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ORIGINAL PAPER

Centring the voices of schools in widening participation discourse: how building closer partnerships with educators can benefit WP providers' practice

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Abstract

Many organisations in the UK work with schools to try to increase the numbers of young people from underrepresented groups progressing to higher education. However, public debate about the efficacy of these programmes rarely centres the views of schools themselves, often giving the sense that schools are passive recipients of these activities rather than key stakeholders. This study begins to rectify this omission by conducting a series of interviews gathering in-depth information from school representatives about their views on, and interactions with, external widening participation providers. Participants had a range of ideas as to how interventions could be improved and made more impactful, and also pinpointed areas of difficulty, including target pupil selection and quality of some providers' delivery. Schools expressed a sense of overload in dealing with numerous approaches from external providers and wished for more access to 'filter' mechanisms to provide quality assurance; however, some also wished to work more closely with known organisations. It was also notable that none of the schools were working with providers to evaluate the impact of activities. Our findings demonstrate that listening to the voice of the school has the potential to make outreach activities more impactful.

Keywords Widening participation · Outreach · School leadership · Social justice

Introduction

The expansion in higher education (HE) participation in the UK initiated by the Blair government around 20 years ago led to an increased emphasis being placed on activities aimed at encouraging young people from more deprived backgrounds to go to university. Over the course of the twenty-first century, such initiatives have

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expanded rapidly, being delivered by government programmes in various iterations (Aimhigher, NNCOs and the current Uni Connect) as well as HE institutions themselves,[1] educational charities, large employers and other bodies.

As these widening participation (WP) interventions proliferated, attention turned to measuring their efficacy, and as a result, there now exists a body of research/grey literature looking at the impacts of these programmes. However, there is an important perspective which is often omitted from such publications—that of the schools and teachers who often facilitate these outreach activities.

Whilst WP interventions are generally delivered by outside agencies, the role of schools is of undeniable significance, acting as they often do as a conduit between the delivery organisation and the pupil. They host activities, select which pupils will take part, facilitate trips and much more besides. However, what the school as a body, or individual staff members, think about the initiatives that they enable is rarely publicly recorded, or is included only at a functional, event evaluation level.

In our view, this is a significant omission. On the one hand, the voice of the school, or its representative, is likely to be a valuable guide to WP organisations as to the most impactful ways to structure their interventions; on the other hand, it has the capacity to reveal any disconnects between the theoretical design of an activity and how it plays out in practice. Including the school in the public debate about outreach, rather than seeing it as a passive recipient of such efforts, has the potential to improve the effectiveness of external bodies' programmes.

In order to explore the above thesis, we conducted a research study in conjunction with Future U, the Lancashire branch of the Uni Connect programme. We spoke to representatives from a number of schools about their relationships with external WP providers—how these worked in practice, any challenges which arose, and how they would characterise the school's relationship with these bodies. To include the external provider's view, we also interviewed Future U representatives about their relationships with schools.

This paper details the results of our study. It begins by reviewing the rather sparse body of extant literature on the school's view of external WP activities and their providers. It then describes our methodology, before recounting the results of our research. Finally, we present our analysis as to what these findings mean for WP provider/school relationships moving forwards.

Literature review

Governments in many countries have introduced policies designed to improve access to higher education in recent years (Shah et al. 2015). In England, policymakers have made a significant commitment to this aim, for example by the development of the Uni Connect scheme; however, inequalities in participation levels have proved persistent (Burke 2012), leading to an increased focus on

[1] Universities and other HE institutions have been required to conduct outreach activities since the advent of variable tuition fees in 2004.

'what works' (Harrison and Waller 2017) and on evaluation and research in the sector.

Although there has been a significant increase in such outputs, when we review the academic literature and 'grey' literature such as government reports on WP activity, it quickly becomes apparent that the school's voice is rarely heard in published materials. Although school representatives are sometimes surveyed in order to gather their view of a programme's efficacy, there is little sense of any collaborative endeavour or attempt to build a dialogue between schools and WP providers. Whilst it is likely that internal evaluations conducted by providers sometimes contain an element of teacher consultation, the outcomes of these are not visible to outside parties.

However, although sparse, there are some instances where the teacher/educator is allowed to become part of the public discussion. This review largely covers materials produced in and about the UK education system, although there is also some relevant scholarly output emanating from Australia. Although the school systems of the two nations are different, it is still possible to find points of contact with the UK experience in the Antipodean example.

The first theme that emerges from the existing body of work is expressions of the importance of the relationship between schools and external WP-providing organisations. A case in point is a study by Armstrong and Cairnduff (Armstrong and Cairnduff 2012) which examined a WP programme run by the University of Sydney. Here the authors discussed the importance of a sense of 'partnership' between the institutions attempting to widen participation and the schools and organisations through which they operate:

> The importance of the deep and serious engagement by universities with their local schools and communities should not be underestimated… To be inclusive, we need to learn from working with others and adopt strategies that are owned within schools and communities, not imposed on them from outside.

