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Marketisation and post-1992 universities' enactment of Widening Participation in the UK: 'I do think universities need to be honest'

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Abstract

Drawing on two pieces of research, this paper focuses on the impact of marketisation on Widening Participation (WP) outreach activities amid indications of a narrowing of participation and in the wake of a tightening Higher Education (HE) funding environment. Within a field of competitive marketisation in HE, we problematise WP outreach interventions and the extent to which aims related to social justice are in tension with institutional responses to the HE market.

Across two studies in the West Midlands, interviews and focus groups were carried out with school and college students, staff delivering WP programmes, post-1992 undergraduate students and alumni from under-represented backgrounds. Exploring the data using Bourdieusian theory and complementary theoretical concepts, we theorise how within an increasingly marketised HE, WP interventions risk becoming for universities a self-interested 'bums on seats' exercise. While these activities may fulfil the meritocratic premise of increasing social mobility for individual students they may ultimately work against an altruistic ideal of social justice. This raises urgent questions about the purposes of HE and of post-1992 universities in particular in relation to social and economic inequality: necessitating authentic and honest relations with students about the HE market.

Key words: Widening participation, marketisation, Higher Education

Introduction

Contextualised by an increasingly marketised hierarchical UK HE sector, this article centres on the enactment of WP policies on post-1992 universities from the perspective of the students deemed to be benefiting from these policies. Widening participation (WP) programmes to increase the participation of students from under-represented backgrounds in Higher Education (HE) are receiving more policy-maker attention worldwide (Shah et al. 2015, Ni Chorcora et al. 2023). In the UK context, a range of university metrics produced for the market regulator, the Office for Students (OfS) include student outcomes indicators, the National Student Survey (OfS n.d.), the Graduate Outcomes survey (OfS n.d.A) and metrics associated with WP activities (produced in-house by each university). For WP as an initiative now focused on improving the student lifecycle: entry, on-course, completion and destination, current metrics illustrate how initiatives including outreach activities are being deployed within an increasingly competitive marketised hierarchy. The focus of this article is on WP policy enactment in less research-intensive universities within this hierarchy.

WP involves universities undertaking a range of activities aimed at increasing the number of students they recruit from under-represented groups such as students from low participation neighbourhoods, students eligible for Free School Meals, students from Black and Global majority backgrounds, young people from lower social classes and other backgrounds considered ‘disadvantaged’ (Burke and Hayton 2011, p8). The UK HE market is historically characterised by a hierarchical ‘established social order’ (Harrison and Waller 2017, p.146) with pre-1992 research-intensive universities requiring a higher level of entry qualifications at its apex and typically attracting students from a national base (Graham 2013, Davies et al. 2021) and new universities, many of which moved from being polytechnic colleges to achieving university status in the early 1990s (Boliver 2010). As a policy pursued by successive UK governments, less selective post-1992 universities have historically attracted a bigger share of (often local) students from under-represented backgrounds (IFS 2021).

Framed by a recent, ‘generally negative - hostile even - narrative… reinforced by the government and its agencies (the Office for Students in particular)’ (Bekhradnia 2024 p.9), there is recent evidence that WP is stalling (HESA 2025). This negative narrative targets ‘rip-off’ degrees in post-1992 universities, implicitly suggesting a shift towards a narrowing of participation (Salmon 2025). Concurrently, while UK HE has become increasingly reliant on income from international students (Bolton et al. 2025), recent restrictions on international visas have created additional pressure to recruit domestically. These changes to international visa policy reshape the fiscal and discursive conditions under which widening participation policy is enacted, reconfiguring WP as a constrained, compliance-oriented institutional practice (Thornton et al. 2025). With the value of university participation (for some groups and in some courses) being called into question, this article contributes to the literature by focusing on the operation of a marketised HE sector and the impact of enacted WP policies on students who are perceived as benefiting from these policies.

