



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Asking the right questions: Opportunities and challenges of survey methods in widening participation research

**Bethan Collins<sup>\*a</sup>, Clive Hunt<sup>b</sup>, Alex Wardrop<sup>b</sup>, Lizzie Gauntlett<sup>b</sup>, Vanessa Heaslip<sup>b</sup>,  
Maggie Hutchings<sup>b</sup> and Colin Pritchard<sup>b</sup>**

<sup>a</sup>University of Liverpool, UK

<sup>b</sup>Bournemouth University, UK

---

The development of an institution-wide survey at one English university raised questions for the researchers in relation to how to ask students about their background. The survey was to focus future widening participation (WP) practice. A detailed iterative process was undertaken to design the institution-wide survey, which included pilot testing and qualitative focus groups with students, from which the results of this paper are drawn. We highlight two areas for consideration: the first, consists of issues of survey design and deployment in an education context generally, and the second, of specific issues relating to survey methods in widening participation research and practice. Students willingly participate in a survey when its aims are clear, when it is easy to complete and when it is perceived to be of ultimate benefit to them. Students in this study did not mind responding to questions about their widening participation status but needed the reason for these questions to be overt and the question to be phrased in a manner that is straightforward and easy to understand. A key learning point from developing the survey was that, in our attempts to use what we thought was more positive, politically correct language, we used euphemistic terms which had the unwanted effect of causing confusion amongst the students. We question whether the use of euphemism clouds the potential reality of inequality and that to uncover and act upon this inequality – surely the aim of WP practice – we need to directly ask students about their experience of disadvantage. Our reluctance to ask direct questions was to avoid offending students and based, problematically, on our underlying assumptions about the shame and stigma attached to disadvantage. These unconscious beliefs about shame and stigma need to be brought into conscious awareness and challenged if we are to address inequality in higher education.

*Keywords:* survey design; questionnaire development; pilot testing; widening participation; higher education; student equity

---

#### Introduction

At its heart, the term widening participation (WP) conveys an understanding that persistent structural and intersectional inequalities exist in higher education, in terms of who has access to which types of provision and how those experiences shape future lives. The ways in which

inequalities are articulated in regulation, policy, funding and practice varies according to nation, region, institution and the epistemological standpoint of institutional actors. Are participation gaps rooted in a deficit found in individuals or a lack of will on the part of institutions or are educational inequalities another symptom of a hierarchical system that drives all areas of society and the economy? Within this study we approach WP as the space in which the complex lived experiences of individuals meet the complexities of institutional policy. The inherent ambivalences of a discourse driving socially aware change within a competitive, market-led system emerge as survey participants seek to find a language for their own identities within the frameworks established by the institution to orient their own performance (Wardrop et al., 2016).

This study is part of a larger institutional research project exploring WP at a UK university. Survey-design research was undertaken to examine how students from different backgrounds rate different aspects of the student experience. Widening participation practice at this university aims to reduce inequalities across the whole student journey (not merely admission to the university) and enable students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to succeed and experience both equality of opportunity and outcome. The survey aimed to establish baseline data specifically for disadvantaged students about overall satisfaction with, and engagement in, aspects of university life. If differences in ratings for aspects of student experience were identified between the more and less advantaged (such as mature versus young entrants i.e., under 21, first-in-family versus those whose parents attended university, those from low-income families against high-income families and black or minority ethnic groups in relation to non-minority groups), particularly if less positive experiences were identified by less advantaged students, this would enable the university to plan interventions to improve experiences for specific student groups. Such efforts could be tracked through annual redeployment of the survey. Thus, the survey approach was intended to be a core part of the university's WP practice. In discussing the development and pilot testing of the initial questionnaire, this paper raises questions about how we use survey methodology in WP research. Particularly, this research raised issues of how we ask the 'right' questions, appropriately chosen and phrased, about WP status to elicit information about institutional changes and improvements in WP practice.

In UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), an annual survey is deployed, the National Student Survey (NSS), administered by the National Union of Students, to elicit final-year undergraduate student's perceptions of their experience. While demographic data (including WP status) are sought in this survey, it is undertaken with final year students and not available until after the students have graduated. The questions, being outside the control of specific HEIs, may therefore not provide data that is needed to target developments in that particular institution. The university at which this study was based particularly sought information on student experiences in their first and second years of education, rather than an overall summary, so it was decided that the NSS would not provide adequate granularity to be used to develop a WP strategy. It was therefore agreed, at the highest level of the university, that a targeted survey would be developed to support an ongoing commitment to genuine WP development.

WP in higher education (HE) is subject to different regulatory and monitoring processes depending on the national HE system (European Commission, 2014; Shah, Bennett, & Southgate, 2015). In England, the new HE regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), considers WP from the perspective of underrepresentation across the learning lifecycle (OfS, 2018). Specific measures are used to identify and track differentials in participation, attainment and progression. These can relate to socio-economic background, race, disability, social care experience, age and refugee and asylum status. One of the dominant measures of WP used in England is the Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) classification. POLAR estimates how

likely young people are to go into higher education by geographic ward with disadvantage conceived of as those young people living in areas with historic low-participation in higher education (HEFCE, 2015; 2017). Harrison and McCaig (2015) have emphasised the inadequacies and risks of POLAR, particularly as it remains critical to the English HE regulatory landscape. The ambiguity relating to how WP is measured and who is deemed underrepresented within a particular context presents significant data and epistemological challenges for researchers, practitioners and policymakers. This situation is compounded by additional legal requirements to promote equality and non-discrimination for people with particular protected characteristics that includes sexual orientation and religious beliefs (OfS, 2018).

