Editorial

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In the current social situation, and even more in this time of the pandemic generated by Covid-19, education remains one of the most credible and central processes for access to knowledge and for civic, cultural and socio-economic development. In particular, higher education institutions play a fundamental, unique and core role in seeking and pursuing a vision for education and training that encompasses being culturally different. This is crucial in the era of globalisation, cultural diversity, ubiquitous digital social networks and where the processes of access to knowledge are multiple and challenging. This challenge is reflected in the strategic framework for European co-operation in education and training, which pursues four common EU objectives: to make lifelong learning a reality; to improve the quality of education and training; to promote equity, social cohesion and active citizenship, and to enhance creativity and innovation at all levels of education and training.

Despite this ideal, we are witnessing a stubbornly persistent situation in which low proportions of students from under-represented groups access and succeed in higher education. We also continue to see disproportionate attrition (withdrawal/drop-outs) by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, recent studies have highlighted that a learner's socio-economic level, even more than gender or ethnic origins, is a crucial factor in predicting school failure. In too many countries, economic needs lead to young people dropping out of school to enter the labour market early (OECD, 2016; Quinn, 2013).

In this context, the failure of students turns out to be the failure of the educational system itself, insofar as the principle of equity is not witnessed. Data in the UK continues to show indefensible gaps in participation, in achievement and in progression outcomes between the

most advantaged and least advantaged students in higher education (OfS, 2019).

The articles included in this volume show us that there are alternative measures and pathways that can change this depressing scenario and contribute to an increase in access and a decrease in failure among all students and, in particular, among widening participation (WP) students. Collected as a set of six research articles, they present important issues that grow in complexity due to the compelling relationship between education, training, employment and skills. These inter-relationships currently result in complex transformations that are reflected in society in general, and in demands from individuals not only for lifelong training, but also requalification to update professional practices. However, as the reports and official documents of European and world organisations show, the number of adults who do not seek lifelong training is considerable, especially among the so-called 'non-traditional public', and there remain marked inequalities in different EU countries. In this context, it is interesting that five articles venture into the disciplinary areas of healthcare/medicine and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) where employability is healthy but academic failure is noticeable. Related to these, one article addresses the equally pertinent area of students' perception of their own development and transfer of employability skills.

The first article, '*Attrition, mental health and student support in engineering education: The Engineering Futures Project*' by Andrews et al. focuses on the Engineering Futures Project. Its major purpose is to contribute to understanding attrition in engineering education and pursue strategies to improve this situation. As drop-out is a universal issue in STEM areas, where engineering is included, this project has the innovative feature of addressing it through the negative mental impacts, such as depression and stress, that students face, which can be generated by failure and drop-out.

Going well beyond the socio-economic and poor undergraduate education arguments, the authors put well-constructed sound arguments to show how failure and drop-out, in addition to having an individual impact, also have a collective impact in that. In addition, the authors put into perspective the importance of encouraging new, unprejudiced attitudes in students to help them face situations and reap positive

benefits by showing positive results, and how proactivity is essential in the success of WP students.

Cullen's article, '*Do students really engage with their skills development in the context of widening participation?: an institutional case study*', aims to better understand the employability skills development of WP students. Arguing that higher education institutions have to undergo changes at various levels to accommodate mature, WP and BAME students, the article presents the results of a project that was developed in a private provider of higher education based in London, and collected data from questionnaires given to 150 students and from ten students' interviews.

The chi-square test for variable independence was used to determine whether two or more categorical variables are related, concluding that there was a strong positive correlation observed between the independent variables and the dependent variable. Hence, students' perception on the degree to which they possessed the given employability skills was influenced by the student's subject of study, after study career plan, working status, work pattern, marital status and childbearing status. The Kruskal-Wallis test was applied and shows that there was a significant difference in perceived employability skills levels across the age range.

The third article, '*Enhancing self-efficacy through life skills workshops*' by Mozley et al. offers a thorough exploration of the impact of a self-efficacy workshop aimed at potential medical students from a WP background. By exploring an intervention aimed at medical students as they transition from the academic environment to the clinical (placement) setting, the authors identify the potential impact of peer discussion. Interestingly, discussion of feelings associated with 'imposter syndrome', and hearing vicariously how others had experienced (and coped with) transition difficulties contributed to greater self-efficacy and an improved sense of belonging. This again points to the importance of institutions realising that opening doors to a more diverse range of students is not, automatically, sufficient, and that well-designed supportive, pro-active interventions can help a wider range of students to succeed.

