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# Reconceptualizing the 'problem' of widening participation in higher education in England

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## Abstract

This article critically analyses national and institutional forms of policy and different conceptions of widening participation in higher education in England by contrasting representations of 'it' as a 'problem' to be managed, compared with complex and recurring dilemmas in practice. Building on Bacchi's (2012a) strategy, the article asks, 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' (WPR), and how the 'problem' of widening participation was constructed in specific contexts, by examining tensions between constructions of policy in texts and representations of widening participation in semi-structured interviews with national and institutional policy actors. Policy actors did not share a single voice, and various proposals embodied different representations of the 'problem'. These do not reduce practice to distinct or static categories limited by available policy options. Instead, contemporary representations, interpretations and translations of policy and practice make visible both limitations and possibilities for widening participation in higher education in the future.

**Keywords:** widening participation, higher education, policy, problematization, policy actors

## Introduction

In the construction of 'access' into higher education in England, the under-representation of individuals and groups, and an emphasis on entry, has been combined with particular notions of 'participation' (BIS, 2014; OfS, 2018). This article examines how governmental policy and practice has represented these different forms, through the Office for Fair Access (OFFA, 2004–18), and the Office for Students (OfS, established in 2018). By analysing policy texts, constructions by national and institutional policy actors, and differing notions of access and participation, the article then asks how 'problems' of widening participation are produced and represented (Bacchi, 2012a).

Since the 2010s, research on widening participation has challenged rational models of policy (Stevenson *et al.*, 2010; Burke, 2012, 2016; Burke *et al.*, 2017; Stevenson *et al.*, 2018; Rainford, 2019). In this article, my distinctive contribution to analysing contested meanings of widening participation is derived from Bacchi's (2012a) analytic strategy 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' (WPR). Two research questions, informed by Bacchi's approach, ask:

- What is the 'problem' represented to be in specific policies or policy proposals?
- What assumptions underpin this representation of the 'problem'?

The article builds on Bacchi's (2012a: 22) argument by examining how contemporary policy texts construct definitions and assumptions representing the 'problem' of

widening participation. Her analysis of ‘problematization’ (Bacchi, 2012b), and the production of a ‘problem’, is first applied, in this instance, to contemporary texts (BIS, 2014; OfS, 2018). These documents define widening participation, and they are ‘thought of as proposals about how things ought to be’ (Bacchi, 2018: 6). Each text is understood not as a *response* to existing conditions but as *constructing* policies and practices: what ‘the problem’ of widening participation was and is represented to be (Bacchi, 2012a). Second, by analysing how policy actors, in a national policy network and within an institution, interpret and translate widening participation policies, the article examines tensions and disagreements in which policy actors speak from different positions, do not share a single voice and present various proposals embodying different representations of the ‘problem’ of widening participation. Building on the work of Stevenson *et al.* (2010), Ball *et al.* (2012) and Rainford (2019), I report how, in a series of semi-structured interviews, some policy actors combine an assertion of personal values with their *interpretation* of widening participation that reinforced dominant discourses of policy texts. By contrast, others pieced together ‘messy’ processes of *translation*. Finally, the article briefly considers the implications of these tensions between processes of interpretation and translation for limiting, or extending and re-imagining, different contemporary forms of widening participation policy and practice (Burke *et al.*, 2017).

## Widening participation: Problematizing policy texts

A policy proposal can be examined by ‘working backwards’ and tracing how a ‘problem’ has been created and produced (Bacchi, 2000: 47). Bacchi’s (2012a) notion of WPR is now applied to analysing contested meanings of widening participation, and her analytical strategy is applied to specific examples of policy. Stevenson *et al.* (2010) argued that the discourses of widening participation were contradictory, contested and complex. They concluded that the language of policy had not significantly changed between 1997 and 2010. These continuities are still evident in discourses threaded through subsequent policy literature (BIS, 2014; OfS, 2018).

By making representations of policy visible, these discourses remain problematic, and contradictions between competing values persist (Burke, 2016). The *National Strategy for Access and Student Success in Higher Education* (BIS, 2014), and guidance issued by the OfS (2018), continue to embody dominant definitions and representations of widening participation. BIS (2014) and OfS (2018) explicitly construct definitions of policy and practice. For example, the overall scope of widening participation in the foreword to BIS (2014: 6) proposed ‘three broad stages’:

Widening participation to higher education is about ensuring that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can access higher education, get the support they need to succeed in their studies, and progress to further study and/or employment suited to their qualifications and potential.

