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Editorial

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‘Where are we now?’ (Bowie, D.)

I am delighted, from this edition, to take on the role of Managing Editor for *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* from Liz Marr. I sincerely hope, after such sterling service, Liz can return to the editorial hot seat in the future. I am grateful to the professional commitment of the (tiny) administrative team supporting the journal (Kate and Sattie, on the margins of their time) who have ensured a smooth transition, and who have produced a particularly rich edition for May 2017.

I write this editorial with the much missed David Bowie lamenting ‘Where are we now?’ in the background. A beautiful track from what was regarded as his comeback album in 2013 after a decade of recording silence, his plea seems a prescient one given the seismic changes affecting the world of education. The spectre of Trump in the US presidency and the UK removing itself from the European Union, could hardly have been predicted four years ago, even if, sadly, the host of global crises currently unfolding might have been. ‘Where are we now?’ seems a timely, pertinent and important question for colleagues interested in global and national issues around participation in higher education (HE).

With Bowie’s rhetorical question in mind, the articles in this edition of *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* suggest two stubborn issues, and one glint of hope. First, we appear (still) to be threatened with the unintended consequences of national policy decisions around the world which continue to limit progress on equitable access to HE – for example, a recent article in *The Guardian* (UK) headlined ‘Part-time student numbers collapse by 56% in five years’ outlined the impact of a lack of financial support on those learners, disproportionately mature and from disadvantaged backgrounds, who need a part-time/flexible route into HE. With numbers plummeting, some universities are withdrawing from part-time undergraduate education completely. Second, we still have much to do to enhance the opportunities available to certain groups who have traditionally been under-represented in HE – obstacles remain and issues of transition,

retention and student success have not disappeared. Third, and hopefully representing a glint of optimism, it appears the journal is attracting a more rigorous body of research and evaluation, so that we are in a stronger position to influence policy makers and ensure HE ‘punches at its weight’ in relation to social justice.

Contents

The eight articles and two book reviews contained in this edition of the journal offer serious reflection and robust evidence to help position widening participation and lifelong learning issues in the educational zeitgeist. The wide-ranging coverage of relevant issues across the eight articles, the close attention given to diverse disciplines and settings, and the broader contextualisation offered in the globally-focussed book reviews are commendable. Taken as a whole, this edition suggests that, even if the issues highlighted over the past decade remain stubbornly persistent, the academic attention given to widening participation and lifelong learning is in energetic hands.

For readers particularly interested in learning from situated examples in HE, we publish here three full articles and an innovative practice (IP) article which offer valuable case studies of institutional approaches to widen access and support student success.

Duncan and Purcell address inclusivity and exam adjustments in the Humanities, reporting that no advantage is conferred on those students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD) who are allocated additional time and/or access to a word processor in examinations. This is an important finding, offering evidence that assessment policies which seek to meet individual needs are not ‘dumbing-down’ standards, but can be effective approaches to equity, and to levelling the assessment playing field.

In arguing that the language of assessment in HE is an under-recognised obstacle to students from so-called ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds, a group of researchers at the Open University present evidence that even academic teams with a commitment to social justice can be inadvertently sucked into employing, by default, an exclusionary language around assessment. This research has implications across HE – suggesting colleagues need to cast aside assumptions about the language in which assessment is currently expressed (technical, with power held by the University, written in ‘un-commonsense’ language, done to students), and scrutinise how they present assessment tasks from the perspective of students adjusting to HE, conceptualising assessment for rather than of learning.

Issues of masculinity, social class and access to Fine Art are rarely explored in widening participation research. Broadhead offers a valuable contribution to this under-developed area, using narrative enquiry to identify invisible/visible pedagogic issues in art HE. In a finely nuanced individual study, the interface of a mature student's expectations about master/apprentice approaches to 'craft' education, and the reality of a more theorised underpinning, are explored.

Of relevance beyond his own University is Farenga's analysis of institutional efforts to support the transition of students from WP backgrounds. Reporting findings from student focus groups stimulated by visual research methodologies, a valuable reminder is asserted about the need to focus on the student journey rather than institutional systems.

For those readers interested in pre-HE outreach and its impact on WP learners, three articles are especially relevant:

Gauntlett *et al* rise to the challenge recently laid down in England by the Office for Fair Access (OfFA), who, along with Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), have been extolling universities to evaluate their aspiration-raising outreach activities far more rigorously, as well as their approaches to supporting students from groups under-represented in HE. Drawing on data from two institutionally-funded PhD studentships in widening participation, the authors use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to challenge a discourse of deficit and report individual stories of aspiration-raising work with learners from low participation neighbourhoods, and student lifecycle support for first year students from low income backgrounds.

Complementing this study, Lewis offers a thorough analysis of the impact of an unusual outreach activity, which uses archaeological fieldwork in teams to instigate cross-curricula confidence-building with disadvantaged 13-15 year olds from schools with poor GCSE results (public examinations taken at age 16). Findings suggest that, if such activities are vigorously evaluated at every stage, positive learning outcomes can result.

Drawing on data from an Irish context, O'Sullivan *et al* report the positive impact of a mentoring programme aimed at pupils from low-income backgrounds. This adds to extant research on the importance of confidence-building and the development of social networks/social capital for students from disadvantaged backgrounds via undergraduate role models.

For readers seeking to understand the impact of widening participation policies on learners themselves, Walton and Carrillo analyse an Australian national policy aimed at widening participation to research intensive universities. The authors argue, persuasively, that, in relation to such policies, a deficit discourse persists, and that the key dimension to widen participation remains the identification of school factors which influence pupil outcomes.

Walton and Carrillo's article has been positioned as a discussion piece and we will facilitate this conversation via our Access Observatory blog <http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/wideningparticipation/> and on Twitter @access_observe.

Our two book reviews also contribute to better understanding of policy impacts across the globe. In McLean's review of *Contemporary Issues of Equity in Education* (Eds Gannon & Sawyer, 2014), the edited collection of 15 chapters, which cover equity issues from Primary to HE settings, is highly regarded. In particular, the impact of increasing commodification of education, the unwavering significance of social class, and the issue of refugee education are highlighted.

In McCaig's review of *Access and Expansion Post-Massification: Opportunities and Barriers to Further Growth in Higher Education Policy* (Eds Jongbloed & Vorsensteyn, 2015), a series of international perspectives exploring widening participation in relation to universal access to HE are given a more mixed review, with the notable exception of Parry's lauded overview chapter on policy.

So, where we are now is perhaps evidenced by the considerable academic interest demonstrated internationally in widening participation and lifelong learning – let's solve some of those intractable social justice problems together.

Next edition of *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*

I hope you have found some stimulating ideas in this edition of *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*. Please tell your colleagues and share in your networks. The next edition will be published in Autumn 2017 as a special edition in partnership with SEEC, focusing on the recognition of prior learning (RPL).

References

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