### ***Challenges of measuring widening participation***

Internationally, there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of research and evaluation of WP practice, driven by the desire for cost-effectiveness, influenced by the political, social, and economic constraints on HE due to global austerity measures (Reed, King, & Whiteford, 2015; Mountford-Zimdars & Harrison, 2016). In the UK, there are increasing calls for WP practice to adopt more robust and reflexive research and evaluation processes to ensure that resources are directed effectively (Burke et al., 2018; HEFCE, 2015; Thomas, 2012; The Sutton Trust, 2015; OFFA, 2016; OfS, 2018). However, the question of how research about WP should be undertaken at an institutional and national level is frequently ambiguous (Wardrop et al., 2016). Good evidence is needed to underpin practice and to ensure that efforts focus on reducing the impact of disadvantage. The purpose of the survey discussed in this paper is to inform decision-making about the targeting of resources to support the university's WP students and then monitor impact on student experience.

The Sutton Trust (2015) argue that there is a lack of robust evidence demonstrating the impact of outreach activities because HEIs are not consistently using randomised control trials (the 'gold standard'). Such data-driven, positivist approaches, however, are not without their pitfalls and can perpetuate and exacerbate existing inequalities (Harrison & McCaig, 2015). Within quantitative research ontology and epistemology, the requirement to test and control in the pursuit of discovering one 'truth' about what works can oversimplify social complexities and risk perpetuating the very hierarchies and exclusions that WP seeks to challenge. Quantitative research necessarily requires standardised categorisation and measurement. This means that, even where these data can be disaggregated, evidence may not be sufficiently sensitive to recognise and reveal the complex lives experienced by marginalised students. Accurate quantitative analysis can show us large trends and changes over time so, despite its limitations, this method of research remains essential for establishing a baseline understanding of a research problem (in this case, student experiences) from which further, more detailed enquiry can proceed.

In addition to the challenge of determining research design, researching WP is beset with challenges of identification: that is, who are the subjects in the first place? In England, as already noted, the OfS (2018) supply a list of those typically underrepresented in HE. In England, the *Higher Education and Research Act 2017* shifted the regulatory landscape from a single-focused WP regulator to a system whereby a concern for access and participation underpins the OfS strategic vision (OfS, 2018). The regulatory technology of annual institutional plans and investment forecasts still stands although this is subject to consultation and future change (OfS, 2018). All higher education providers in England wishing to charge tuition fees above the basic level (£6,165 per annum for full-time courses in 2018-19) must outline publicly, through documents known as access and participation plans (previously known as access agreements), how they will invest their higher fee income to support disadvantaged and underrepresented

students to enter and progress through their programmes of study. The first access and participation plan guidance (OfS, 2018) built on the approach taken by OFFA to encourage providers to examine multiple dimensions of disadvantage within that particular institution. This recognises an understanding of how inequality and oppression are intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989). This means that some people and groups experience multiple levels of disadvantage and, in order to tackle that oppression, consideration from all sides is required. Taking an intersectional approach to WP opens up discussion of HE representation further. Within England, for example, we can see attention being paid by some institutions to students who are the first in their family to attend university because these students can lack the social capital support necessary to succeed in HE (Hunt et al., 2017). This increasingly nuanced understanding of economic and educational marginalisation requires researchers to appreciate and capture the diversity of experiences.

### ***The use of survey methodology in widening participation research***

The design, development and deployment of a survey intended to capture the experiences of WP students is contoured by the challenges of both identity and research process. However, surveys and questionnaires in a variety of forms are common in WP research (Marshall, Reay, & Wiliam, 1999). However, they are typically used to evaluate WP interventions (such as outreach activities) or as a complement to data analyses rather than stand-alone research tools (Crawford, Dytham, & Naylor, 2017). There are a number of good practice guidelines for survey design; one such approach is that of the ‘tailored design’ proposed by Dillman (2011) and others, which aims to walk the reader through carefully designed questions that are specifically aimed at improving completion rate and minimising ambiguity. There are many challenges associated with survey design, such as the risks associated with sampling error, coverage error, non-response error, measurement error and coding error (Stern, Bilgen, & Dillman, 2014). While a well-designed survey deployed through a robust sampling strategy can manage some of these challenges, in higher education, another key challenge relates to ‘survey fatigue’ where students receive numerous and sometimes poorly constructed surveys.

The status of the survey as more of a quotidian evaluation tool than as a reflexive research mechanism seems persistent. Questionnaires may be *potentially* effective monitoring tools but only in a certain restricted capacity; they are often seen to be utilised to provide a better understanding of student background rather than capturing the complex experiences of students. Questionnaires are, however, valuable to practitioners because they can provide the background information necessary for tracking and monitoring over time. From this perspective at least, the lived experiences of students become the background noise to the establishment of metrics for improved service delivery.

A survey of WP practitioners working in HEIs in England found that questionnaires for students and for teachers are the most frequent evaluation method used (Waller, Harrison, & Last, 2015; see also Crawford et al., 2017). This research also showed how questionnaires are perceived as “of limited value” even though they were the most frequent method of evaluation used (Waller et al., 2015, p. 18). Indeed, there are a number of studies from the UK which have scrutinised student-facing surveying in terms of its appropriateness and reliability (Cheng & Marsh 2010; Richardson, Slater, & Wilson, 2007). However, these studies ultimately found that large scale surveying of students created valuable and comparable data that can be used by institutions to improve their practice and improve public accountability (Callender, Griggs, & Ramsden, 2014).

