

## Writing together: practitioners, academics and policy makers

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We are delighted to introduce this special issue of the *Journal of Widening Participation & Lifelong Learning*, which features papers that explore issues in widening participation (WP), access initiatives and student support across England. The papers have been developed and written by the participants of an international writing programme that was run simultaneously in England and Australia from 2017–18.

The English writing programme was designed and delivered by Professor Jacqueline Stevenson of Sheffield Hallam University following a successful institutional writing programme – ‘Write a Paper in a Year’ – delivered with Professor Carol Taylor. The programme was co-delivered by Rae Tooth of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), which was replaced in April 2018 by the Office for Students (OfS). OFFA also sponsored the programme and hosted outputs on their website<sup>1</sup>.

In England the programme sought to improve evaluation of WP practice in higher education by matching up practitioners with academic mentors in order to enhance the relationship between WP practitioners and academics; to raise the profile of the effective evaluation of WP activity, both nationally and internationally; to increase the understanding of the challenges of robust evaluation ‘in practice’ by academics; and to support WP practitioners when presenting evaluations of their practice at conferences and in refereed academic journals.

More importantly, the programme also sought to enable WP practitioners who have knowledge and expertise but lack the opportunity to speak into academic spaces. Indeed, the contribution that such practitioners can make to the academic field of widening participation has often been overlooked. As Dr Julian Crockford noted in agreeing to act as a mentor:

‘I was concerned that the grounded experience and “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi, 1958 – “we know more than we can tell”) of practitioners on the ground was often missing in papers written for an academic audience, and

could be easily displaced by the interpretative expertise and authority of the academic-researcher-author (although researchers in education-related studies tend to be more sensitive to this than in other disciplines).<sup>7</sup>

The need for such a programme became clear when over 60 people attended a one-day launch event in London in September 2016:

‘The launch event for this programme demonstrated the appetite amongst academics, policy makers and practitioners to support each other in the dissemination of the fantastic work that is being undertaken within the widening-participation field. For many practitioners, academic writing can be daunting and often dissemination of innovative practice remains in the domain of conference and seminar presentations. The commitment from the programme managers to change this perception was evident and the practical workshop format contributed to an increased enthusiasm for academic writing. The value to the participants is clear to see as we have journeyed together through this innovative initiative.’ (Wendy Fowle, contributing author to this special edition.)

Following a competitive application process in November 2016, 21 participants started the one-year English programme. The participants represented 14 universities and three third-sector organisations supporting widening participation to, or success in, higher education, and were supported throughout the year by 14 academic mentors. The mentees met monthly in order to craft aspects of a journal paper – writing the abstract, for example, or the literature review or the methodology section – as well as to explore issues such as the connections between academic writing and identities as WP practitioners, writing techniques and styles, and how to keep writing when also managing the demands of a full-time job. This was a further success of the project, as Jade Hunter (also a contributing author to this special edition) notes:

‘The OFFA writing project allowed me to justify time to write alongside my practitioner-based role, which can sometimes become dominated by administrative tasks. It made me consider widening-participation practice in a different way through the opportunities it provided for dialogue with practitioner and academic colleagues, and developed my confidence in reflecting on, and carving out responses to, regulatory advice. Participating in the programme made me consider how important it is for colleagues working in WP practice to join conversations with academic and policy audiences to create links between what the research says, what is experienced in practice, and what is communicated in policy.’

Seventeen research posters were presented at a one-day open event in March 2017, hosted by Sheffield Hallam University and opened by the university’s provost, Professor Christina Hughes. A final dissemination conference in September 2017 – also hosted by Sheffield Hallam – included 16 papers presented by the programme’s mentees as well as five workshops delivered by the mentors. The workshops covered writing one’s next paper, disseminating WP research, and getting published. The event was opened by

Sir Les Ebdon, former Director of Fair Access to Higher Education at OFFA, and attracted over 100 delegates from organisations and institutions, including many not involved in the programme.

Whilst five of the papers written for the programme are included in this special edition of the *Journal of Widening Participation & Lifelong Learning*, further papers have been published in other journals, including, for example, a paper by Jessica Benson-Egglenton, one of the programme's mentees, who explained:

'The project helped me to navigate the world of academic publishing in a way that I would have found challenging otherwise. With the help of the programme, I'm pleased to say that my first paper, "The financial circumstances associated with high and low wellbeing in undergraduate students: a case study of an English Russell Group institution", was published in the *Journal of Further and Higher Education* in January 2018.'

Other papers are currently in the throes of the submission process. More importantly, however, there have been multiple other outcomes from the programme. In particular, the writing sessions highlighted the importance of finding the time and space to be reflective. Many of the mentees had rarely been afforded the opportunity to explore how they thought about themselves as WP practitioners, or as evaluators, or of the times in which these identities might be in conflict. A particular concern for the group was how to reconcile their strongly held commitments to social justice with the neoliberal politics and practices that surround what they do as practitioners or evaluators (Wilkins and Burke, 2015).

'[The] project gave me ... space and a platform to critically reflect on some problematic institutional practices as well as wider issues with the widening participation agenda, and this is something that often we are usually either explicitly or implicitly encouraged to talk down or to make disappear ... So at first it felt quite uncomfortable and difficult especially when you're thinking about your positionality in relation to your paper and whether you are an insider or an outsider, but embracing the ability to slow down and think critically was liberating.' (Farhana Ghaffar, contributing author to this special edition.)