The achievement of higher participation rates of under-represented groups is commonly presented as beneficial, with universities being described as ‘crucial engines’ of social mobility (Sutton Trust 2021). Here it is important to draw a distinction between social mobility and social justice. While Brown (2013) argues that policy frameworks often conflate fairness with social mobility, he sees this as reducing educational inequality to an individualised problem of meritocratic advancement. He stresses that social mobility focuses on individual movement within existing hierarchies, while social justice requires structural redistribution and transformation. Wood et al (2023, p.86) concur, arguing that a mobility-driven agenda is ‘inimical to social justice’ as it obscures structural inequalities.

Contextualised by the HE hierarchy, this tension between social mobility and social justice in the enactment of WP initiatives is contentious (Elwick 2019, Jones 2021). Given that students from under-represented groups are more likely to study locally (Davies et al 2021), elite institutions are seemingly concentrating on recruiting the ‘heroic disadvantaged’ (Boliver et al 2018, 15). Sandlan (in HEPI 2018, p.79) proposes that access should be viewed as ‘a whole system problem that requires a whole system approach’. However, this would appear to depend on an erstwhile ‘co-operative ethos and wider social justice aims’ (Harrison and Waller 2017, p.141) that are in tension with competitive market conditions. In addition, such a whole system approach might also necessitate more prestigious universities suspending their narrow selection criteria (Boliver et al. 2018).

The current context of increasing marketisation contingent on tightening HE funding suggests that the enactment of WP may shift towards a ‘bums on seats’ approach to recruitment reminiscent of the Further Education quasi-market in the 1990s (Smith 2007, Illesley and Waller 2017). Perry (2021, p.14) sees marketisation as having the potential to distort the enactment of WP, making it serve ‘the interests of the market more than it acts as an equalizing force’. There are already indications of a scramble to recruit, with ‘high tariff providers’ recruiting students they would not normally consider (see Jack 2025) with ‘less stellar results’ (Kernohan 2025, n.p.). As a consequence, less resource-rich post-1992 universities like that at the centre of this study, may become more vulnerable within the market (Garland 2020).

The next section outlines the theoretical framing used to illuminate data drawn from both studies.

Theoretical Framing

i) **Neoliberalisation, Marketisation and neoliberal meritocracy**

The marketisation of UK HE exists in a relationship of mutual reinforcement with massification (Olssen and Peters 2005). New Labour's (1997-2010) strategy to develop "the knowledge economy" (Wright, 2016) championed massification and positioned WP as fostering economic growth through the development of individual human capital via educational opportunities (Bell and Stevenson, 2006). While massification increased the pool of students, marketisation determined the distribution of students and resources (Burke 2020).

Davies (2017) sees market competition as framed by neoliberalisation: producing hierarchies, domination and uneven social outcomes in ways that enhance market asymmetries and reproducing inequalities. He uses neoliberalisation as an alternative to neoliberalism to emphasise it as a *process* rather than a static *condition* which, among other things:

> targets institutions and activities which lie *outside* of the market, such as universities, households & public administrations: to bring them inside the market, through privatization; or to reinvent them in a 'market-like' way; or simply to neutralize or disband them. (Davies 2014, np)

In HE, market competition has been conceptualised by policy makers in purely positive terms as 'the tide that lifts all boats' (Willetts 2011). However, implicit even in this nautical metaphor is the sense that inequalities remain unchanged; that equality results from market arrangements is demonstrably false (Brown and Hillman 2023). The UK HE market hierarchy established by the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) (McCaig and Squire, 2022; Anders, 2020) inflects WP in fundamental ways. The hierarchical HE market means that WP initiatives are undertaken in a landscape in which degrees and institutions are wildly differentiated in terms of their 'reputation' and 'value', affecting their currency in the employment market (Drydakis 2016). Inequalities in the system are reflected in post-1992 universities consistently taking the lion's share of WP students (Harrison and Waller, 2017; IFS 2021), meaning that often 'working class students predominantly end up in universities seen to be "second class" both by themselves and others' (Reay 2018, p.10). The limited number of working-class students who do gain entry to elite universities are commonly depicted in the literature as feeling like 'fish out of water', struggling to fit in and belong (Franceschelli et al., 2015).