Yet, the literature highlights a paradox inherent in questionnaire use for WP research: that is, that the data are often only seen as useful, credible or robust if they push the complex experiences

of students to the background. These challenges are elaborated on by Marshall et al. (1999) who suggest that large-scale surveying can only be understood as rigorous if it acknowledges what gets lost from the process (emotional responses) and what gets put in (distortions and misrecognitions). One of the potential distortions identified by Marshall et al. (1999) is how survey fatigue can shape student answers. For example, one of their participants states, “Just tell me what you want me to put down. I hate filling these things in. I just try and work out what they want me to say and put that down” (Marshall et al., 1999, p. 5). However, research by Hagyard (2009) suggests that although students can become tired of poorly designed questionnaires, students are “happy to contribute to a well-designed survey”, particularly when they are clearly informed about its purpose and the positive outcomes that are intended from it (p. 125). Hagyard (2009) demonstrates that when the questionnaire forms part of the students’ relationship with the institution the response rates are higher, and they capture more nuanced evidence.

In addition to common questions about reliability and comparability, the use of questionnaires for WP research risks perpetuating the power, privileges and exclusions which WP policy and practice seeks to challenge and change, as highlighted in the work of Marshall et al. (1999). This power differential risks data inconsistency as well as exacerbating the “(often unconscious) values” bias which Greenbank (2003, p. 792) has noted exists even at the point of survey design. Similarly, Wittenbrink, Judd, and Parl (1997) have shown how, in the US compulsory education context, implicit racial prejudices inform the shape of explicit questions in research. It is important to recognise that when designing questionnaires to address issues of inequality, the tools, techniques and terminology deployed are part of the systems that perpetuate the very inequalities being investigated. This paper seeks to acknowledge these tensions and unpick some of the challenges and opportunities of using questionnaires for WP research.

## **Methods**

As outlined above, this paper reports on the lessons learned for WP research as a result of designing a questionnaire. A reflexive, narrative approach was used to understand and critique the decisions made throughout the design process alongside data collected during two focus groups with students about their perceptions of the questionnaire. Qualitative information from the focus groups combined with the research team’s reflexive discussions provide the data for analysis in this paper.

Institutionally, a survey approach was chosen to be deployed annually, initially to establish a baseline understanding of how different student groups rate aspects of their experience, and subsequently as a measure of change. Therefore, as the survey forms a central aspect of WP practice at the university in question, a key concern was to design an instrument - the questionnaire - that could accurately capture both complexities of student experiences and of their backgrounds. As this process also enabled the research team to consider and critique the praxis of WP practice, a reflexive strand has remained central throughout our research. We draw on this reflexivity alongside the data from the various stages of development of the questionnaire.

### ***Phase 1: Questionnaire design process***

The questionnaire design consisted of several discrete, iterative processes, including multiple meetings of the research team with the following groups:

- Undergraduate students;
- PhD students;

- the Students' Union;
- representatives from the university's Centre for Excellence in Learning; and,
- the Dignity, Diversity and Equality steering group.

Initial discussions with members of these groups centred on the types of information sought in the questionnaire and what should and should not be included in each of the question clusters. Then, the various groups influenced the types of questions and the process of developing and refining multiple drafts. Throughout this iterative process, the discussions were noted (in informal minutes and e-mail conversations) that reflected the diversity of thought and documented the development process. Ethical approval was granted by the University Ethics Committee for the development of the questionnaire, its pilot deployment, the focus groups and the eventual deployment of the questionnaire throughout the university.

The first cluster of questions was intended to provide understanding of how students perceive their university experience. Questions were developed to capture aspects of student engagement, belonging, perceptions of student success and overall satisfaction with their experience. These themes were identified through review of the literature, and debate and discussion, and were compressed into a large series of question topic pools. The second cluster of questions aimed to identify student background and, specifically, their WP status. These topic areas were identified and compiled using annual guidance from OFFA (2015) and the protected characteristics identified in the UK *Equality Act 2010*.

Initial drafts of the survey that included both sets of question clusters were discussed during a focus group with PhD students, researchers and staff working in the area of WP, the Students' Union, the research team and professional and support staff working in the area of WP. Questions were further refined to make the questionnaire clearer, shorter and more manageable and it was then sent to experts in student surveying to review.

The data that informed progress from the development of the initial version of the questionnaire to its final iteration therefore includes notes from meetings, e-mails and reflexive discussions of the research team.

### ***Phase 2: Students' experiences of the questionnaire***

The second part of the questionnaire development aimed to understand students' experiences of the questionnaire, with a view to making further modifications prior to deployment across the university.

The questionnaire, in hard copy, was provided to final year students in two faculties during a showcase of their work. This was done to seek students' views about the questionnaire, to gauge completion time and also to assess whether it would enable the research team to gain the required information. It was important to pilot the questionnaire with students in their final year because the research team wanted to ensure that only those who had not experienced this process would be included in the institutional roll-out in the following year.

