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Aims |
To explore the ways in which widening participation practices vary within official plans laid out in access agreements between pre and post-1992 institutions in England and to explore the relationship between these policy documents and the experiences of practitioners.

Objectives |
* To identify what differences there are in the discourses used within access agreements between pre and post-1992 institutions
* To understand the extent to which access agreements mirror the work done by, and experiences of, widening participation practitioners.
* To explore the motivations and reasons that practitioners choose to undertake widening participation work.
* To explore similarities and differences in the experiences of practitioners working within pre and post-1992 institutions.
* To understand how practitioners reconcile institutional and national policy with their individual beliefs and values.

Context |
In order to charge higher fees, universities are required to detail within an access agreement (HEFCE & OFFA, 2014) how they will ensure that these fees will not be a barrier for entry to and success within Higher Education. The work in this area is generally referred to as widening participation or WP.

Whilst there is a growing body of literature on WP, its focus has varied from the experiences of students (e.g. Archer et al., 2003, Hutchings and Archer, 2001, Stuart, 2012, Slack, 2003) to student involvement in the delivery of WP initiatives (Taylor, 2008). There have also been a number of recent studies into policy-making and delivery of widening participation however these mainly focus upon higher levels of policy making within government and senior management in universities (e.g. Butcher et al., 2012, Graham, 2011, Greenbank, 2006, Jones, 2014).

Recent data shows that participation levels for targeted groups are increasing. One measure of increased participation, that of young students from the most deprived neighbourhoods, has increased by 43% between 2004 and 2011 (UUK, 2014). However, when data relating to specific institutions is examined the picture is not as positive (Boliver, 2013). This raises the question of why some institutions have done better in closing the gap.

Graham (2012) explored widening participation within the marketing materials for a number of post-1992 and elite institutions and found decreasing differences in approaches to widening participation. Other recent work has focused on comparing changes in access agreements (McCaig, 2015) or on interviews with senior management (Graham, 2011). Stevenson et al. (2010) examined staff commitment to widening participation within one university but did not focus on those tasked with delivering the initiatives.

The most extensive study of WP practitioners focused on interviews with seven managers and practitioners from seven different institutions (Wilkins and Burke, 2013, Burke, 2012). This study highlighted issues of identity and how social positioning shapes practitioners, but a limited sample size and the wide spread participants across seven different institutions limit its scope. Whilst the studies into policy enactment in WP are limited, similar mechanisms are explored in other research relating to teaching (Ball et al., 2012) and community cohesion work (Jones, 2015) this study therefore seeks to fill a distinct gap in the literature relating to how practitioners navigate WP policy enactment.

Methods and Sampling |

Phase One |
Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2003)

pre-1992

post-1992

ten institutions in five cities
five institutions

Phase Two |

Purpose |
*Explore content and use of language
*Explore similarities and differences
*Generate themes for discussion with practitioners

Phase One |

Purpose |
*Explore themes from phase one
*Understand values and motivations
*Explore tensions with policy

Phase Two |

Purpose |
*Explore tensions from phase one
*Understand values and motivations
*Explore tensions with policy

References |
BOYTON, R. 2013. To get this far is a miracle:pedagogy of achievement. The British Journal of Sociology. 64. 344-364.