While neoliberalisation casts universities as competitors, it also reconceptualises students as self-seeking entrepreneurs and consumers (Molesworth et al. 2009) which connects it to meritocracy. Littler (2018A, 2018B) sees the myth of meritocracy as an integral feature of neoliberalism, that:

> obscures the unevenness of the social playing field, with its profound dis/advantages of parental wealth and social location. The neoliberal idea of meritocracy as enabling a fair system of social mobility is therefore both profoundly unfair and an ideological sleight of hand… Neoliberal meritocracy promotes the idea of individualistic, competitive success... (Littler 2018A, p.7-8)

Neoliberal meritocracy badges as common sense that the degree of 'hard work' and 'talent' of an individual informs their social success and:

> redefines the citizen as self-interested and "responsible" for their own betterment (and, conversely, for their own failure). (Littler 2018B p.11)

That a meritocratic hegemony is argued to underpin the existing HE market is evidenced by a rhetorical shift in policy away from 'the collective interests of the state to those of the individual applicant-consumer' (McCaig 2025, p.10); in other words, from a social justice agenda that targets social inequality to an emphasis on social mobility underpinned by a meritocratic reorientation. An example can be seen in how the differentiated nature of the sector is implicitly acknowledged in policy:

> all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have equal opportunity to participate and succeed, on a course and in an institution that best fit their potential, needs and ambitions for employment or further study. (HEFCE/OFFA, 2014, p.7).

The passage above effectively affirms the marketised hierarchy as a given. Its reassurance that ‘there is a place for everyone’ within HE that ‘best fits their potential’ obscures a systemic exclusion of students from under-represented groups from elite universities (Boliver 2013). As highlighted by Burke (2012, p.145), HE participation carries with it ‘differential and unequal levels of risk’ dependent on student background and the type of university they study at, yet these risks are obscured by the dominant policy narrative. In other words, as we go on to describe below, a surface policy commitment to a social justice agenda acts in practice to mask and reify an exclusionary HE sector with potentially divisive social consequences beyond HE.

Despite this, political rhetoric espoused by successive governments presents entry to and success in HE as uniformly transformative, especially in terms of future earning power, irrespective of background, subject or institution (Littler, 2018A). The mythic representation of neoliberal meritocracy as somehow ‘fair’ is also challenged by Sandel (2021, p.24) who sees it as promoting the belief that people ‘whatever their start in life’ can ‘rise as far as their efforts and talent would take them’. Markovits (2020) critiques meritocratic discourse in education. He sees elite education as *producing* merit and sees HE as legitimising inequality by presenting privilege as merit (Markovits 2020, p.288).

The concepts in this subsection provide analytical concepts to help explain how policy influences the enactment of WP. In the next subsection we will outline concepts that help us interpret the actions of individuals and institutions in the enactment of WP in HE.

ii) **Bourdieu: Habitus, Capitals, Field and Practice**

The inter-related Bourdieusian concepts of habitus, capitals and field may prove useful in looking critically at how WP functions in marketised HE. Bourdieu's formula (1984, p.101): '[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice' explains the interaction of habitus and capital within a dynamic context (field), producing practice. Practice in this case can be seen to apply not just to the students from under-represented groups accessing HE but to WP activities as carried out by universities.