In addition, two focus groups of more than 60 minutes' duration were held with 26 final year students to ascertain their thoughts and experiences of the questionnaire. These students, a subset of those who completed the questionnaire, were recruited from the two faculties during their showcase events and were from a range of backgrounds. We did not collect any demographic information as, at the time, we saw the focus groups as part of the survey design process and did not want students to complete both the survey and again complete information about their

background before coming to the group. We know that in Focus Group 1, consisting of nine health science students, all but two of the participants were female, and there were mature students, students with a disability and students from LPNs but no care leavers or BME students. In Focus Group 2, which was larger and consisted of Design and Engineering students, there were 17 students, with eight being female, and a mix of first in family and students with parents who went to university, three had declared a disability, and all had gone to state schools. There were no care leavers or BME students, but three were of mixed race. In hindsight, it may have been preferable to specifically target students from the specific WP backgrounds of interests, but this was not done as our primary focus was to explore whether the questions made sense to a mixture of students.

Information about the intention and nature of the survey and the focus groups was provided to participants and informed consent was sought. Each of the focus groups was facilitated by three members of the research team and audio recorded. The focus groups included open-ended questions about students' perceptions of the questionnaire as a whole, as well as specific questions. The focus groups had a very loose structure to allow students to discuss the questionnaire in depth and for them to be actively involved in the discussion process. Where differences of opinion arose, these were further probed to initiate deeper discussion.

### ***Data analysis and integration***

The process of data analysis began with an examination of the recorded material obtained through the focus groups. Information from the audio recorded focus groups was themed and a constant comparison approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to promote integrity of themes. While it is not possible to guarantee data saturation, once themed, information from both groups was broadly similar, despite different student characteristics and a very different 'feel' and flow to the two focus groups.

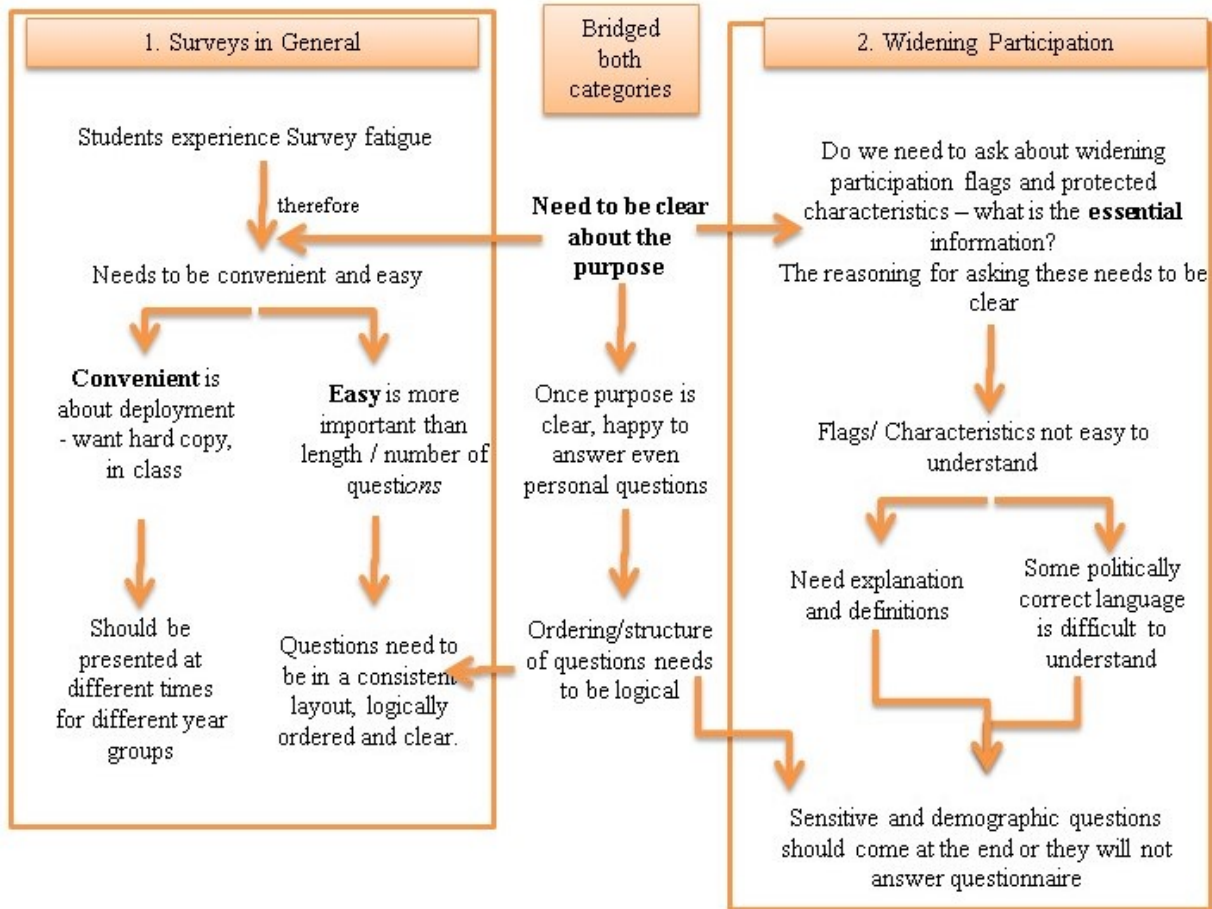
The focus group information was analysed first to reduce the likelihood that interpretation of the students' experiences would be influenced too greatly by the researchers' experiences. Once the focus group analysis was agreed, review of the questionnaire development process was undertaken, which included reflexive discussion. At each stage of the questionnaire development and refinement process, notes were taken and discussed within the research team, yielding a rich source of information that provides lessons about the challenges and considerations of using survey methods for WP research. Notes collated through this process were integrated with the focus group themes.