Continuing the important theme of efforts to widen participation in medicine, the fourth article by Whiting and Wickham titled '*Does a*

training programme improve the perceived confidence and performance of student mentors in their delivery of a widening access to medicine programme?' explores how mentors feel about their role supporting students from under-represented groups. This is a topic ripe for research, illuminating as it does the potentially crucial role played by medical students in opening access to their own profession. Noteworthy findings identify the increased confidence perceived by mentors who did engage in training, but the authors conclude the impact of training is felt most by new and inexperienced mentors. Thus, they recommend training is not mandatory.

Our fifth article by Harris and Lane, '*Medicine e-mentoring: accessibility and suitability of e-mentoring for applicants from widening participation and non-widening participation backgrounds',* explains how an e-mentoring programme aimed at candidates for higher education medical courses can be a valuable intervention to overcome doubts, misunderstandings and constraints that both WP students and others have upon entering university. After describing how the programme works, the article presents the major characteristics of the 36 applicants who joined the e-mentoring programme and worked on the set of activities. The authors also draw on meetings with former students and other agents in the study that offer guidance and human and social capital in support of the students' submission of an application to medicine.

In order to better understand the situation and inform Medical School Admissions and Outreach in the design of future support measures, the article presents the research carried out, starting by mentioning the key points of the methodological approach and qualitative analysis of the conversations between mentors and mentees. It lists the students' subjects of greatest concern, the feelings and emotions manifested, the needs and objectives of the members, the issues that emerged in the relationship between mentors and the similarities and differences between WP and non-WP students. Important conclusions are presented that show us what WP students think and how the mentoring process can be used. The conclusions also point out that, citing the article '... there is no discernible deficit in a sub-group of applicants when it comes to the information and support they need'.

In the unexpected situation all universities currently find themselves in, this project based in e-mentoring design, shows very interesting potentialities to face the challenges of the current pandemic circumstances.

Butcher et al. authored the sixth article, '*How might mature students with low entry qualifications succeed in undergraduate science?*' This study focused on mature students (defined in the UK as 21+) on a part-time distance education preparatory access programme. It explored the particular challenges associated with WP into STEM and how obstacles such as fear of maths might be addressed. The article offers compelling evidence that the impact of such an access module can be sustained into undergraduate study in science, demonstrating that adults returning to education with low prior entry qualifications can, with appropriate preparation, succeed in their first undergraduate STEM studies. Compared to a 'control' group of peers who entered directly at L4, students who began with Access were more likely to submit assignments, more likely to have the confidence to overcome their fear of maths and more likely to pass. This 'Access' effect is attributed to a learned tenacity, a greater sense of student agency by which students were more likely to pro-actively seek tutor support, and more likely to take a strategic approach to assessment tasks. There are significant implications for the conventional HE sector in shifting to a more inclusive STEM pedagogy to sustain a more diverse student demographic.

This particularly rich edition of *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* is also enhanced by a discussion piece, an innovative practice article and a note on research methods.

Reilly and Warren's discussion titled '*An inclusive model of programme enhancement*' offers a spirited and persuasive argument to address inclusion by an evaluative approach which focuses on engaging and supporting all learners. The discussion is especially insightful in signaling the importance of intersectionality in addressing attainment gaps.

Formby et al.'s innovative practice report, "*A presence in the community': developing innovative practice through realist evaluation of widening participation in West Yorkshire'*, follows neatly from our previous special edition on evaluation in WP. The article emphasises the importance of spatial disadvantage in the context of a National

Collaborative Outreach partnership, drawing attention to the importance of a community focus. By employing a realist evaluation approach, the authors demonstrate how important it is to avoid 'one-size-fits-all' solutions to WP to higher education. The approach enables unintended outcomes to be captured, and more confident claims about causation to be offered.

Raven's insightful research methods note, titled '*Understanding outreach: the potential of qualitative longitudinal research to enrich the evidence base*', explores the effective use of longitudinal focus groups when evaluating WP initiatives with school pupils. The article offers a clear, pithy, and suitably tentative analysis. His study should embolden WP practitioners to employ such follow-up focus groups more often than presently as part of a suite of evaluation activities.

Darlinda and I hope you enjoy all the articles collected here, and we are confident each has a contribution to make in enhancing sector understanding of barriers to participation and how institutions might help to overcome them. As ever, we are grateful to the scrupulous consideration of our reviewers in working with authors to ensure the highest quality research is disseminated in clear and accessible language. Keep well and watch out for our next (special) edition, a collection of articles originally presented at recent UALL conferences.

References

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