Whether or not it is possible for such initiatives to be 'owned' by schools is a key focus of our study.

Such partnerships, however, can come at a cost. Another important paper positioned from the Australian context is Blackmore et al. (2017) which analysed how a school–university partnership was viewed by school principals. The principals revealed a side to sustained WP activity that perhaps would not otherwise have been seen. For example, one felt that "frequent contact between school and university mentors to discuss a range of concerns from homework to social issues built 'supportive networks' and increased 'school connectedness'"; however, as the authors note, when schools in low-SES areas built such networks, "this drained limited resources to the detriment of enrichment programmes in the arts, sport and digital cultures". This trade-off might not have become visible had not the voice of the principals been heard.

An important reason for WP providers to listen to what educators have to say about their programmes is that conditions within the school may impact on the practical implementation of such initiatives. For example Bryan et al. (2022),

who interviewed a small number of teachers about a pilot STEM engagement project, noted that "Teachers repeatedly stressed the time constraints when working with hard-to-reach pupils, because they have to focus on meeting targets and have to compensate for their typically low attendance", a factor that could be factored into intervention design.

At a broader policy level, one of the few academic publications to centre the voices of school staff is by Braun et al. (2011), which addresses the question of how individual school contexts can impact on the delivery of national educational goals. This work highlights the risk of not hearing the views of these stakeholders—that the 'on-the-ground' result of an initiative can be very different from the theory:

> …policies are intimately shaped and influenced by school-specific factors, even though in much central policy making and research, these sorts of constraints, pressures and enablers of policy enactments tend to be neglected… Policy analyses of schools rarely, if ever, include details of budgets, buildings or staffing in their purviews and contexts are magically dematerialised…

In addition to these types of practical disconnects, there can be more active philosophical tensions between the WP provider and the school. Examples of these can be found in publications discussing the impacts of the UK Aimhigher[2] scheme which attempted to include the teacher voice in their analysis. Hatt et al., for example (Hatt et al. 2008) found that teachers were extremely enthusiastic about the programme, making statements such as "Aimhigher has… increased aspirations in a deprived area where university is often not considered". However, the relationship between school and programme was not without its tensions, with selection of participants a particular sticking point. This is described as a fundamental difference between the school's aim of benefiting all children, and the programme's aim of focusing on only some:

> For schools, inclusion means giving everyone access to the curriculum, while Aimhigher aims for social inclusion by focusing on the excluded.

In another study (Baxter et al. 2007), the same group of authors found that teachers were using various methods to include more students in the activities provided by Aimhigher who may not have been part of the target group:

> Aimhigher is combined at school level with equal opportunities or diversity policy to ensure that it complements the school's own mission… Although the integrated approach reflected in these interviews with teachers runs the risk of diluting the focus of Aimhigher, it also shows that the initiative has become embedded in the school in complex ways.

The authors make the point, very pertinently to the current study, that "The teachers' evidence also suggests that Aimhigher policies in the South West do not

[2] Aimhigher ran from 2004 to 2011 and operated at both national and regional level.

operate in isolation, but are integrated within the context of the school's priorities and concerns".

There are some signs in the recent grey literature that these types of concerns are being taken more seriously as part of a drive to rigorously evaluate WP programmes. A recent study for HEFCE looking at why some schools had higher than expected levels of HE participation (Webster 2017) found an interesting disconnect between government advice and in-school practice:

> Universities have been encouraged to work with pupils from a young age to encourage them to consider HE yet it appears this practice is not replicated in schools until pupils progress to sixth form studies. This is particularly concerning given the implications of option choices (made in year 9) on the ability to gain entry to certain HE courses at a later date

There was also evidence that some teachers did not share the government's attitudes to HE participation; the author notes that "Many of those surveyed felt there were too many graduates already with others supporting the status quo in terms of graduates entering the job market… The study reveals a mismatch between government policy and practice in schools".

A couple of very recent reports shed some light on teachers' views of the government's flagship WP programme, Uni Connect, which is in some senses a successor of Aimhigher. The Office for Students (OfS) conducted an online survey of school staff in late 2020 (Ipsos Mori 2021). Although there was no qualitative element to the data collection—so that the teacher's voice is not precisely 'heard'—some interesting findings emerge. For example, although 62% of respondents agreed strongly or slightly with the programme's eligibility criteria, 95% supported expanding these; the authors suggest that teachers may prefer this expansion to be decided at a local level:

> There was no overall consensus on other groups of individuals that should be eligible to participate in targeted outreach through Uni Connect. Survey respondents identified almost 30 different groups that the eligibility criteria could be expanded to include, suggesting that schools and colleges would welcome scope to determine who should benefit.