### **Results**

Findings from the design process, including analysis of pilot results and reflections from the research team were integrated with the themes that emerged from the analysis of the focus groups. Focus group themes were broadly categorised into two areas:

- those related to experience of survey methodology in HE generally, and
- those related to asking about WP status more specifically.

Some themes, particularly the need for clarity in the purpose of the questionnaire, bridged both areas. The themes that emerged from analysis of the focus group material are presented in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1:** Themes emerging from focus group analysis

**Experiences of survey research**

Students in both focus groups described experiencing ‘survey fatigue’ whilst at university, a finding anticipated by the research team. This, students explained, has implications for the timing and type of questionnaires used. To manage survey fatigue, students identified that the purpose of the questionnaire needs to be overt and relevant to them, and that who is conducting it and exactly what will be done with data needs to be clearly stated. Pilot-testing suggested that in relation to our survey, the latter was an area which needed improvement. For example, some students were unaware that the survey was a collaboration between the university and the Students’ Union (despite both logos and this statement being on the front cover). Therefore, in the widespread deployment of the questionnaire, a verbal description of the survey and its purpose is needed for hard copies or, if offered online, a clear written explanation of the research on the landing page is required. The implications of survey fatigue, as articulated by students in the focus groups, were that students wanted questionnaires that are convenient, easy to complete and which they perceive will inform change.

Students in both focus groups suggested that hard copy questionnaires delivered in taught sessions would be their preferred method of completion, rather than online surveys, and would yield higher response rates than online surveys or hard copies delivered outside of timetabled sessions. They reported ignoring many online surveys and ones that are sent by e-mail, partly due to the volume of questionnaires received. Their preference, however, was a challenge for the research team, particularly with a plan to deploy the questionnaire across the entire



university. The students also discussed the time of year that the questionnaire should be deployed – they did not want questionnaires at times of stress (for example, during the examination period) – but also recognised that when the survey focused on their experience, it would not be appropriate to ask first year students right at the beginning of their programme. A key finding from the focus groups was that questionnaires need to be easy to complete. In this context, ‘easy’ was described as having a logical order of questions, a clear layout and the purpose and value to the student clearly articulated. The structure of the questionnaire was considered more important than how long it takes to complete or how many questions are included. The pilot questionnaire included eight core questions, one of which had 21 sub-question options, was in hard copy form on three sides of A4 paper and students reported that it took them less than five minutes to complete, which they felt was an appropriate length. Thus, the clarity rather than the number of questions was most important to the students.

Ease of completion of the survey also related to how the questions are to be completed – students preferred consistent layouts and quick box-ticking in Likert scales. The participants wanted clear subheadings and preferred fewer open-ended questions. Where there were text boxes, they wanted guidance about how much to write, and how many statements they should make, such as ‘Which *three* things would you most like to change about the University?’. Following this feedback from study participants is challenging in that it necessarily limits the depth of information that can be achieved using survey methods.

Students also commented on the layout of the questionnaire and ordering of questions. The overwhelming majority of students from both focus groups were very clear that they would not respond to surveys with demographic information at the start of the questionnaire, including questions like age and gender, a point that links to another bridging theme between general HE questions and those focusing on WP. The order of the questions would affect both their perceptions of the central purpose of the questionnaire and also their willingness to complete it. All students also asserted how they needed more information on the purpose of the questionnaire and what would happen to the data once analysed. This related both to the themes about questionnaires in general and also to research about widening participation more specifically.

### ***Asking about widening participation***

In the pilot questionnaire, there were 12 questions specifically asking about WP markers and protected characteristics, as well as general demographics, such as year of study. In addition to challenges around specific wording of questions and layout on the page, some students wondered why the number of demographic questions was so large, particularly those about protected characteristics such as sexual orientation. This led the research team to think about how to best embed equality and diversity questions into WP categories.

A key finding that arose from the focus groups was that students did not mind being asked potentially sensitive questions about their identity, provided that the rationale was clear. The design process led to many considerations for the research team, including which are the essential questions and which are the ‘interesting’ ones, that spark researchers’ curiosity rather than directly answering the research question. During the development of the questionnaire, to keep it as short as possible, some questions were removed including, for example, details of engagement in university co- and extra-curricular activities and the question about religion. The challenges faced by the research team related to the purpose of the questionnaire and how it sits within a wider project funded as part of institutional statutory WP obligations and therefore linked to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) definitions of WP (as listed in the introduction). The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify any challenges or

differences in the experiences of students from WP backgrounds with a view to addressing them. As such, although we know that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students, for example, experience higher levels of harassment while at university (Ellis, 2009), this survey was intended to capture broad WP background information, as identified by the HEFCE. Therefore, another challenge for the research team is how, by limiting our classification of WP background in this way, we may be missing out on understanding more about the ways in which the culture of the university and other places of higher education impacts upon the lives of students who are marginalised in other ways.

In terms of protected characteristics such as ethnicity, there was much discussion within the research team (but not the focus groups) about how to achieve the most accurate information while, given that this survey is specifically designed to be inclusive, balancing layout with an extensive list of options. It was decided to provide text boxes for students to write in their ethnic origin (with examples on the back cover) rather than ticking preordained boxes requiring some students to tick 'other', which can exacerbate feelings of being 'othered' by students from under-represented ethnic backgrounds.