*Particular* notions of access, ‘student success’ and progression (BIS, 2014: 9) were embedded within ‘a student lifecycle’ constructing entry, transition and forms of support for ‘the student’ and their ‘experience’. The foreword to the *National Strategy* emphasized students ‘receiving study support’ (my emphasis) as part of ‘student success’:

Our approach also recognises that widening participation should encompass the whole student lifecycle: preparing to apply and enter higher education; *receiving* study support and *achieving* successful

completion; and *progressing* to postgraduate education or to/within employment. (BIS, 2014: 3; my emphasis)

How are the 'problems' of widening participation now made explicit by the OfS? Established by the Higher Education and Research Act (2017), the OfS began operations in April 2018 after the closure of the OFFA and the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE). Subsequently, the Director for Fair Access and Participation, on behalf of the OfS (2018), framed 'access and participation' through a Regulatory Notice. The benefits of higher education for individual students are still framed in terms of a 'cohesive and just society' and 'productive economy' (OfS, 2018). This definition of widening participation reinforces earlier guidance (BIS, 2014) and still exemplifies the argument of Stevenson *et al.* (2010) that the language of widening participation, between 1997 and 2010, emphasizes a juxtaposition between individual economic prosperity and social justice through wider participation. This fundamental dilemma was recognized by Davies *et al.* (1997: 1):

The contestations are about what can be said and thought about higher education, who can speak, when, where and with what authority, and about who has the power to translate argument and policy into practice and to determine the shape, size and access to higher education.

These contradictions and tensions have persisted since 2010. Burke (2012, 2016) critiques this dominant emphasis on the economy and marketplace in relation to access and participation. Notions of social justice, particular to some forms of widening participation, are marginalized by assumptions over a common or shared understanding of access (Burke, 2016). Instead, as Burke (2016) argues, overlapping discourses of 'expansion' and 'massification', combined with those of economic growth, act to obscure inequalities, and limit identities, experienced by students in stratified and diverse forms of higher education – but meanings are diverse and contextual. By defining 'the problem' of widening participation, and of 'support', BIS (2014) and OfS (2018) misrecognize both widening access *and* participation (Burke, 2012, 2016). In this instance, emphasis is placed on (some) students as *objects* of intervention (see the earlier definition of 'widening participation'; BIS, 2014: 6) rather than *subjects* who may shape their own diverse experiences, needs and identities. This is significant for contested meanings of widening participation because, as Burke *et al.* (2017) argue, the question of *participation* becomes marginalized in dominant forms of widening participation embodied in these national texts. They emphasize that discourses of widening participation in these texts construct limited forms and imaginings of the participation of 'others' that marginalize, or ignore, how practices reproduce inequalities within and through higher education. As Quinn (2010: 127) emphasizes, 'there is no such thing as an identity'. However, in BIS (2014) and OfS (2018), the condition of 'being' a 'non-traditional' student embodies practices that objectify, and processes that label, the status and purpose of being 'a student' within 'the student experience' – rather than the formative, complex and shifting process of 'becoming' a student by participating in higher education. These texts reproduce and limit widening participation. The definition of widening participation is problematic because, as Burke (2016: 1) argues, 'assumptions are often made about a common or universal understanding of the term'.

The second dimension of 'problem' – *questioning* (Bacchi, 2012a: 23, emphasis in original) – asks what assumptions underpin this representation of the 'problem'? Within the marketization and differentiation of higher education, diverse contemporary

forms of widening participation coexist (Stevenson *et al.*, 2018), with implications for institutional stratification, pedagogy and widening participation:

while the expansion of HE [higher education] may lead to increased opportunities for access to HE for previously under-represented groups, a hierarchical arrangement of HEIs [higher education institutions] within the differentiated system often means that only particular kinds of HEIs provide opportunities for particular social groups. (Stevenson *et al.*, 2018: 152)

These diverse forms reflect, and are shaped by, increased marketization and competition, which is an integral feature of the regulatory framework of the OfS (Rainford, 2019: 29). Contemporary representations of widening participation are situated and shaped within this stratified higher education system. The analysis of interviews with national and institutional policy actors now asks how assumptions and regularities of statements (Sandberg *et al.*, 2016: 117) underpin different representations of the 'problem' of widening participation in these contexts.

