

FIVE UNANSWERED QUESTIONS IN WIDENING PARTICIPATION REVISITED

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**University of Sussex Centre for Teaching
and Learning Research seminar**

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AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

- Work with a neighbour or two
- You've got five minutes to come up with **three questions** that you think need answers about widening participation
- Focus on questions that have a national scope (i.e. not about a local programme) and that might be answerable through research
- Tweet them individually with the hashtag #wpchange
- I'll try to respond to them all in the course of the day

MY STARTING POINT

- Practitioner – 1993 to 2006
- Recipient of Aimhigher funding, but also engaged in data analysis projects from 2007 onwards
- Developed strand of work to critically assess what WP is, does and means
- 2012 FACE conference: posed five questions that I felt needed answers in order to improve policy and practice (Harrison, 2013)

Aimhigher

FACE
Forum for Access
and Continuing Education

MY ORIGINAL 2012 QUESTIONS

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1. **Is WP about school attainment, aspirations, applications, admissions or something else?**
2. **Is it enough to know that young people enjoy and value WP interventions – what about behaviour change?**
3. **Are area-based approaches to WP fair?**
4. **Is social class the cause or a symptom of educational inequalities – and which?**
5. **Is participation without economic regeneration solving or worsening the problem?**



ORIGINAL QUESTION I...

- Increasingly clear top-down line from government and Office for Students
- Focus on individual institutional admissions targets through A&P Plans
- Increasing focus on attainment as determinant of HE participation (Crawford, 2014)
- Continuing tensions with bottom-up concepts of WP from practitioners

Is WP about school attainment, aspirations, applications, admissions or something else?

Status: RESOLVED, in part, but not very clearly or convincingly

ORIGINAL QUESTION 2...

- On-going efforts from the Office for Students to improve evidence-gathering (e.g. Office for Students 2019; Harrison *et al.*, 2018)
- Increasing use of logic models and theory of change approaches
- However, institutions still heavily reliant on dubious self-report data from young people
- Lacking a solid epistemology of effectiveness

Is it enough to know that young people enjoy and value WP interventions – what about behaviour change?

Status: UNRESOLVED, despite sustained efforts

ORIGINAL QUESTION 3...

- Much greater understanding now of weaknesses in POLAR (Harrison and McCaig, 2015, Gorard *et al.*, 2019)
- Clear inequality in its (mis)use – as well as misdirection of resources (Harrison and Waller, 2017)
- Areal data does still have value in forging a broad understanding of disadvantage at the community level

Are area-based approaches to WP fair?

Status: Emphatically **RESOLVED, but with lots of sceptics and a need for more clarity about appropriate use of areal data**

ORIGINAL QUESTION 4...

- A badly conceptualised and worded question!
- Driving at highlighting the embodied inequalities manifest in HE participation and need for earlier intervention
- 95% of variance in HE participation set at 16 (Crawford, 2014)
- Also meant to highlight the overuse of structuralist lens for understanding decisions

Is social class the cause or a symptom of educational inequalities – and which?

Status: POORLY CONCEIVED, but still relevant and needs reconceptualising!

ORIGINAL QUESTION 5...

- What do we know about the long-term impact of WP work at the macro-level?
- Focus of research and policy is about trajectory of individuals, not communities
- Particular challenge around WP based on geographical mobility – do graduates go back?
- No research to date about impact on communities – good or bad

Is participation without economic regeneration solving or worsening the problem?

Status: UNRESOLVED, and potentially unresolvable, but still relevant

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Question I ...

THE UBIQUITY OF ASPIRATIONS (I)

- Aspiration-raising ubiquitous in widening participation from its inception
- Vigorous critiques from theory from the outset (e.g. Jones and Thomas, 2005)
- Most institutions still draw on aspiration-raising rationales and discourses for their outreach work (Harrison and Waller, 2018; Harrison *et al.*, 2018)