Adding colour to these findings is a qualitative study conducted by Raven (2020) into teachers' views of one Uni Connect's activities. Through interviews with teaching professionals, the author finds that the programme is seen to have impacts including generating excitement among the target group and raising subject interest; a number of challenges are also identified, including selection of the participant cohort, and evidencing longer-term impact.

In terms of *how* we take schools' views into account when developing and reviewing WP programmes, authors commonly use interview techniques (e.g. Bryan et al. 2022; Raven 2020), as we have also in this study. However, there are other possibilities; Bates and O'Connor Bones (2021), for example, detail how a method of Community Conversations was used to explore the sensitive topic of school provision in Northern Ireland. The authors argue that "Community

Conversations have hitherto been underused generally within education research", and such an approach could be useful for collaborations between schools, providers and other stakeholders when planning future WP provision.

Taken together, this review of the available literature reveals two things: firstly, that in all the enormous amount of discussion of how to widen participation in HE, and the wealth of programmes, there is little published material which allows the staff in the schools who must host these to give their view on their suitability and efficacy. Secondly, when school staff *are* allowed a voice, what they say can be highly illuminating, both in terms of pinpointing areas where initiatives work and ways in which they could be improved and sometimes in revealing a mismatch between the teacher's views on the aims of WP and the provider and/or government's stated goals.

It is also important to note that changes to the emphasis of government policy may necessitate providers involving schools to a greater extent. As a systematic review by Baines et al. (2022) notes, "Moving forward under revised Access and Participation Plans for universities, a renewed emphasis on collaboration with schools earlier in pupils' educational timeline and support for attainment… will require a shift in focus from widening participation practitioners". Although policy in this area can be subject to frequent changes of priority, this may signal an increased focus on provider-school partnership development.

Starting from this point, our current project takes the view that academic study of the school's perspective of its position as a recipient of WP activity is overdue. It aims to centre the voice of the school staff, identify the areas where school motivations and those of external WP providers may differ, and gather 'on-the-ground' information as to what works and what does not in terms of broadening young peoples' horizons.

Research questions

The above review of the existing literature leads us to pose the following questions:

(1) Why do schools think we conduct WP activity, and what do they feel are the important points to consider when designing such initiatives?
(2) What areas of difficulty arise when conducting WP activity in conjunction with external providers?
(3) How does the relationship with external WP providers work, and how could it be improved?

Methods

In order to address the above questions, we initiated a study in which we spoke directly to school representatives who were involved with co-ordinating widening participation activity with external providers, in order to gather their views about how such initiatives worked, the school's interactions with the provider, and feelings

of partnership and/or disconnection. The study was conducted in co-operation with, and funded by, Future U, the Lancashire Uni Connect; however, it does not restrict itself to a review of Uni Connect activities, but ranges more widely across all external WP providers.

We conducted a series of six hour-long semi-structured interviews with representatives from schools across Lancashire in the north west of England. Interviews were held on Microsoft Teams during April–May 2021. None of the participants were classroom teachers, but held a variety of roles within their schools; most were members of the school's senior leadership team. A summary of the schools, together with details of the individual participants, can be found in Table 1.

In order to protect the privacy of participating organisations and teachers, we have pseudonymised both schools and staff members.

In addition to this, to understand the WP provider perspective, we interviewed two representatives of Future U, in December 2020. Because of the relatively small pool from which the latter participants were drawn, we have additionally anonymised them by using gender-neutral pseudonyms and pronouns.

Use of Microsoft Teams to conduct the interviews was necessary at the time of investigation due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The use of remote methods as a platform for conducting research interviews presents both practical and ethical challenges. From a practical standpoint, there may be technical difficulties with using the platform, such as connectivity issues or issues with audio and video settings which can disrupt the flow of the interaction (Samuk Carignani and Burchi 2022). Additionally, there may be concerns around data security and privacy, as the use of a third-party platform for conducting research raises questions about the control and management of sensitive information. From an ethical standpoint, there may be issues related to informed consent, as well as concerns around participant privacy and confidentiality.

In order to mitigate these practical and ethical challenges, remote interview procedures followed protocols laid down by the Research Office of the University of Central Lancashire and the study as a whole was reviewed and approved by the relevant university ethics committee. In addition, extensive pre-interview preparations were made using a more highly structured format than might have been used in an in-person setting in order to compensate for potential difficulties with connectivity and rapport-building.

After all the interviews had taken place, the data were analysed via a process of inductive thematic analysis. Transcripts were read and re-read and initial themes identified; a further stage of reading took place in order to tease out relevant subthemes; and a final iteration then revealed a further web of connections between these sub-themes. Table 2 details the themes and sub-themes generated by this iterative process.