## **Representations and constructions of the 'problem' of policy: Research design**

By critically examining data generated in semi-structured interviews, I analyse how representations and definitions of widening participation, including those within policy texts (BIS, 2014; OfS, 2018), were interpreted and translated by national and institutional policy actors. These highlight tensions between 'fixed' interpretations of texts, in which the dominant discourse of policy texts were represented in some interviews, compared with shifting and 'messy' processes of translating widening participation in others (Ball *et al.*, 2012). Rainford (2019: 37) applies these distinctions to widening participation and argues that *interpretation*, as an act in practice, may transform national policy into an institutionalized form, whereas *translation* is a more nuanced and discursive process that finds spaces between policies and practices.

Fifteen policy actors, in two purposive samples, participated in semi-structured interviews. Seven national policy actors, and their organizations, were part of a policy network designed to widen participation. They were interviewed over four months – after the preparation and production of the *National Strategy* (BIS, 2014). Two participants, in this sample, worked for 'arms-length' agencies or non-departmental public sector bodies that were part of (an earlier) higher education 'regulatory environment'. Others worked for organizations comprising a 'more ragged continuity' (Scott, 2013), with their origins in the policy era that Stevenson *et al.* (2010) analysed. Each of the participants knew one another – and the relationships between individuals and groups in the network denoted various interdependences within the network. However, as Newman (2001: 108) emphasizes, such networks are fluid and have 'shifting membership and ambiguous relationships and accountabilities'.

Within the institutional sample, two senior managers and six other participants had different roles. Three middle managers were chosen because each had responsibility for specific areas of policy, identified in the OFFA/HEFCE *National Strategy* document (BIS, 2014) and institutional Access Agreement. By contrast, three other participants were heads of academic departments within the institution. They were chosen because of my interest in understanding not only other parts of an 'organisational story' (Cortazzi, 2001) of widening participation, but also because of their perspectives as teachers who also manage. Their inclusion follows Gerrard and Farrell (2014: 640), who, in research on curriculum policy and teachers' work, trace

'the intersections between policy texts and policy-makers' understandings and uses of them' – through interviews.

The analysis of each transcript built on several recurring stages (Cousin, 2009: 104–7). After writing a short summary of each interview immediately after it took place, I then listened back to the recording of the interview to gather *what* was said, including differences between my initial summary, what the interviewee said and what was privileged – and omitted from my first account. Then, I transcribed the interview and asked *how* the story was told. I asked several questions: what held the story together; what were the links between *what* was said and *how* the story was told; and what were the possible contradictions in each narrative? My final thematic analysis, working across transcripts, enabled me to map cross-cutting themes, but also to ask what was incongruent: what was not said and what were the silences in these representations of widening participation – in a particular time and place?

This initial process of analysis was then deepened and extended. As Burke (2012: 75) emphasizes, narratives are 'social products created within specific social, cultural and historical locations'. Although the initial analytical procedure, following Cousin (2009), provides clarity, in earlier work, Savin-Baden (2004: 370) recognizes tensions between recurring acts of analysis and interpretation: 'In the process of data analysis there is a tendency to want everything to be tidy, when it is not, whereas interpretation appears to be a position where the researcher begins to embrace the complexities in the data.' Savin-Baden (2004) emphasizes the importance of understanding the subtext of an interview. She suggests reflecting on what the other person is arguing for, probing what their position may be and recognizing and then 'piecing together' the organizing principles used in an interview (Savin-Baden, 2004: 361). Savin-Baden (2004: 375) argues that these principles are 'categories used by people to justify, explain, defend and define themselves'. These interrelationships between Cousins's analytical framework and Savin-Baden's emphasis on embracing complexity in data (2004) are now used to sensitize my interpretation of four interviews, chosen from each sample. These illustrate dominant, but also messy and uneasy, struggles between competing values and contested terrains of widening participation policy and practice (Burke, 2016). For Bacchi (2012b: 2), the main purpose of studying problematizations is to 'dismantle objects', and I now analyse how 'problems' develop *in* practices and *through* the 'messy', shifting and contested terrain of widening participation (Burke, 2016).

## **Plotting a restricted narrative through national policies: 'It's all connected'**

National and institutional policy actors spoke from diverse positions, did not share a single voice and presented various proposals embodying different representations of 'problems' of widening participation. While restricted narratives were embedded within recurring metaphors of 'the student lifecycle' and transition, reformist narratives 'worked around the edges' of policy and practice. The latter offered first tentative steps in extending and 'piecing together' conditions and possibilities for re-imagining places for widening participation within a curriculum. However, although these distinctions embody different narratives, they were nuanced and, as I illustrate, some policy actors adopted shifting positions.