This opportunity for reflective conversation also helped to shape the group's identities as writers. After all:

'Writing is deeply tied to identity. Writing is a matter in which concerns about who we are, and how we matter to others, are entangled with what we write about. In other words, the "content" of our writing is bound up with our perceptions and experiences of what we mean to ourselves and what we think we mean to others.' (Taylor and Stevenson, 2017: 101)

Moreover, as one of the mentors noted:

'Writing relies not only on adhering to particular conventions but also on developing one's own authorial voice, and I know from my own

experience that this can only come gradually and with effort and encouragement. The willingness of both parties in this mentoring partnership to take the activity seriously, and particularly my mentee's determination to complete the task, made our mentoring partnership work.' (Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas, mentor.)

As they began to develop their writing identities, the group adopted the term 'pracademic', which they used to describe their evolving sense of occupying the space between being practitioners and academics, as remarked on by one of the mentors:

'It was clear that the practitioners hugely developed their own understanding and application of research through the project, but more than that, they were able to present their robust and timely research findings for a wider audience. I am now keen to find other opportunities to support such constructive and productive scholarly relationships between academic researchers and widening participation practitioners. I feel professionally inspired by my involvement in this project!' (Dr Katy Vigurs, mentor.)

In Australia the writing programme stream was offered by the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) at the University of Newcastle, directed by Professor Penny Jane Burke, convened by Dr Anna Bennett and supported by Belinda Munn. Fifteen participants enrolled on the 2017 Australian writing programme group, with 13 producing a poster. (Two participants collaborated on the same project/poster.) Of those continuing participants, six were included in the Australian special issue of *International Studies in Widening Participation*, an open-access journal hosted by the University of Newcastle. Out of the participants not publishing in the *ISWP* journal, two have already had their papers published elsewhere, one has their paper under review for the *ISWP* journal and one project approach has been used to redesign approaches across an institution and has featured in the national media. Participants who started the programme have described multiple positive outcomes from participating, including recognition of the importance of their projects and approaches, with some experiencing personal and career developments that have temporarily delayed – albeit in productive ways – the finalisation of some of the papers at this point in time.

The Australian special issue of *International Studies in Widening Participation* focuses on the importance of recognition for those practitioners so often misrecognised (Fraser, 1997; Burke, 2012) as not possessing capabilities and overlooked despite their expertise and empirical knowledge (Burke et al., 2017). The concept of pedagogical methodology (Burke, Crozier and Misiaszek, 2017), which is committed to research and practice development as being pedagogical, was drawn on to create the time and support for participants' development in the Australian stream. This approach highlights the importance of praxis, which is about generating iterative cycles of research-informed practice, as well as practice-informed research, in order

to draw attention to how the material and structural are deeply entwined with the discursive, affective and symbolic. This type of methodology provides the opportunity for critical reflectivity and new ways of knowing ‘that otherwise might be unavailable and/or closed down’ (Burke, Crozier and Misiaszek, 2017, p. 53) in our taken-for-granted, institutionalised ways of thinking. Without spaces that help us to analyse our assumptions and practices, we are not always aware of the insidious hold of misrecognitions and exclusions in education.

Without the recognition of those in positions to influence and develop us, it is almost impossible to fully develop and sustain our aspirations. Without relationships with others who are able to take the time to look, recognise and encourage us, it is not possible to develop the kinds of capabilities required in educational contexts and to feel able to continue and flourish (Fraser, 1997; Burke et al., 2015; Bennett and Burke, 2017). Thus, opportunities to develop practices and/or research that enable inclusive development for all people, along with resourcing, recognition and support approaches like the programme discussed here, work to make a difference for people conventionally overlooked in education. (See also Cull et al. 2018 – a paper included in the special issue of in the *International Studies in Widening Participation* journal – for a discussion of professional development in schools.) As Gino Graziano (mentee, still writing) has noted:

‘The real strength of the programme was that it treated practitioners with respect, and the importance of our tacit knowledge was recognised and even celebrated by academics. This felt like a properly balanced meeting of these two threads of widening participation work and created a space for important experiences to be captured and articulated. Having spent a lot of time with colleagues on the programme, I know that some hugely valuable ideas percolated through the course. I am proud to have been on the same journey as them, and to have been part of what I hope will become an influential movement in widening access and participation.’

Indeed, the underlying principle of widening participation is that we need to invest in approaches that recognise, value and provide opportunities to create ongoing development for those involved (Sayer, 2011), so that we are all able to understand what happens in WP practice; to recognise and develop other forms of knowledge, expertise and needs; and to work collaboratively to understand what could be different for developing more inclusive educational systems. As Becca Bland – another contributing author to this special edition – describes her experience:

The lasting memory of the programme is around the people that I worked with, both the academics and the other practitioners, who all rose to the challenge of teaching and learning together. It was this sense of academic community and purpose that helped our ideas to grow and develop, and our willingness to be open and vulnerable helped us to refine our broad thinking into sharply argued papers.’

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<sup>i</sup> Archived here:

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112327/https://www.offa.org.uk/egp/writing-publication-widening-participation-practitioners/>

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