Impact of Covid-19

The initial design of this study involved researchers visiting participating schools and interviewing a number of staff members from each institution. However, in

Table 1 Study participants

Pseudonymised name	Role	Pseudonymised school name	Location of school	Description of school
Claire Smith [CS]	Careers Co-ordinator	Eastern High	Urban East Lancashire	Slightly lower % of pupils receiving Pupil Premium (PP) than average; higher than average % white British pupils
Sarah Jones [SJ]	Assistant headteacher	Hillside	Urban East Lancs	Higher % PP than average; much higher % pupils from BAME backgrounds than average
Nicola Taylor [NT]	Assistant headteacher	City High	Urban Central Lancs	Much higher % PP than average; much higher % pupils from BAME backgrounds than average
Paul Brown [PB]	Careers leader	Moor View	Urban East Lancs	Much higher % PP than average; much higher % pupils from BAME backgrounds than average
Mark Williams [MW]	Careers leader	Western High	Urban West Lancs	Much higher % PP than average; higher % pupils from white British backgrounds than average
Lisa Robinson [LR]	Careers Co-ordinator	Riverside	Smaller North Lancs conurbation	Much higher % PP than average; average % pupils from white British backgrounds
Morgan Davies [MD]	Future U team member	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ellis Thompson [ET]	Future U team member	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 2 Themes and sub-themes generated by inductive thematic analysis process

Selection	**Provider selection in practice**
	Awkward conversations
	Activity unable to run
	Selection no problem
	Friendship groups
	Difficulty/barriers
	Inflexibility
	Internal selection for WP
	Selection by ability
	Right activity for student
	How I select for WP
	My opinions on selection
	Prefer if no selection
	Concerns about some providers
	Positive about Future U

Hub/filter	**Use of FU as hub**
	FU as funding hub
	Person to turn to/sole provider
	Openness to others
	Issues with other providers
	Will work with others
	Links with other orgs
	Need for hub mechanism
	Flexible/inflexible
	Receive many approaches
	Need for hub or filter
	In-school structures
	Devolved/centralised within school

Aims	**Practical aspects**
	Practicalities of accessing uni
	Barriers eg geographic, financial
	Ability and academic performance
	Courses and career choices
	Affective aspects
	Opportunities/options/expand horizons
	Aspiration/inspiration/encouragement
	What a university 'is'
	Myths
	Uni a realistic possibility
	Who receives info?
	Deprivation/family background
	All students should get same info

Partnership	**Working together**
	Joint development (activity)
	Sense of partnership
	Feedback and development
	Building on activities
	Measuring impact
	Measuring impact YES
	Measuring impact NEED TO DO MORE
	Measuring impact NO/DIFFICULT
	Interactions
	Personal relationships
	Who knows about FU?
	Positive views of FU

Idealised vision	**Practical ideas for improvement**
	Campus visit
	Curriculum/subject links
	Same info for everyone
	Other practical ideas
	Wish list
	Desire to be consulted
	Difficulties to be addressed
	Future U and other providers
	Good things about Future U
	Concerns about other providers

Teachers	**Organisational**
	Practical aspects
	Organisational structure
	Teacher role in session
	Attitudes
	Sources of tension
	Staff attitudes

Activity	**Visits**
	Visits to uni
	Other visits
	Examples of good activities
	Hands-on/practical
	Soft skills
	Other activity examples
	Views on approaches
	Activities for different age groups
	Meeting people
	Subject/career-specific
	Views of online engagement

January 2021, England went into a round of school closures which lasted for several weeks, and in the aftermath, many schools were not allowing visitors or were severely disrupted by lost teaching time and high rates of absence. We therefore had to scale the study back to involve an online interview with a single member of staff from each school. However, the 60-min length of these interviews enabled

researchers to explore themes in depth and follow interesting lines of enquiry that arose, meaning that we were still able to extract rich learning from the data.

An additional Covid impact was on our ability to recruit a wide range of schools to this study. All the schools who agreed to participate had a level of involvement with Future U and were thus known to be actively engaged with external WP providers. It was originally the intention to include schools who were not utilising Future U's provision; however, after approaching a number of such schools by email on two occasions, no responses were received. Given the pandemic-hit circumstances, we did not wish to put undue pressure on schools by pursuing them further. We therefore accepted that we would not be able to include such schools. This study, therefore, can only comment on schools who actively engage with external WP providers; the view of those who do not is an area ripe for further study.

Results

In this section, we will consider the findings relating to each of the three research questions in turn.

Why do schools think we conduct WP activity, and what do they feel are the important points to consider when designing such initiatives?

The reasons for undertaking WP activity identified by school participants can be categorised as 'practical' and 'attitudinal'. Practical reasons for such activity included tackling potential barriers such as geographic location or cost of universities, and informing pupils about courses and career choices. Attitudinal reasons for WP activity, meanwhile, mainly centred around showing young people what opportunities existed for them, 'expanding horizons' and providing 'inspiration' for the future. A related theme raised by school staff was showing pupils what a university 'is' or 'does', and how they might fit into that. "I think the main thing is inspiring and showing people that [HE] is accessible… for pupils that probably in the first instance would not necessarily consider it as being for them", says MW.