Stephen, a national policy actor, carefully constructed a narrative in which senses of stability, control and compliance, and the generative metaphor of 'the student lifecycle', were presented and interpreted to give an apparent coherence



to policy. Another, Marie, adopted a hybrid position. Both are problematic – albeit for different reasons. However, the frustrations of two other national policy actors, Laura and Debbie, embodied affective dimensions of policy. They emphasized the marginalization of earlier forms of access – and participation – for adult learners before widening participation was framed, and arguably limited, by Aimhigher and an emphasis on school or younger college leavers.

Stephen reinforced a dominant restricted narrative of widening participation, reproducing BIS (2014), by combining a framing of ‘student success’ with an implicit reference to ‘the student lifecycle’ and retention. His assertion exemplified Roe’s (1994) argument that ‘bureaucratic stories’ and narratives can be used to *stabilize* uncertainties and complexities of policy. Here are examples of ‘policy-as-discourse’ (Bacchi, 2000: 47) in which ‘problems’ are *created* and then shaped by proposals and, in this instance, a narrative of stability, control and compliance is constructed to give coherence to policy. Bansel (2015: 184) extends this analysis of ‘policy-as-discourse’ further by suggesting that narratives are a form through which ‘normative discourses and discursive practices are co-ordinated’, and the temporal dimensions of multiple narratives are organized through a process of emplotment in which events in a policy story, or plot (Jones and McBeth, 2010), are not simply ‘pieced together’. Instead, events are coordinated *through* narratives. However, while a ‘policy problem’ may be contested, and solutions may be ambiguous, policy in this first example of a ‘restricted’ narrative is stabilized in the interview by seeking to construct a ‘truth, transparency and necessity’ (Bansel, 2015: 187), first embedded in a policy text (BIS, 2014).

By contrast, the complexity of the positions that Marie called on, and referred to, embodied a hybrid of restricted and reformist narratives. ‘Truths’ were created and shaped by proposals. Reviewing the scope of BIS (2014), she argued:

*Well, I mean, it’s all connected. I mean, the national strategy sets out very clear expectations to universities in terms of what each HEI should be doing, that HEI strategy has to be evidence based, it has to be mindful of local and geographical WP [widening participation] patterns. It has to work across the whole of the student lifecycle.* (Emphases in interview)

Another ‘truth’ about institutionalizing change was also emphasized:

every change you come up with has to be institutionalized. So, the universities we accepted on to this programme, they had to have the support of their PVC [pro-vice-chancellor]; they had to show that they were going to be able to attempt to institutionalize this across the universities.

However, these were combined with two further arguments – in relation to more nuanced notions of ‘active learning’ and ‘belonging and attachment’:

active learning, what happens in the classroom, is really, really, really important. But we also know you can’t do that just in, sort of, isolation, otherwise you get some great teacher doing it and then they move on, and the problem just stays the same. It has to be ... but *every change you come up with has to be institutionalized.* (My emphasis)

Here, Marie ‘pieced together’ a narrative about widening participation, combining not only restricted notions of ‘the student lifecycle’ and institutionalization of change, but also reformist notions of curriculum, by emphasizing and asking:

What *are* you including students in? You know, *what are* you including them into? Are you including them into an experience that’s not really about

them, that when students look at the curriculum, they can't see themselves in the curriculum? And is that why some students are more likely to drop out than other students? *We've said over and over*, education, it's not ... inclusion is not about tolerance, it's about students' entitlement to an education. (Emphases in interview)

References to inclusion, entitlement and the curriculum were and are welcome. But what is problematic is that de-contextualizing students' diverse experiences of learning obscures inequalities experienced by individuals and groups of students when they access higher education and experience its diverse forms. Although Marie did refer to the curriculum in these debates – by asking 'What are you including students in? You know, what are you including them into? Are you including them into an experience that's not really about them?' – what was troubling were the limited explicit references to the practices of those who teach (other than references to the notion of 'a great teacher').