### ***Clarity of language in questions***

As for the core WP markers in the questionnaire, there was much discussion about how to ask students about socio-economic group and whether they lived in a low participation neighbourhood, as defined by HEFCE (2015) and linked to postcode. The need to ask about socio-economic background was self-evident, as it remains the most important determinant in HE participation (BIS, 2014), but how exactly to capture this information was a challenge. In the development of the pilot questionnaire, there was much debate within the research team about how to ask about socio-economic group, whether asking for parental employment circumstances was appropriate and could be categorised or whether the socio-economic groupings (e.g., from the NS-SEC) should be listed for students to tick boxes. For the pilot, groupings were provided but student feedback indicated that this was more challenging to complete than parental employment. For LPN, we asked students to provide their postcodes. Some students were concerned that this would identify them and did not understand why it was asked. Others simply completed the first part of their postcode, which is inadequate for analysis. Knowledge of whether a student lived in a low participating neighbourhood at the time of applying to university is an important WP flag that relates to the university strategy but is difficult to obtain without seeking a postcode.

When questions that relate to foster care experiences, socio-economic group and LPN were raised with the focus group, much discussion was sparked about whether we, as researchers, are more sensitive to language than students who identify with the groups. Students expressed concern that some language was confusing. For example, those with no experience of being in care found the language of 'looked after child' confusing, whereas it would have been easier to understand if the language was about being 'in foster care'. Students had different views about socio-economic group questions and, interestingly, those who thought that the question could be offensive declared that their parents were in employment in professions generally considered to be 'middle class'.

### **Discussion**

There are two key areas of significance arising from this research. Firstly, some general survey design challenges common in any field of inquiry in HE, particularly when surveying student populations. Secondly, and possibly more importantly, specific challenges about how to ask questions about WP, equality and diversity. Despite questionnaires being a common method of

evaluation for WP initiatives, we note that there is a somewhat limited insight into methodological developments and construction of surveys for WP research. Rather, questionnaires seem to be a common mechanism to evaluate specific interventions, often at a rather quotidian level (Crawford et al., 2017; Waller et al., 2015; Marshall et al., 1999). The current research has highlighted a number of challenges and points for debate both about questionnaire deployment within HE broadly and within the area of WP specifically that warrant further discussion. Drawing from international research and from a broader HE context, we suggest that questionnaires are an essential element in establishing a rich and nuanced research culture, particularly one that seeks to inform and transform policy and practice. More pertinently for WP, although there are potential risks of entrenching inequality in questionnaires (Marshall et al., 1999), when used effectively they can form part of strategies intended to build relationships between students and institutions, and nurture and enhance student capabilities for self-reflection and relationships with others (Hagyard, 2009). However, there needs to be further critique of how we ask about students' backgrounds and their WP status, and more critical investigation of how this information is collected.

### ***Challenges with survey methodology in general***

Our initial point of discussion relates to whether questionnaires and surveys are the best approach for gathering information on students and what other options for research and evaluation exist. Our conclusions are that survey methodology, while not perfect, does allow for mass data collection enabling comparison between groups which would not be possible using other approaches. Also, the choice of survey methodology might be financially or time driven, as there simply may not be the resources to collect qualitative data through focus groups or interviews. The challenge of survey fatigue remains; an outcome of our research is the development of a set of questions about WP that are used in institutional surveys and those undertaken by the Students' Union. This standard set of questions enables data to be compared across surveys and will also, it is hoped, enable students to become familiar with the questions and thereby improve completion with the hope that this could ultimately reduce the number of surveys. It is unsurprising that survey fatigue was highlighted by students in the focus groups and their comments directly reflect those found in other research, such as Hagyard (2009).

One key challenge for the research team designing the questionnaire had been the balance between a questionnaire that is too long and detailed (and, so, not completed by many students) and one that is too short and does not collect adequate data. Designing the questionnaire was a delicate balance between the desire to ask a broad range of questions that relate to the core research aim with needing to keep the questionnaire short to promote higher response rates. As with any survey design, there are clearly considerations of avoiding survey fatigue and the deployment of a questionnaire to promote the highest possible response rate. Given students' familiarity with and daily use of technology, it is very interesting that a pertinent finding from the pilot related to their preference for a hard copy questionnaire provided to them at the beginning or end of timetabled sessions. Doing this, however, clearly has significant implications both in terms of resources and the need for buy-in to the survey across the university.

### **Surveys as student engagement**

Within the study university, there was concern about survey approaches as these may promote disengagement rather than engagement. However, surveys undertaken by the Students' Union had enabled identification of issues and development of campaigns to inform the work of the union and also to specifically recruit students from diverse backgrounds to engage with specific initiatives.

The questionnaire was developed as part of institutional WP practice: its aim was to enable the university to identify differences in perceived experiences in order to focus future interventions. The survey was, therefore, a means to engage students in thinking about their experience and engagement with the university and thus, rather than being yet another tool that adds to further disengagement and survey fatigue, it aimed to promote engagement. The question of whether this was a realistic goal remains unanswered, yet it is worth considering whether an annual institution-wide survey approach may be an appropriate vehicle to promote student engagement, particularly in co- and extra-curricular activities. Given the aim to promote student engagement, a key action remains the facilitation of effective collaborations between the university, the WP practitioners, researchers and the Students' Union.