It is reassuring that the above motivations for outreach efforts cited by educators are in line with what is being provided by the sector. Robinson and Salvestrini (2020), in their review of widening access interventions, note that activities included "interventions that provide information, advice and guidance", in order to achieve outcomes including "aspirations towards, awareness of, and progression to, higher education for disadvantaged or underrepresented students". This demonstrates a broad alignment between what is being provided by WP organisations and the underlying aims of such activity as perceived by teachers.

In terms of what type of activities are effective in achieving these aims, there was a consensus among respondents that off-site visits, and particularly campus visits, were most impactful. This was because of the broad range of experiences that they could convey—accommodation, academic content, leisure facilities—but also

because of the sense of possibility and familiarity that can be engendered by such experiences. As LR notes,

> [The pupils] think, 'It's great, get a day off school'. But every time they go past a university again then they can say, 'Oh I've been there, I've been there and I've had a look around'.

These comments support similar findings in Raven's study, where school staff commented that such visits "normalise going to a university". In addition, some of our participants felt that visits could be even more effective if made available more widely, for example to younger age groups, or extended to include an overnight stay.

Another recommendation made by staff in terms of the effectiveness of an activity was to ensure that the right people are involved in the delivery. Whilst a session leader who can connect with young people and communicate information at the right level can be very effective, teachers felt that relatability was also a key characteristic. SJ cites an unengaging session where pupils met senior figures from a local business as an example of this, suggesting that junior staff could have been more effective and inspirational role models: "…the people that are closer to their age. That would actually make the biggest impact on them, because they can see themselves in that role in a short period of time".

When it comes to how the content of interventions could be improved, a recurring theme was a desire for activities which demonstrate how the school curriculum links to university courses and careers—linking medicine to school science, for example. More broadly, staff felt that showing young people what the subjects they enjoy could lead to—those they had chosen to study at GCSE, for example—could be beneficial in connecting the school experience with potential futures.

What areas of difficulty arise when conducting WP activity in conjunction with external providers?

When we consider the difficulties that schools have in working with external WP providers, the theme that arises in almost every conversation is difficulties in selecting the correct target pupils. From the literature review we are aware that this is not a new concern, and in fact dates back to (at least) the Aimhigher programme. However, our conversations for this study allowed us to probe not only the issues that schools have with pupil selection, but their proposed responses to the problem.

The first area of tension is that there are different ways of measuring 'deprivation'. There are various simple ways in which schools feel they could identify target learners, for example those who receive free school meals. However, programmes such as Uni Connect are often told to use more complex targeting techniques, such as looking at comparative HE participation at postcode level, taking into account prior attainment. At Future U, MD understands the problem: "I think what's difficult—and I understand this from a school perspective—is that they have their own measures, such as pupil premium, free school meals, etc., that they understand as WP criteria".

This can lead to situations which seem counterintuitive to the lay observer. MW, for example, works in a school in an area widely agreed to be one of England's most deprived, which has around twice the median level of children receiving Pupil Premium.[3] Despite this, his school has only a few Uni Connect target learners:

> As a school we do have quite a high number of pupil premium, free-school-meal pupils, quite a lot of pupils whose parents haven't gone into higher education and that kind of thing. But from a postcode point of view, very few of our pupils hit that criteria, which has caused us barriers to getting involved in as much as we'd like to. So, lots of Future U activities are turned down, not because they're not great activities to get involved with and not because we haven't got pupils that would really benefit from them.

The fact that schools seem not to fully understand how Uni Connect targets students is potentially a reflection of a tension between the approach mandated for the programme by OfS, and broader measures of widening participation, based around deprivation, ethnicity and other measures, which are often discussed by bodies such as the Department for Education.

For schools, the complexity of deciding which pupils will qualify for which externally provided programme is a related issue. CS comments that "it's quite a lot of work… to get the data together, which can be a bit frustrating". In fact, several participants reported instances when programmes had been cancelled or not taken up because of selection difficulties, particularly at a time when extra Covid restrictions added a layer of complexity to school life.

Aside from targeting criteria, there are further challenges connected with pupil selection. One issue raised by some of our participants is that the importance of friendship groups often seems to be overlooked. It is not uncommon to hear of pupils who had been selected for a trip or activity but who did not want to participate because their friends had not been chosen. "Pupils are very reluctant to do things by themselves and not in their friendship group", says MW. "If one or two of their friends aren't going with them, then our pupils would opt out and choose not to go".

At Future U, ET points out that it is not only breaking up friendship groups that cause such problems, but group dynamics more generally. A school with few target learners may feel that as a group they will not mesh well, and thus they are reluctant to run activities; schools with more target learners may be keener because "they can still pick and choose who they feel would work well in a group".

