parental engagement has a positive impact on many areas of a young person's progression, including educational attainment, aspirations, and HE

progression (Mulcahy and Baars, 2018). However, the authors acknowledge parental engagement is difficult to measure, and this could be due to issues of inequality impacting families beyond academic factors.

Access to a programme of activities was insufficient to ensure engagement from all students and parents within a ward, partly due to not addressing other aspects of socioeconomic inequality. For instance, the Derbyshire NCOP (DANCOP), formed its activity programme with Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital in mind (Spink and Hubbard, 2021), which is where culturally valued non-financial forms of privilege such as education, are passed down through families (Whitty, Hayton, and Tang, 2015). Cultural capital has been found to have a positive association with intention to go to university (Davies, Qiu, and Davies, 2014), but this is only useful if students are engaged in the first place. This has implications on the socioeconomic reach of the programme if these experiences were consistent across the country, as hinted by the CFE evaluation (CFE Research, 2019). Taking a Bourdieusian perspective is certainly not unique to an English context and has often been used as a lens to understand WP policy (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016). Peacock, Sellar and Lingard (2014) focused on one instance of equity policy and appropriation in the context of Australia. They reflect on how the Australian Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP), introduced in 2010 reinvigorated student-equity and outreach programs, but like the previously discussed English AimHigher programme, various partnerships shifted away from collaborative regional work, towards a more competitive effort to recruit students to specific HEIs (Peacock, Sellar and Lingard, 2014).

The OfS were aware of the critical role of parents in promoting aspirations during NCOP phase one and this is visible in baseline data within the CFE evaluation, where 28 NCOP partnerships reported some level of engagement strategy for parents

(OfS 2018). However, no clear roadmap for how to do this successfully has presented itself and methods of evaluating impact have been restricted to monitoring perceptions. CFE research have made attempts at recording this perception data, noting 57% of NCOP staff considered the parents they had engaged with had increased their perceived knowledge of HE options (CFE Research, 2019). There are two major issues with this, firstly, this treats parents as a homogenous group, and secondly, it makes no comment on the number of parents the NCOP failed to engage with. Equally, the care workforce should be considered, as young people in care are affected by their social class, and because of the limited educational experience of those who look after them (Cameron, Jackson, Hauari, and Hollingworth, 2012). Therefore, while NCOP and WP in general is effective in overcoming barriers for those keen to develop cultural capital and learn more about HE, this is critically dependent on these families engaging in the first place.

Developing NCOP Phase Two

The scale of resourcing and the flexible nature of NCOP was admirable, as was the drive to involve as many stakeholders as possible. It offered a variety of activities to 246,204 students by the end of year 2 (CFE Research, 2019), and supplemented activities with bespoke mentoring and support. Considerable WP progress has been made over the years, but further challenges remain (Hillman, 2017). NCOP continued this trend, with the programme receiving positive feedback from those who engaged. However, the policy was less successful in tackling the most difficult to engage students and parents, as combating the effects of years of structural inequality these families may have experienced would require a much larger number of bespoke interventions than the programme could afford.

The evaluation of NCOP phase one by CFE Research involved gathering evidence from a wide range of measures. This included ‘an annual survey of partnership

staff, 12 field visits to individual partnerships, a baseline and follow-up survey of over 4,000 learners who took part in the programme, three randomised control trials and a qualitative review of the partnerships' evaluation evidence' (CFE Research, 2019, p2). The mixed methodology here is important, as it demonstrates a clear understanding the benefits of the programme could not be captured by quantitative data alone.

NCOP phase two did not have a full, published evaluation under that name. Instead, an evaluation was published under the guise of being Uni Connect phase two which ran from August 2019 to July 2021 (Office for Students, 2021b). Phase two aimed to address some of the difficulties experienced in the implementation of phase one. For example, the first major aim of phase two was:

“Within the core eligibility, partnerships may want to consider whether to apply additional targeting, for example, students from NCOP wards with a disability, receiving free school meals or in care. This would need to be agreed in consultation with the schools and colleges concerned. We would encourage partnerships to consider prioritising particular student groups within the target wards where data shows gaps in equality of opportunity in relation to access to higher education” (Office for Students, 2019b, p7).

This demonstrates a greater emphasis on differentiating between eligible students within the POLAR4 wards and pushing for more targeted interventions for students facing additional indicators of socioeconomic deprivation. This indicates a keen understanding of the shortcomings of the previous phase.