Bourdieu describes habitus as:

> 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions… predisposed to function as structuring structures that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations…' (Bourdieu 1990, p.53)

In relation to institutions, Bourdieu writes about:

> 'a dialectic between habitus and institutions, that is, between two modes of objectification of past history, in which there is constantly created a history that inevitably appears… as both original and inevitable. This durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations is a practical sense which reactivates the sense objectified in institutions.' (Bourdieu 1990, p.57)

Embedded historical academic practices constituting an institutional habitus in HE as a whole can be seen as "exclusionary" (Burke 2008, p.208), as evidenced by the reliance on essaywriting and on lectures as the primary, tutor-led method of 'delivering' content to students (Loughlin, 2025). Bourdieu's definitions are also helpful in illuminating how post-1992 universities, in the vocational focus of some courses and the classed characteristics of their intake (Harrison and Waller, 2017) continue to be shaped by their institutional histories, with their accumulated capital positioned on the lower rungs of a marketised knowledge hierarchy.

The extension of habitus in applying to *individual* institutions through 'institutional habitus', in HE as suggesting unitary systems of disposition however, must be approached more cautiously (Webb et al 2017, Reay 2004). While there may be overarching practices and behaviours, Burke et al (2013) argue that institutional habitus should be regarded as flexible and non-homogeneous as different disciplines attract students of specific backgrounds and approaches to teaching and learning may be subject-specific.

In Bourdieu's conceptualisation, habitus exercise a multiplying function on capitals. Bourdieu (1984) suggests that individuals and social groups draw on a range of socially validated and symbolically legitimated capitals (social, cultural and economic) in order to consolidate privilege within social hierarchies. The HE field is where the dynamic between habitus and capitals plays out for students (Reay et al 2009). In their choice of university, middle class students might in most cases be seen as catalysing all three capitals: social, in their having access to privileged familial connections and networks – perhaps through their school; cultural, in their accent and access to favoured resources and references – positioning them favourably as they apply to selective universities; and economic, perhaps because tuition and accommodation costs do not have to feature as an obstacle in the choice-making (Reay et al 2005).

Influencing habitus in the social groups targeted by WP strategies can be seen in the shifted emphasis of schools-based WP programmes towards 'changing attitudes', improving attainment and influencing decision-making (Bolton and Lewis 2023). However, Baines et al. (2024) assert there is 'limited causal evidence as to the efficacy' of such HE-orientated outreach programmes, while Harrison and Waller call into question the very idea of 'an outreach activity having a predictable causal outcome on a young person's decisions', seeing this as 'thoroughly misguided' (Harrison and Waller 2017, p.84). Instead, they emphasise the 'complexity of environment and decision-making' of young people (Harrison and Waller 2018, p.934).

Importantly, this focus on 'changing attitudes' rests on the notion that students from under-represented backgrounds might legitimise their own exclusion from an unequal market hierarchy of HE, misrecognising this as a natural expression of educational superiority (Bourdieu, 1986; Ball et al. 2013, Tholen and Brown, 2017). However, while WP outreach activities may change these attitudes, as Evans et al. (2019, p.113) clarify, they 'require little in the way of change on the part of the institution'.

The capitals in Bourdieu's formula multiply or diminish the advantages of habitus within the field of HE and in turn, feed into the reproduction of an existing unequal social hierarchy. In contrast to the experiences outlined above, in some HE settings, the different capitals of students from under-represented backgrounds might not be recognised as legitimate, impacting on their practice as students and potentially leaving them feeling diffident, isolated and like 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 p.127).

The concept of capitals (economic, cultural and social) provides an account of the privileging of certain dominant social groups in HE (Ball, 2003; Woodward, 2022). As such, one focus for WP interventions is changing the attitudes and aspirations of under-represented students. Bourdieu (1986, p. 243) explains how capital 'can be converted from one type to another'. In an orientation that derives from social mobility rather than social justice, WP could be problematically conceptualised as providing access to the symbolic capital of a degree which then has transformative power economically. In such interventions, WP is seen as ‘fixing’ students perceived as not having attributes either appropriate or adequate to HE norms.