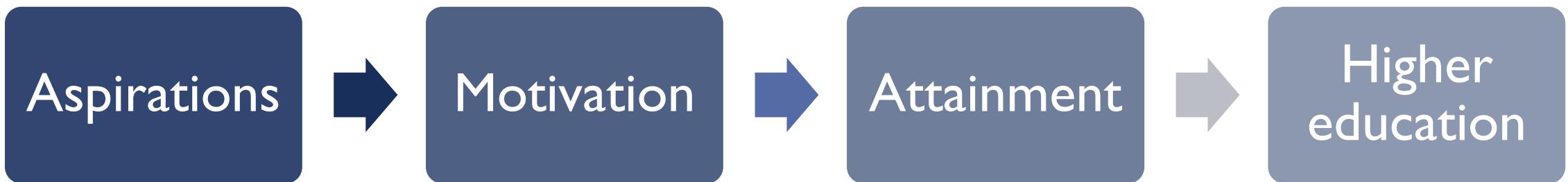
'It is especially important that those who come from families without a tradition of going to HE, and whose aspirations are low, are supported both in achieving their full potential before university, and in aspiring to go on to further study' (DfES, 2003, p.69)

THE UBIQUITY OF ASPIRATIONS (2)

- Considerable contradictory evidence:

- Disadvantaged young people have similar aspirations for careers (Archer *et al.*, 2014; St Clair *et al.*, 2013) and higher education (Baker *et al.*, 2014; Croll and Attwood, 2013) as other groups
- If anything, aspirations are unrealistically high – many more want to go to university than actually do (Croll and Attwood, 2013)
- *Expectations* generally much lower than aspirations (Boxer *et al.*, 2011), but not closely correlated (Khattab, 2015)
- Greater differences in expectations about whether they will go on to university (Khattab, 2015) – a cognitively distinct concept

ASPIRATIONS AND ATTAINMENT



- Very little evidential support for the first link in the chain:
 - Cummings et al. (2012, p.4) concluded that 'the widespread emphasis on raising aspirations ... does not seem to be a good foundation for policy or practice'
 - Gorard et al. (2012) concluded that attainment drives aspirations, not vice versa

Why won't aspiration-raising die?

- Thoroughly discredited as a conceptual tool for change
- Shades of 'victim blaming' and excusing lack of progress on social justice
- Children probably don't share adult conceptualisations of aspirations
- Alternative conceptual frameworks – e.g. possible selves, locus of control, self-efficacy, theory of planned behaviour etc.

Question 2...

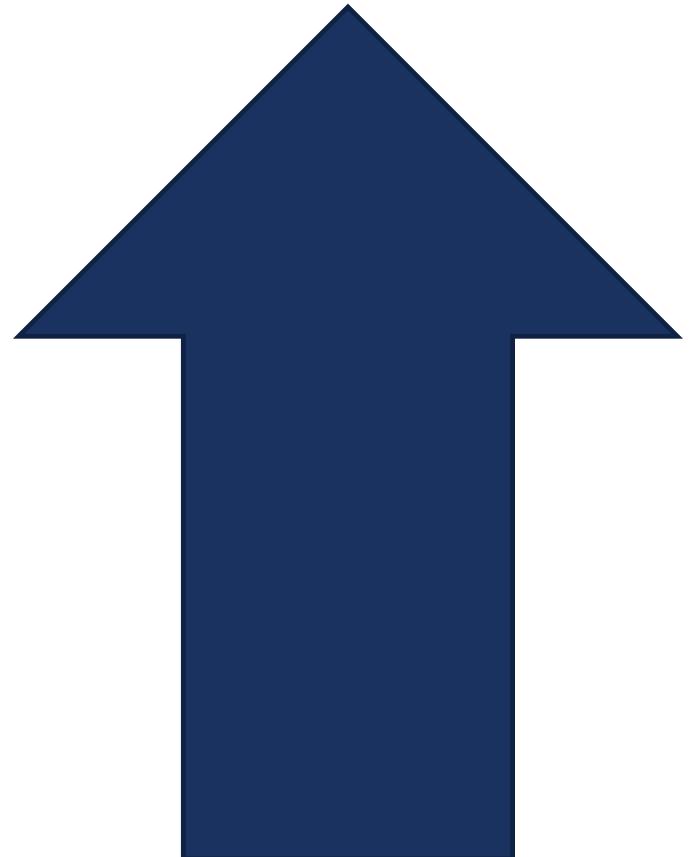
THE CHALLENGES OF TARGETING

- The effectiveness of targeting was a significant concern in early days of WP (e.g. HEFCE, 2007)
- Development of POLAR and other guidance
- Practitioners still struggle to identify the ‘right’ young people (Harrison *et al.*, 2018), with some perverse incentives (Harrison and Waller, 2017)
- Over-emphasis on simplistic markers of disadvantage?