### ***The challenges of asking about widening participation***

Within the literature, it is clear that the language of WP is not uniform across different institutions within a single HE system or internationally. How we ask questions about WP thus depends on different national and institutional contexts. Given the widespread use of questionnaires as data collection tools (Bowes, 2015; Crawford et al., 2017; Waller et al., 2015; Marshall et al., 1999), it is somewhat surprising that research regarding the methodological approaches and overall opportunities and challenges in surveying is somewhat limited. However, one reason for this lies in how (at least in the English context) questionnaires have been used; namely, for small scale evaluations of specific WP interventions or for specific target groups (Crawford et al., 2017; Waller et al., 2015). One thing does seem clear from the literature: how we ask questions about WP is part of how we conceive of and enable a widening of participation at a local, national and potentially international level.

Although it is important that any questions asked about WP in surveys work within different institutional and national contexts, developing a more consistent approach to survey design could better enhance data sharing and comparison. This would enable the better evaluation of different interventions at a sector level, and also that students' voices and experiences are at the heart of the research process. However, there are clear limitations, discussed in the literature, with existing measures of 'disadvantage'. One such criticism is the approach used in the UK to determine whether a student comes from a socially disadvantaged geographical area (from a LPN), measured using the POLAR system, which has been criticised by authors such as Harrison & McCaig (2015).

Within the local context of this study, one key by-product of the work to date is the creation of a shared, agreed list of WP and protected characteristic questions that have been drawn up by the Students' Union and the research team as a result of the student engagement in the pilot testing and focus groups. This will hopefully mean that students become familiar with the questions and therefore more engaged in the response process and will also enable data sharing and direct comparison of results from different surveys. In our efforts to be inclusive and use language sensitive to the lived experiences of individuals, we confused students by adopting euphemisms, which clouded the meaning of certain questions. For example, rather than asking if a student had been in care, we asked had they been a 'looked after' child; we asked about students' socio-economic group using language adapted from the NS-SEC rather than asking for parental employment and we asked students to 'describe' their ethnic origin rather than asking them to categorise themselves. We failed to recognise that some students do self-define as 'working class' for example, without shame or stigma (Rubin et al, 2014). While the merits and demerits of each of these examples could be argued, it became clear in the development of the questionnaire that we, WP researchers, practitioners and the Students' Union, felt discomfort asking about WP, in case we caused offense. Based on the focus groups, we are not sure that this

discomfort is shared by students.

In reflecting on the process of asking about WP, we have been led to consider whether our discomfort in developing questions that do not offend is because we are concerned about shame and stigma. Unwittingly, in skirting around issues and using euphemistic language, are we revealing our prejudice that being from one of the WP groupings is actually stigmatising, when we have little evidence to suggest that this is experienced by students? Indeed, are we as researchers *perpetuating* an assumption where difference must equate with deficit? Is our struggle relating to asking about potential marginalisation and inequality because we are afraid to truly expose this inequality? These challenges to our thinking present a critical opportunity to reflect on, and thereby change our assumptions. The challenge facing us in WP research may be to face the problem of inequality head-on, to first accept that inequality within HE exists and persists, that there are some student groups who are statistically less advantaged. Facing up to this reality, while challenging, may be necessary to make change effectively, change aimed at reducing the very inequality that we are so afraid to ask about. Asking the right questions can be as much about safeguarding the right to education as it is about collecting accurate data.

A key finding from the focus groups was that students were willing to answer personal questions, including those about background, provided that the aims of the survey and how the data will be used are clear and relevant to them. In asking the right questions about WP, it seems clear that we need to ask straightforward questions rather than hide behind euphemism and even more importantly, use the data that we gather to actively address inequality wherever it is found.

## **Conclusion**

Our reflective process and focus groups with students to develop a questionnaire has led us to conclude that, while survey methodology can be very helpful, the manner in which we ask questions about WP needs to be clear, consistent and free from euphemism. These findings also have broader implications for how surveys are used. We argue that the more standardised questions are, the easier they are for students to complete. The development of a common, consistent way to ask students about WP within different institutional contexts is therefore needed. This initiative would not only produce valuable sector-level data but potentially reduce survey fatigue and enhance engagement of students.

When asking students about WP issues, we need to challenge what may be hidden, unconscious assumptions that specific characteristics could be associated with shame or stigma. Clear, direct questions that ask about WP characteristics may better enable practitioners and researchers to uncover inequality where and when it exists. To challenge inequality, we must move away from euphemism and towards clear, unambiguous language that assumes neither pride nor stigma in any characteristic. Further discussion about the utility and usefulness of survey methodology in WP research, beyond simply using as an evaluation tool for specific WP interventions, could provide a mechanism for institutions to listen more and reflect upon the experiences of their students.

## **Acknowledgements**

The research team would like to thank the Health Sciences and Design and Engineering students who participated in this study and completed the survey. Their comments and rich discussion in the focus groups has greatly enriched our understanding. We also acknowledge the significant contribution to the process from the Students' Union, in particular Jane DeVekey. We would

also like to thank the wider research team, the WP practitioners and other staff and students who supported the earlier parts of our work. A thank you to Dr Bethan Roberts, for her support and proof-reading of initial drafts of this manuscript.