Phase two changes built on some of the phase one successes, with a greater array of partners invited to the implementation of the programme, including the Job Centre, the National Citizen Service, and greater involvement of Local Enterprise Partnerships. The activity of these partners was coordinated through 'outreach hubs' operated by the NCOP (Office for Students, 2021b). These hubs appear to have replaced embedded staff

within colleges and schools, which could be argued as counterintuitive to the goal of better targeted interventions, since embedded staff had access to a greater range of data on the students participating. Furthermore, it appears in some NCOPs, these staff were replaced by recent graduates acting as ‘ambassadors’ for the scheme (AimHigher, 2019). Although this supports the ambition of engaging students through relatable role models, which has been found to be effective (CFE Research, 2021), recent graduates are less likely to have the same degree of skills embedded NCOP coordinators would have in conducting impactful interventions.

Another change for phase two was the omission of further parental engagement in NCOP guidance. It is possible the OfS viewed parental engagement as difficult to measure and maintain across 29 consortia and chose to focus their efforts elsewhere. By relying on NCOP staff interpretation of positive impact on parents, they are demonstrating a lack of a more impactful vehicle for capturing this valuable data. An independent review indicates that all 29 partnerships delivered targeted interventions for parents or carers during phase two, but only two partnerships could provide any empirical evidence of impact (CFE Research, 2021).

Overall, while NCOP phase two had its intended merits, the independent review of phase two NCOP outlined how partnerships’ understanding of the remit of outreach hubs and their approaches used differed significantly (Office for Students, 2021b). Hence, despite attempting to achieve more flexibility, the result of phase two was variation between hubs, confusion amongst practitioners in interpreting the aims and objectives, and a lack of consistent measurable outputs.

Conclusion

This paper began with considering the Dearing report, and since then, there has been a propagation of WP related projects and initiatives, such as AimHigher (Doyle and Griffin, 2012), Action on Access (Thompson, 2019), and more recently, NCOP and Uni Connect. This continuation of WP policy has led to a wider WP community of practitioners and researchers, but it is evident problems remain, whether regarding effective evaluation of impact, or understanding and reaching the target group. Despite how WP initiatives allows institutions to be seen as socially aware, which is good for them from a marketing perspective (McCaig and Adnett, 2009), universities will often be driven by market forces and the needs of employers as opposed to the needs of underrepresented communities (Jones and Thomas, 2005; Peacock, Sellar and Lingard, 2014). Hence, it is perhaps unsurprising that some authors have characterised the concept of student transition into HE as being system-driven and system-serving (Gale and Parker, 2014). Rainford (2019) furthers the contextualisation of this problem by evaluating how the introduction of the OfS led to the stimulation of HE competition and marketisation, where the focus on access becomes more related to compliance, than excellence. Rainford (2019) later outlines the differing imperatives of WP; the moral imperative (being the right thing to do), the economic imperative (needing to remain financially viable), and the policy imperative (to charge maximum tuition fees, institutions needed to have engaged with the agenda). Ultimately, this means that meeting the moral duty of WP can be hindered in tougher economic conditions. Through research with over 350 staff across 11 English HE institutions, Stevenson, Whelan, and Burke (2018) found this to be the case. The authors outline how marketisation processes have deflected resources away from WP and other related social justice activities, thereby leading to diverse forms of WP activities and further debate as to what WP is and should be.

This is not just a national issue, with many developed nations suffering from the difficulty of the ‘policy trilemma’, or in other words, finding an effective balance between increasing HE participation, WP, and increasing the emphasis of how HE funding can be passed onto students and their families (Adnett and Tlupova, 2008). In addition, market forces continue to put pressure on universities with a “triple whammy” of sudden rise in inflation, a loss of EU funds and growing uncertainty around the future of the international student market (Foster, Gross and Borrett, 2023). With the establishment of UniConnect, outreach departments, like many are being scaled back or redirected to grow recruitment teams which is likely to reduce the amount and effectiveness of the types of intervention shown to be the most impactful in this paper. Therefore, inequality will likely persist, with some authors contending that so long as the philosophical rationale and policy context of WP continues to be unclear, WP practice will be constrained within the boundaries of committed individuals and teams at a local level, with the inability to have a broader and sustained impact (Stevenson, Clegg, and Lefever, 2010; Office for Students, 2021b). There can also be an argument that the complex and contradictory nature of the “policy trilemma” may stretch as far as making OfS-led strategy in its current form paradoxical; this would only serve to highlight the need for a top-to-bottom rethink of devolved strategy itself. If sole responsibility for WP success on a national level was removed, and other groups such as charities and schools partnerships were taking into account, the impact of this “trilemma” would be greatly reduced.

As a concept, WP needs to become more of a culturally ingrained consideration internationally, as until then, pockets of good practice will be counteracted by the influence of market forces, with underrepresented communities being left behind. It is

therefore recommended that future research applies the same rigour of policy evaluation as described in this paper to other country contexts, so that a more thorough evaluation of global WP practices can be identified and understood.

Disclosure statement

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