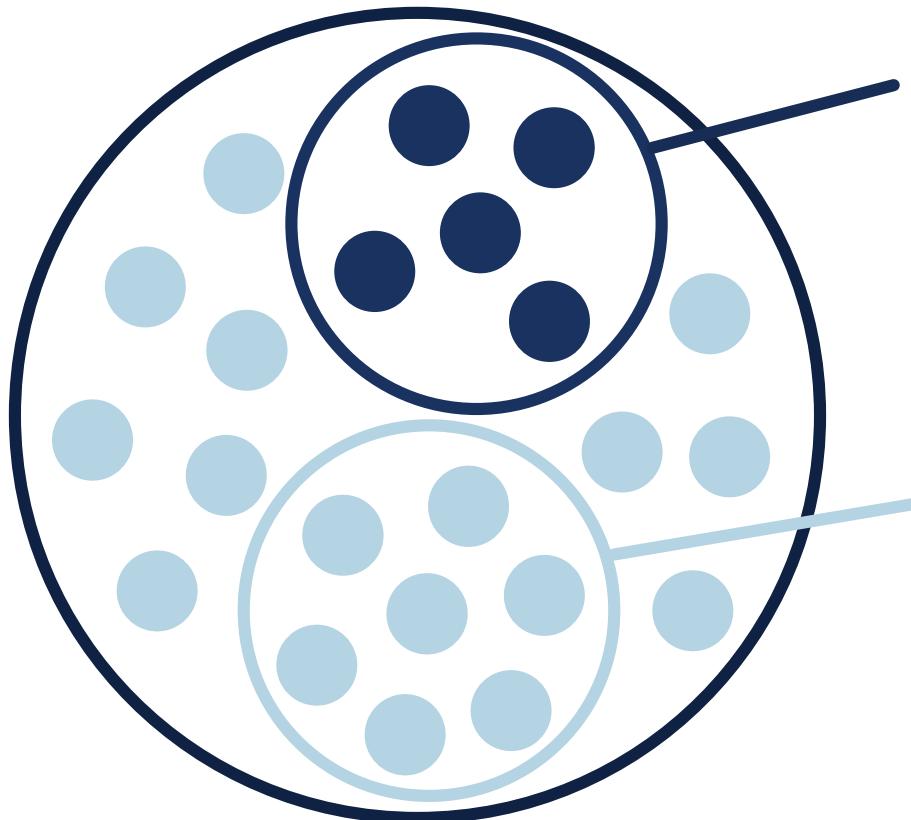


WHAT IS POTENTIAL?

- Danger that 'potential for HE' simply means 'those already likely to go anyway' – even if they and others don't know it yet
- Strong sorting role through school and testing regimes – e.g. KS2 results as predictor
- More rigorous formulation: 'Who might go with intervention who wouldn't go without'?
- Concept of 'deadweight' (Harrison, 2012)



TYRANNY OF COUNTERFACTUALS



Targeted intervention group (of those with 'potential for HE')

Comparison group (of those without 'potential for HE')