Another important facet of the selection problem is pupils' own perception of the process, which can lead to difficult discussions. "The target learners aren't daft", says MD at Future U. "They know that they've been chosen, and they want to know why". LR has seen this in action at her own school: "It can be tricky. I

[3] Pupil Premium is government funding intended to improve education outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in schools in England: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium/pupil-premium

mean sometimes the students do know that it is the same people that are being asked to do similar activities. They can probably work it out themselves".

So given this multitude of problems around selection, how do the school representatives themselves feel that this issue should be tackled? Opinions on this point varied. A general desire for 'flexibility' emerged; a more specific suggestion made by NT was that target schools, rather than pupils, would be more equitable:

> For me, the fairest way is looking at the school postcode and progression to higher education. We have lower than average progression rates to higher education and, therefore, all of the pupils that are in our school, for me, should be eligible to then access those programmes.

The first suggestion is likely to attract disagreement, as the demographic profile of a school's postcode and those of the homes of its learners can be radically different. However, it serves to illustrate the breadth of opinion among educators as to the best ways of targeting these interventions.

There were also some who were philosophically opposed to targeting activities at all. MW said that in an ideal world the school would "offer everything to everybody" and felt that the category of 'target learners' meant that the needs of other pupils might be overlooked. CS agreed, saying:

> You can have a child from a background where there's plenty of economic, social and cultural capital, who are lonely, who are at risk, maybe are being pushed a lot, maybe pushed into choosing careers options and going to colleges that they don't want to go to.

Whilst selection was the most prominent source of difficulty in working with external providers expressed by our school participants, there were several other causes of complication or frustration. In practical terms, the provider's ability to work in ways that suited the school day was an issue for some; a potentially valuable activity can be rendered useless if a school is physically unable to participate. CS gives the example of a major manufacturer which offered pupils an online guided tour around its facilities:

> …but these events are live. Well, yes, it sounds great that this event is live, it's really dynamic and you've got that ability for questions and answers, but in the practical school day, when there are lessons and things going ahead, it's very difficult to have a time where you can have pupils together to be able to engage with this. So I've just had to say no to so many things just because of that.

Another issue raised by participants was difficulty in assessing the potential quality of activities from organisations which they had not previously encountered, with some questioning the expertise and/or motivations of providers with whom they were unfamiliar. For example, LR recalls a healthcare careers for boys activity; the organisation leading the project was working with the NHS, "but when I spoke to our local NHS careers hub, they didn't really know much about them"; the scheme ended up running into difficulties. A certain amount of suspicion is in

evidence; PB, for example, comments that "There are a lot of organisations out there who would love some of the school money". In a similar vein, CS notes that "I get a lot of approaches from providers that, on the surface, are offering free resources, but actually, it isn't. When you look further into it, it isn't free at all". And she has deeper-seated concerns:

> I, personally, have some issues sometimes with companies, external companies, like private companies, offering careers advice. I am a little bit wary of, for example, banks that offer careers support and training. I wonder how they're going to use that data that they collect from the students in future years when they go on to get student loans and things like that. So I have been a little bit wary of that. I'm sure that there are lots of privacy notices and they don't use that data, but I do wonder sometimes just about the ethics with that, really.

How does the relationship with external WP providers work, and how could it be improved?

The responses to our questions on this theme revealed competing forces at play. School representatives often expressed a perception of overload where external WP activity was concerned; however, alongside this was a desire for more consultation and joint working.

Let's first consider the question of overload. A large number of external WP providers want to work with schools, particularly those in target areas. "My inbox can be quite onerous sometimes", notes CS. Whilst the staff often appreciate the wealth of activities available to them, there can be too much to physically respond to, and a lack of time to assess the benefits of differing schemes. NT comments:

> I think it's good that they're contacting us directly absolutely, [but] I think that given particularly my role in the school and my different areas of remit, often those direct emails might not get picked up or responded to… [And then] how do I best make that judgment as to what's going to work best for the pupils? I think that then involves quite a lot of admin type work…

Because of this, several of our respondents expressed a desire for a 'hub' or 'filter' mechanism to ease the burden of having to make such judgements. Local Uni Connect operations such as Future U have a remit to act as such a facility, but other organisations such as local careers hubs can also fulfil this function. The burden of choice, and uncertainties about quality, can be such that schools prefer to access all activities through such a hub, rather than considering individual approaches.

Where a relationship *has* been built, however, we found a clear strand of desire for greater consultation among our respondents, several of whom suggested that an opportunity to give their input could improve the efficacy of WP programmes. MW notes that "for schools generally it would be a good thing for them to be able to have a bit more of a say in what they want for WP", and SJ expands on this thought:

> …if we could sit down and say, 'These are our priorities as a school, this is what we need some help and support with', then they could help us to look at our school development plan and to support that, those gaps that we've got as a school. So, I think that would be useful, yes.

But what is the underlying nature of this relationship between schools and providers? Can it ever be thought of as a 'partnership', can schools feel 'ownership', or are they destined to be solely recipients of WP activity? And would an ownership or partnership arrangement, in fact, be desirable?