### **Restricted narratives and national policies: 'It's all about school leavers'**

However, Debbie and Laura challenged a dominant restricted narrative – not from the perspective of work within higher education, but from an emphasis on how the place of school leavers marginalized their work with adult learners in widening participation. A recurring emphasis, or pattern in their experiences, was marked by a *shift* in policy because of Aimhigher (2004–11) and subsequent policies. They argued that national policy trajectories of widening participation had been reframed by the conjunction of the Aimhigher programme, introduced by the second New Labour government (2001–5), and the establishment of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) following the Higher Education Act (2004). While Aimhigher was designed to address the aspirations and decision making of children and young people, OFFA was established to regulate widening participation practices within higher education institutions. Doyle and Griffin (2012) trace the origins of Aimhigher and map its formation through a combination of Excellence Challenge, established in 2001, and Partnerships for Progression in 2003. But, what their review of Aimhigher does not consider is the effects of the programme on either national organizations, with a remit to widen participation, or the reframing of widening participation policies, practices and strategies *within* universities.

Both Debbie and Laura traced and shared senses of struggle in their respective interviews. Their positions in relation to a dominant restricted narrative were complex. Each was explicit about their sense of frustration and the significance of political factors that shaped the work of their organizations. Threaded through their narratives was a recurring sense of ambivalence about the effects of Aimhigher and Access Agreements on multiple framings of widening participation. Laura emphasized:

the Aimhigher programme was government saying, 'Do this', and the bulk of the funding came not from [anonymised] but directly from central government and was an incredibly important initiative. And, the fact that that initiative actually pumped a lot of money into schools to allow them to engage was very, very important. But it took the emphasis away from those issues of student success, in terms of what was visible nationally, I think. It also probably didn't do much to encourage that join up within institutions.

Other interpretations of widening participation were of a struggle between an emphasis on access to university and widening participation in terms of what a 'student lifecycle' or the possibilities of 'the lifecycle approach' may offer:



institutions were then contributing to the Aimhigher scheme; they had outreach offices that didn't necessarily have much to do with the rest of the university, so there was all manner of things, I think, that meant that the emphasis was seen to be on access, *which is hugely important*, and you can't widen participation without it, *but ...* (Emphasis in interview)

Debbie also emphasized how the momentum of Aimhigher marginalized and disrupted her work, and that of her organization too:

why was it then that Access to HE continued to plough its own furrow, as it were, apparently with very little relationship to all of that other activity in Aimhigher, and so on. That was, I think, to do with the simple fact that actually the government policy was directed to increasing the progression rate from school leavers, so all of the policy stuff was written in terms of school leavers, young people, and so the way in which targets were written was all about increasing that progression. That then made it very difficult to put an argument that said, 'and adults, too'. I think there was immense frustration in the FE [further education] sector, from people who'd been working in Access to HE for many years, and to see that growth of widening participation, and kind of expecting, each time there was a new policy statement of some kind that finally Access to HE would've been brought within that, but it wasn't, because I think through all the years of the last government, *it was all about school leavers*. (Emphasis in interview)

These four representations of access and participation, by national policy actors, exemplify the argument by Ozga (2000) and Ball *et al.* (2012) that policy texts do not operate in a vacuum. Individual representations of the 'problem' and processes of problematization differed. While Stephen's 'statements of social practice' combined a settled organizational perspective and process of interpretation that reproduced national policy texts, Marie, Laura and Debbie each acknowledged space for translating 'messy' and shifting terrains (Burke, 2016) of widening participation – including work with adult learners. There were similar tensions between processes of interpretation and translation in my interviews with institutional policy actors. Three overlapping themes were identified: marketization and institutional formation, framing/s of widening participation, and the possibilities of shifting practices and pedagogical spaces. These embody not only competing values and a contested terrain (Burke, 2016), but also different representations of the question of participation (Burke *et al.*, 2017).

## **Compliance and marketization: 'We take so many students from WP backgrounds'**

Early in my interview with Gary, one of the members of the institutional management group, he made a bold assertion: 'I mean we are one of the best widening participation institutions in the country. Because we take so many students from WP backgrounds'. Recurring references to entry qualifications, and a labelling of 'support' and specific cohorts of students, explicitly situated policy and practices in relation to questions of institutional identity and risk:

If you use entry qualifications as a proxy of people's success on a course, then you are always going to have – you will have the oft-cited person who came in with nothing and left with a first – but *for every one of those you probably have ten others who drowned. They weren't ready*. (My emphasis)

No evidence was provided to support these assertions. In one sense, this comment was not a surprise. The notion highlights assumptions about how (some) students are formed by 'practices of inscription', but also how policy actors are 'regulated through the organisational processes in question' (Walby, 2013: 143), and why their specific location/s *within* the institution, and beyond, also affect their standpoint. In this instance, entry qualifications were being 'pieced together' in a plot constructed and related to personal, but also institutional, identities and contested notions of marketing and 'standards'. However, what Gary failed to recognize was that this dominant narrative not only framed the 'disadvantaged "WP" student' and widening participation; it also acted to obscure the diversity of experiences, the range of needs and multiple identities of students themselves within the institution (Burke, 2012).