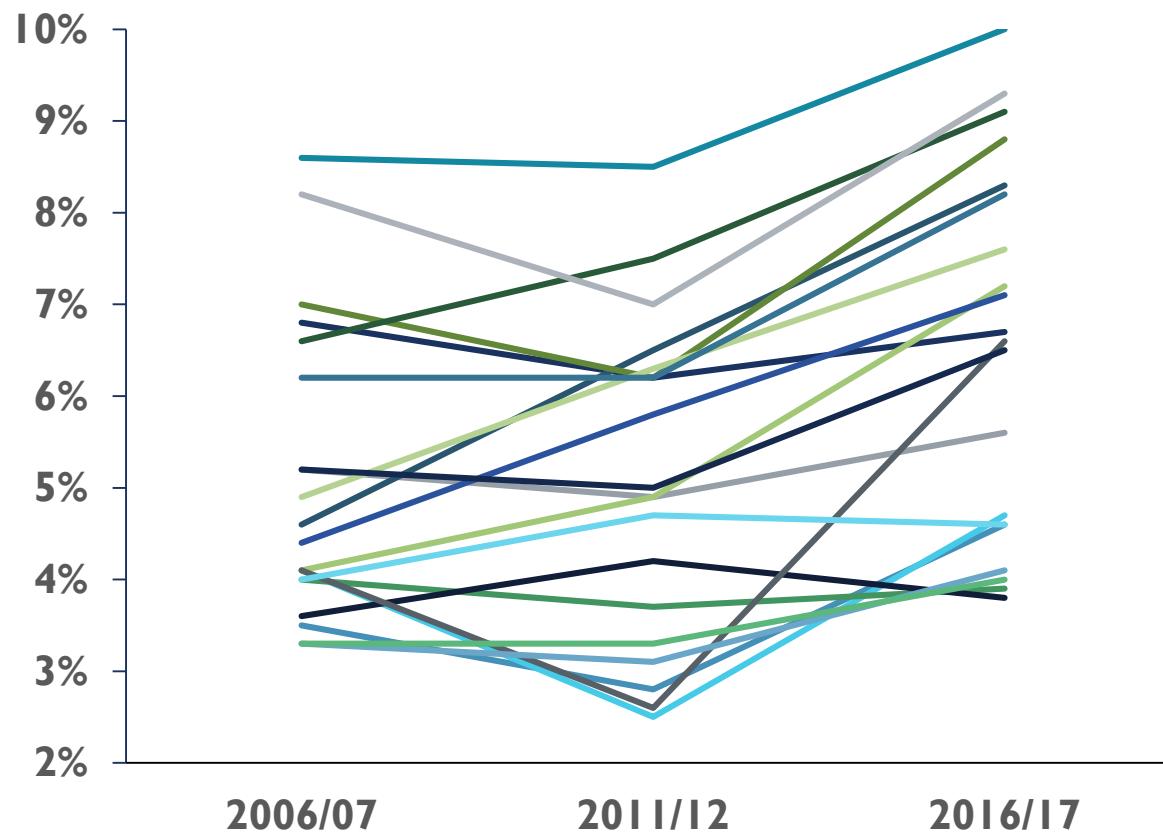
- How do you avoid creating self-fulfilling prophecies?
- How do avoid cementing them into practitioner confirmation bias?

Why is there so much deadweight in outreach work?

- Anecdote alert: much outreach activity appears to contain a high proportion of deadweight which is then used as an indicator of success
- Which young people actually need interventions to get on a pathway (or a particular pathway) towards HE?
- Are the most successful activities those with low success rates...?

Question 3...

ROOM AT THE TOP?



- Russell Group (inc. new joiners) proportion of new young students from low participation neighbourhoods – Source: HESA
- Raw averages: 2006/07 = 5.1%; 2011/12 = 5.1%; 2016/17 = 6.5%
- Proportion from POLAR Q1 in high tariff institutions rose from 2.4% to 3.6% between 2011 and 2016 (UCAS, 2016)

A ZERO SUM GAME

- Very large amounts invested for very limited progress – only since number controls lifted
- Most elite institutions have strong outreach and support programmes
- Not quite a zero sum game, but surprisingly close to being one
- Fishing metaphor: not a deeper pool, just fighting for better nets



MY NEW QUESTION 3...

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Why is the Russell Group unable to widen their participation effectively?

- Not necessarily meant as pejorative – it's a wider phenomenon
- However, new evidence that targeting is getting worse, not better – retrenchment into post-16 recruitment-led activities
- Need for sub-regional or sectoral targets to force collaboration

Question 4...

A LITTLE SELF-KNOWLEDGE...

- As noted, institutions still heavily reliant on data collected from young people to evaluate their outreach (Harrison *et al.*, 2018)
- To what extent can they make meaningful statements about distal concepts and events?
- Susceptibility to cognitive biases: placebo effect, priming effect, social desirability bias, Dunning-Kruger effect etc.
- Likely to cause an over-estimation of impact



Are young people reliable witnesses?

- Reworking of original Question 2!
- Perhaps only epistemologically-sound to ask about here-and-now impact of outreach – not possible future changes
- Greater use of known psychological and psychosocial constructs like locus of control and self-efficacy
- Greater use of data from adults surrounding the young person

Question 5...

Why do seemingly similar young people end up on different pathways?

- Reconceptualisation of original Question 4!
- We still really know very little about *how* young people take decisions about education and transition into adult life
- Why are some able to transcend difficulties and others are not?
- Relative risk as a potentially useful lens (Harrison, 2019)



1. **Why won't 'aspiration-raising' die?**
2. **Why is there so much deadweight in outreach work?**
3. **Why is the Russell Group unable to widen their participation effectively?**
4. **Are young people reliable witnesses?**
5. **Why do seemingly similar young people end up on different pathways?**

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