In order to probe this question we looked more closely at the relationship between our participant schools and the local Uni Connect, Future U, with whom several had close ties. School representatives' characterisations of the association were mixed. LR, for example, described her school as "partnered" with Future U, but later commented that "we would be more of an end user, rather than shaping how it's run". In a similar vein, NT described the relationship as "a supplier agreement", whilst MW said:

> …as far as Future U and WP, basically, we get the opportunity to take advantage of things that are done to us or done for us rather than us saying, 'This is what we want'.

PB, however, had a different perspective. "They're always open to our ideas", she said. "I'd like to think that there's a partnership involved there".

On the Future U side, MD felt that there was a limit to how far the relationship could be taken:

> Obviously, we run the sessions. So, they're never going to take ownership over what they're doing, but they have facilitated it, and I think there is a positive aspect when they come. If you've got a really good school contact, often they try and be there and take part in things, and when they do that aspect, they get the reward, even if not the ownership of it, because they are responsible for facilitating something that is clearly having a positive impact on learners.

It is important at this point to note that not every school seeks a closer relationship or more input with WP providers, with NT content with the status quo:

> The providers that I work with do tend to say to me, 'If there's anything else that you think of, or if there's anything else that you would like us to get involved in…' so they do offer that, but with the busy-ness of the school it's often quite difficult to actually sit down and plan those kinds of activities that might be additional. As long as what's being offered to us is quality and is useful and beneficial then from my perspective as a school. I am quite happy to have those offered to me.

One area where there is a clear opportunity for a communal effort to lead to improvement is in measuring the impacts of WP activities. It is notable that all the schools we spoke to felt that more could be done to evidence the efficacy of these interventions. Whilst most schools kept some sort of record of which students had participated in which activity, none had used these records to investigate which were

most impactful or how effective the WP programme as a whole was. As PB notes, "I record it all, what children have done which initiatives. Maybe, yes, I'd need to perhaps follow up with some of those groups more". The teachers reported relying on informal monitoring such as conversation and observation to evaluate efficacy. CS notes that "without even speaking to them, we will know… whether they're enthusiastic with the work and their grades start to increase", whilst SJ was certain that WP activity was having an impact:

> Our children… have started to talk about their futures, their careers, what they want to do. And when you listen to the young people, they have a more varied idea about what they want to go on and do now, we don't just get the doctors, nurses, opticians, that we used to get, taxi-drivers. We do get more of a range of different job roles coming out now…

But as CS admits, "there isn't that big long-term look at the overall picture". Some schools also mentioned difficulties in getting relevant data from relevant bodies such as sixth-form providers, and it may be that in some cases data sharing is a stumbling block to evaluation efforts; however, there would seem to be potential for significant benefits if such issues can be addressed.

Discussion and recommendations

Discussion

It is encouraging to find a fundamental agreement between school staff and external WP providers as to the broad aims of outreach activity, in both practical and attitudinal dimensions. However, our study reveals that on an underlying level, the relationship between schools and external providers is characterised by a series of practical and philosophical difficulties.

In practical terms, these difficulties fall into two groups; existing activities where delivery could be improved, and opportunities that are being missed. Examples of the former include events timetabled in a way that is inconvenient for the school day, interventions led by less engaging individuals, and overly onerous selection criteria. Issues other than selection difficulties were raised more often in relation to non-specialist organisations, such as regional businesses, or those previously unknown to participants, rather than dedicated providers such as Uni Connect.

In terms of opportunities missed, our participants were able to suggest a number of practical steps that could be taken to improve the current offer, including more visits, using relatable activity leaders, and providing more links to the curriculum. These proposals illustrate the benefit of consulting schools during intervention design.

A striking message from our data is that whilst in some areas schools held broadly the same views—for example, their motivations for undertaking WP activity—in others, thinking was highly heterogeneous. This viewpoint diversity is clearly visible when discussing the most contentious WP issue, that of selection of target pupils. Whilst the large majority of schools raised this as a serious concern, opinions varied

widely as to how it should be tackled, with some advocating schools being given more autonomy of choice, some championing selection at whole-school level, and a further group being ideologically opposed to any selection at all. This finding supports, and adds colour to, the survey data gathered by Ipsos Mori on this point.

On a more fundamental level, a tension emerges in the question of how the school's time should be spent when managing WP provision. School representatives felt a sense of overwhelm when faced with a multitude of WP providers, but many also expressed a desire for a deeper alliance with the few with whom they chose to interact.

In relation to the first point, schools often found the range of provision on offer time-consuming and onerous to navigate, and in some cases felt that they were poorly equipped to assess the likely quality of what was being offered; the need for a 'hub' or 'filter' organisation, a trusted intermediary to help with this, was a common refrain.

But once an association had been formed, school representatives had a desire for more, rather than less, interaction. Even where relationships with providers were good, they felt under-consulted or that they were viewed as recipients of activities, rather than partners in them.