## References

- BIS. (2014). *National strategy for access and student success in higher education* (BIS/14/516). London: Department for Business, Innovation & Skills.
- Bowes, L. (2015). *Student opportunity outcomes framework research: In-depth study report to HEFCE by CFE research*. Bristol: HEFCE.
- Burke, P., & Hayton, A. (2012). Is widening participation still ethical? *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 13(1), 8-26.
- Burke, P.J., Hayton, A., & Stevenson, J. (2018). *Evaluating Equity and Widening Participation in Higher Education*. London: Trentham Books.
- Callender, C., Griggs, J., & Ramsden, P. (2014). *Review of the National Student Survey: Report to the UK Higher Education Funding Bodies by NatCen Social Research, the Institute of Education, University of London and the Institute for Employment Studies*. Bristol: HEFCE.
- Cheng, J.H.S., & Marsh, H. W. (2010). National Student Survey: Are differences between universities and courses reliable and meaningful? *Oxford Review of Education*, 36(6), 693-712.
- Crawford, C., Dytham, S., & Naylor, R. (2017). *Improving the evaluation of outreach: Interview report*. Bristol: OFFA.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1(8), 139-167.
- Dillman, D.A. (2011). *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method - 2007 Update with New Internet, Visual, and Mixed-Mode Guide*. New Jersey: Wiley & Sons.
- Ellis, S.J. (2009). Diversity and inclusivity at university: A survey of the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) students in the UK. *Higher Education*, 57(6), 723-739.
- Equality Act 2010*. London: The Stationery Office.
- European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. (2014). *Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, retention and employability 2014: Eurydice Report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Greenbank, P. (2003). The role of values in educational research: The case for reflexivity. *British Educational Research Journal*, 29(6), 791-801.
- Hagyard, A. (2009). Student intelligence: Challenging received wisdom in student surveys. In L. Bell, H. Stevenson & M. Neary (Eds.), *The future of higher education: Policy, pedagogy and the student experience* (pp. 112-125). London: Continuum.
- Harrison, N., & McCaig, C. (2015). An ecological fallacy in higher education policy: The use, overuse and misuse of low participation neighbourhoods. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39(6), 793-817.
- HEFCE. (2015). *Differences in degree outcomes: The effect of subject and student characteristics*. Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England. Retrieved from [www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/2015/201521/HEFCE2015\\_21.pdf](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/2015/201521/HEFCE2015_21.pdf)
- HEFCE. (2017). *POLAR4 classification: A local geography classification for young participation in higher education*.

- Higher Education and Research Act 2017*. Chapter 29. Retrieved from [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/pdfs/ukpga\\_20170029\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/pdfs/ukpga_20170029_en.pdf)
- Hunt, C., Collins, B., Wardrop, A., Hutchings, M., Heaslip, V., & Pritchard, C. (2017). First- and second-generation design and engineering students: Experience, attainment and factors influencing them to attend university. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 32(5), 706-721.
- Marshall, B., Reay, D., & Wiliam, D. (1999). "I found it confrontational": Rethinking questionnaires as a large-scale research instrument. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Sussex at Brighton, September 2-5, 1999. Retrieved from <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00001363.htm>
- Mountford-Zimdars, A., & Harrison, N. (2016). *Access to higher education: Theoretical perspectives and contemporary challenges*. London: Routledge.
- OFFA. (2015). *Celebrating ten years of access agreements*. Retrieved from <https://www.offa.org.uk/uncategorized/celebrating-ten-years-of-access-agreements/>
- OFFA. (2016). *Strategic guidance: Developing your 2017-18 access agreement*. Bristol: Office for Fair Access.
- OfS. (2018). *A new approach to regulating access and participation in English higher education: Consultation*. Bristol: Office for Students. Retrieved from [https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/b6e62c0c-e056-40c3-a2bd-0a5a25678bf2/ofs2018\\_33.pdf](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/b6e62c0c-e056-40c3-a2bd-0a5a25678bf2/ofs2018_33.pdf)
- Reed, R., King, A., & Whiteford, G. (2015). Re-conceptualising sustainable widening participation: Evaluation, collaboration and evolution. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 34(2), 383-39.
- Richardson, J.E., Slater, J.B., & Wilson, J. (2007). The National Student Survey: Development, findings and implications. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(5), 557-580.
- Rubin, M., Denson, N., Kilpatrick, S., Matthews, K.E., Stehilk, T., & Zyngier, D. (2014). "I am working-class": Subjective self-definition as a missing measure of social class and socioeconomic status in higher education research. *Educational Researcher*, 43(2), 196-200.
- Shah, M., Bennett, A., & Southgate, E. (Eds.). (2015). *Widening higher education participation: A global perspective*. Cambridge: Chandos Publishing.
- Stern, M.J., Bilgen, I. & Dillman, D.A. (2014). The State of Survey Methodology: Challenges, Dilemmas, and New Frontiers in the Era of the Tailored Design. *Field Methods*, 26(3), 284-301.
- The Sutton Trust. (2015). *Evaluating Access*. London: The Sutton Trust.
- Thomas, L. (2012). *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: Final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.
- Waller, R., Harrison, N., & Last, K. (2015). *Building a culture of participation: Interviews with the former directors of the national Aimhigher programme. Project Report*. Bristol: University of the West of England. Retrieved from <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/27225>
- Wardrop, A., Hutchings, M., Collins, B., Eccles, S., Heaslip, V., Hunt, C., & Pritchard, C. (2016). Troubling ideas for widening participation: How higher education institutions in England engage with research in their access agreements. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 18(2), 84-110.
- Wittenbrink, B., Judd, D., & Parl, B. (1997). Evidence for racial prejudice at the implicit level and its relationship with questionnaire measures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72(2), 262-274.