## Framing widening participation and 'working around the edges'

Pete, Wendy and Barry, three heads of academic departments, challenged these restricted interpretations of widening participation and the assumptions about the effect of a higher education market. They each emphasized why their recurring roles – but also their involvement in specific practices – were important for their own understandings of how dominant discourses, shifting practices and questions of participation (Burke, 2012; Burke *et al.*, 2017) were framed.

For Pete, a particular notion and form of widening participation was problematic. He framed his current motivations:

the sort of things I do largely interest me around marginalized curriculum areas and other groups that are marginal and where I think they are being done down by particular areas of policy.

However, there was a paradox. In his affective response to the dominant form of widening participation, Pete juxtaposed a sense of unease and acknowledgement of what may ultimately be a 'positive force for good':

one of the things is that the term 'WP' is a rather clumsy and potentially pejorative phrase. So, I don't like the phrase 'widening participation'. I understand again its motivations. Its motives. The first thing to say about what it means is that it is not a very attractive phrase. What it means in policy terms – I think – is about raising aspirations for communities that hitherto have ruled out university education either because simply it wasn't for them or because the development of aspirations – the promotion of an aspirant community – hasn't taken place. Apart from the clumsiness of the phrase, the actual ambitions are a positive force for good.

This sense that 'widening participation' is 'a rather clumsy and potentially pejorative phrase' and not an 'attractive phrase' is a powerful condemnation of a *particular form* of widening participation that reflects Jones and Thomas's (2005) earlier critique of its academic and utilitarian discourses. However, Pete's critique of aspiration raising, embodied by Aimhigher (2004–11), is also significant because it represents what (for many) is *the* dominant interpretation of widening participation. He emphasized this tension by comparing different framings of practice:

on one side, you have got this fairly essentialist agenda and, on the other side, there is this really powerful agenda with issues around social

justice – maximizing participation and what people bring into the university environment in a much richer way really.

By contrast, Wendy and Barry, two other heads of academic departments, highlighted and situated the possibilities of shifting practices over time. Both also asserted their personal values but, unlike Pete, each explicitly related these to the significance of different policy texts and contemporary practice. They emphasized why their involvement in specific initiatives was important for their own situated understandings of how processes unfolded and dominant discourses were framed (Gibb, 2014: 5). They emphasized the interrelationships between national and institutional policy texts and institutional practices, highlighting ‘working around the edges’ of a specific policy or shifting multiple strategies.

First, Wendy, reflecting on earlier developments within the institution, discussed how these were shaped by changes in national policies. Before a cap on student numbers:

we came up with a plan to take students with *low* UCAS points on a *Certificate* of Higher Education Programme. So I was very involved in discussions around that and setting up that Cert HE route. I mean, it did apply to all subjects and not just mine, but we were enthusiastic participants in it. So that is the first time, if you like, when we had to *defend* widening participation, that we had to think about the strategies for supporting students who came in on that programme and that we began to look at the data about their success. (Emphases in interview)

Although a later change in national policy led to a particular decision by senior managers that emphasized a weaving of shifting practice and marketization:

[The provision] hit a bit of a snag because a cap came on numbers. So all the pressure from the top was to cut back and that is a very easy place to cut [and] *to take people who are a safer bet*. (Emphasis in interview)

Barry highlighted a further specific contemporary issue, emphasizing ‘othering’ and a struggle with a marginalization of participation (Burke, 2012; Burke *et al.*, 2017) – not the interpretation of a national policy text, or institutional policy, but of how institutional practices were translated into work with first-generation migrant students and the diversity of their language needs. This example relates to the significance of the representation of a policy ‘problem’ and processes of ‘problematization’ (Bacchi, 2012b), the frustrations Barry felt, but also his imagination in ‘piecing together’ a specific response:

*Really good things happen but they happen in the spaces*. A really good example. I mean you may have clocked it. We have just started – and this is a particular issue for us – we have a lot of students who are first-generation migrants. Who are often doing a degree in a second or third language. Because they are classified as home students they can’t get any support – language support etc. *Now in the cracks there has been a really subtle and well thought out attempt to try and do something about that, ...* so – in this case – Jenny [pseudonym] has really tried to be proactive and do interesting things. But the institution fails to acknowledge that those students exist. So if you raise it, and say how do we raise those students from this view of them as a deficit – who can’t write properly – when actually many of these students have a fantastic range of experience, which we

need to capture in positive and constructive ways. And to do that, I think you have got to have a different model of the relationship between the institution and the students. (Emphasis in interview)

By 'working around the edges' of policy, this practice is comparatively small in scale. However, unlike restricted interpretations of widening participation embedded in BIS (2014) and OfS (2018), and interviews with some national and institutional policy actors, Barry did not claim to be representing an 'organisational story' (Keep, 2009) or 'institutional' initiative. What spaces may open up for other possibilities of extending and re-imagining widening participation? A problem is both the limitations of restricted narratives and the scope of small reformist 'counter stories' (Cavieres-Fernandez, 2017: 414).

## Re-imagining and extending widening participation?

A 'new policy agenda' (van Eeten, 2007: 256) may recast and reframe beyond widening participation (Burke, 2012) through changing pedagogical spaces (Burke, Crozier and Misiaszek, 2017) not separate from, or on the margins of, the curriculum. This is a challenge to limitations of restricted interpretations, but it may begin with 'messy' and shifting processes of translation within reformist narratives. As Freire (1985: 49) argues:

To be an act of knowing ... demands among teachers and students a relationship of *authentic dialogue*. True dialogue unites subjects together in the cognition of a *knowable object*, which mediates between them ... learners must assume from the beginning the role of *creative subjects*. (My emphasis)

Burke (2012) recognizes how forms of pedagogy, curriculum design and processes of assessment in higher education can all act to exclude students. The principles she outlines emphasize the recurring need to challenge misrecognitions and reconstitute practices through participation (Burke, 2012: 190).

Further research and practice, expanding possibilities within widening participation, could begin by reflecting on how to nurture, develop and change pedagogical spaces (Burke *et al.*, 2017). First, by reflecting on who gets to speak about policy – and practice – and how the 'voices' of students and lecturers are conceived in these processes. Second, by lecturers within institutions reflecting on questions about the design of curriculum and forms of pedagogy – given the diverse needs and multiple identities of students with which they work (Gale and Parker, 2014: 745). As Nixon (2011: 123, emphasis in original) argues, what so-called 'under-represented' groups lack is not 'representation' but *presence*. Finally, further spaces may be found for students to 'become' co-creators of teaching approaches, course design and curricula.

## Conclusion

By engaging with tensions between different interpretations and translations of widening participation, this article has traced how policies in texts (BIS, 2014; OfS, 2018) were represented by national and institutional policy actors in semi-structured interviews (Ball *et al.*, 2012). In BIS (2014) and OfS (2018), the 'problem' of widening participation represented (Bacchi, 2012a) and embodied the 'non-traditional' student. Practices objectify, and processes label, the status and purpose of 'being' a student – rather than the formative, complex and shifting process of 'becoming' a student. These texts reproduce and limit widening participation. The definitions they present

are problematic because, as Burke (2016: 1) emphasizes, ‘assumptions are often made about a common or universal understanding of the term’.

Instead, different ways of reconceptualizing widening participation represent tensions between a label of ‘being’ a ‘non-traditional’ or ‘WP student’ and ‘becoming’ a student (Barnett, 2008). However, as Gale and Parker (2014) emphasize, the dilemma is not whether individuals or groups *adapt* to institutions, or are incorporated *into* the culture of an institution, but whether spaces for different forms of transformation in teaching practices and curriculum *within* the institution are opened up and nurtured. These spaces go beyond the limited restricted interpretations of widening participation reported in this article. Instead, possibilities begin with taking account of the ‘multiplicities of student lives’ (Gale and Parker, 2014: 745) and building on ‘work around the edges’ of a narrow interpretation of policy by nurturing new pedagogical spaces and forms of participation (Burke *et al.*, 2017). This reconceptualization of the possibilities of widening participation offers a starting point for re-imagining practices in the future by asking how to access the knowledge of those who have been excluded from higher education.

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## Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work.

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