Perhaps the most striking way in which this 'partnership deficit' expresses itself is in impact evaluation, a function which is increasingly prioritised by regulators such as OfS. The fact that no joint measurement of effectiveness was taking place, even where a close relationship existed between provider and school, is worthy of note.

It seems, therefore, that there is a need for WP providers to build individual relationships with schools, rather than treating institutions as uniform 'end users'. But how should the sector act on this? Whilst it may be beneficial for WP providers to engage more closely with schools, it is *not* clear that the capacity exists within schools to facilitate such a relationship extension, even where the desire is there; it is also important to remember that a few schools were happy with a less close relationship. The lesson gleaned from the work of Blackmore et al., that there can be trade-offs inherent in how schools use their limited resources, should be heeded.

Whilst it is clear that, for a number of reasons, it would be beneficial for schools to be more closely consulted about WP activities provided by external organisations, the diversity of opinion within schools about how and to what extent this should happen, combined with intrinsic capacity problems, make this easier said than done. A solution could be for providers to have different 'tiers' of relationships available, in the way that they also have different activities prepared; establishments with the desire and capacity to form a deeper partnership could then do so, and their insights would be likely to have knock-on benefits for other schools in more constrained circumstances.

Recommendations

The above analysis leads us to make the following recommendations:

- WP providers should seek to consult schools about their goals for intervention and any practical or strategic issues that may arise, at a level beyond simple organisational matters. Methods such as Community Conversations might be helpful here;
- Providers should take note of schools' suggestions as to how activities can be improved, for example:
  - More off-site visits, particularly to campuses;
  - Ensure that the individual delivering an activity is relatable to young people;
  - Provide more interventions linked to the school curriculum.
- Funders, including central government, should consider how much flexibility they can allow in selection of pupils at a local level. Rigid rules intended to concentrate efforts on particular target groups can deter both schools and individual pupils, whilst giving schools more agency may result in more efficient and well-targeted programmes.
- Whilst organisations such as Uni Connect and local careers bodies already function as hubs for the multiplicity of externally provided activity available, this role should be publicised and expanded in order to relieve pressure on schools to do their own filtering.
- At least some schools will have the will and capacity to form deeper partnerships with providers, with knock-on benefits for all. Providers should consider how this can be facilitated, for example by forming advisory panels, inviting school representatives to planning meetings or holding consultation exercises.
- Joint evaluation programmes should be developed to ensure that the impacts of WP interventions are effectively recorded. At a minimum, providers should follow up verbally with relevant school staff, not just about practical delivery issues but on a more reflective level. A scheme of pre- and post-questionnaires would help to evidence impact; however, data sharing may prove a practical barrier.

Implementing these steps has the potential to make WP provision in schools much more effective, simply by listening to the voices of educators who are often viewed purely as recipients of, rather than partners in, such activity.

Conclusion

Widening participation programmes have become an increasingly mainstream aspect of HE provision over the last 20 years, with many interventions relying on schools to host or travel to events and workshops. However, despite the buy-in of school leaders and teachers being key to the implementation of such initiatives, their voice is rarely heard in the academic study of the field.

By interviewing a selection of relevant school staff, this study goes some way towards remedying this deficit and explodes the notion that schools can be seen as 'passive recipients' of WP activity. On the contrary, staff had strong views as to what activities are effective, and how they can be delivered to maximise impact, with campus visits, relatable session leaders and curriculum connections the most

frequently desired inputs. They were also able to pinpoint areas of difficulty in engaging with WP interventions, including those which might not be immediately obvious to providers such as interaction with the structure of the school day, peer group dynamics, and pupils' perceptions of the targeting process.

The nature of the relationship with WP providers is discussed at length, with schools reporting a sense of overload due to being offered numerous activities by an assortment of organisations, and a desire for a 'hub' or 'filter' mechanism to streamline their engagement. One important area of deficit revealed by our study is in programme evaluation, with no participating schools assessing the overall efficacy of WP activity; there is a manifest opportunity here for providers to work with educators to improve impact measurement.

Some schools, although not all, desired a closer relationship with selected providers. It is clear that there is a practical limit to how close a 'partnership' can be between a single school and a provider who will interact with numerous institutions; however, taking steps to build such relationships with those who desire it has the potential to improve programmes for all. This study shows that schools and their staff have valuable contributions to make to the discourse around WP programmes and their efficacy; allowing a channel for willing institutions to give their input into programme design and evaluation would represent the voice of schools as a sector. Schools are crucial stakeholders in the WP domain; it is time to give them more of a say.

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Data availability The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available as they consist of qualitative interview transcripts which carry the risk of making participants identifiable. However, redacted versions may be available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors report that there is no conflict of interest to declare.

Ethical approval This study received ethical approval from the University of Central Lancashire research ethics committee.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all participants in this study.

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