Challenging the normative and meritocratic assumption that the HE field is ‘natural’: an expression of the individual intellectual and social superiority of some (often privileged) students, a range of scholars propose new conceptualisations of value and capital. Regarding social class, Skeggs and Loveday (2012, p.476) propose ‘person-value’ with a relational as well as economic aspect that through disposition and orientation fosters an ethos of sociality and connecting to others. In relation to racialised marginalisation in education, Yosso (2005 p.69) proposes a range of alternative capitals that:

> focuses on and learns from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged.

Importantly, these authors seek to overturn prevalent doxa:

> … the point of view of the dominant that presents itself as universal, accepted without question, and internalized as natural (Bourdieu 1977 p.165).

Bourdieu sees doxa as a field mechanism that influences how the field functions to foreground and preserve dominant interests (Bourdieu 1977). Doxa are dominant assumptions that inform habitus and preserve existing practices and social relations and, in this case, an HE field historically calibrated to meet the needs of students from particular socio-economic backgrounds.

While the concepts of habitus and doxa suggest resistance to change, ‘regulated improvisation’ and adaptation are still possible and increasing marketisation suggests, from a

Bourdieusian perspective, a reconfiguration of the field of HE in which institutional practices are shaped by a market logic. For example, as a result of ongoing funding constraints and intensified market competition, practices around 'Clearing' have shifted to operate strategically to secure/increase enrolment numbers and protect the economic viability of courses and foreground revenue generation (Gandy et al 2024, Mogaji, 2016).

These ideas shed light on a field of stratified provision that produces an equally stratified set of outcomes for different student 'types' (Jaremus et al. 2023). Bourdieu's formula can also be applied to WP as a practice that operates differently for different universities. The importance of situatedness in WP in HE is affirmed by Braun et al. (2011) and Evans et al. (2019). For pre-1992 universities, WP seems focused on recruiting numbers of 'talented' individuals from under-represented groups with already identifiable academic abilities (McCaig 2011, Bekhradnia 2024). However, WP has a very different significance for post-1992 universities like that at the centre of both studies in this paper. Post-1992 universities overwhelmingly recruit students from working class and global majority backgrounds (Reay et al. 2009, 2010). As such, we will explore how increasing marketisation inflects discourses of access to HE for these under-represented groups. One feature of this is cruel optimism.

iii) Cruel optimism

Alongside Bourdieusian theory, we will use Berlant's (2011) concepts of 'cruel optimism' and 'the good life' in our discussion about the data in this paper. According to Berlant, a vision of 'the good life' drives the pursuit of desirable objects such as job security, economic stability and social equality. For Berlant (2011, p.3) 'people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies…including upward mobility, job security, political and social equality' despite the crumbling of 'the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life – at work, in intimacy, politically' (2011, p.5). Berlant argues that individuals persist in holding onto fantasies of the good life to help them cope with the insecurity of the neoliberal present. Maintaining an attachment to the good life gives life meaning and a sense of purpose. For Berlant, this sense of purpose is underpinned by a false form of hope which is ‘associated with unattainable objects to which people become affectively attached, but which are not realistically within their reach” (Tiainen et al. 2019, p.642). This optimistic attachment to the good life, for Berlant, is therefore inherently cruel, resulting in what she terms ‘cruel optimism’ which can be understood as ‘the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object’ (2011, p.23).

Ingram et al. (2023) have applied Berlant’s work within the seminal ‘paired peers’ study: a longitudinal research project that followed the graduate trajectories of working-class and middle-class students from two different universities in Bristol in order to explore how social class affects university experiences and post-graduate outcomes. Ingram et al. (2023) utilise cruel optimism to theorise the disillusionment and loss of hope experienced by some graduates who were unable to achieve their career goals. By focusing on specific student narratives, their study illustrates how aspirations raised by HE can become unattainable or even burdensome, noting the emotional consequences of this disillusionment. Within the marketised structures we have outlined, WP could be understood as a coercive technology that, masked by meritocratic and social justice discourses which promise ‘the good life’, is promoted to potential students without acknowledging the inequalities present in and reproduced by HE in a precarious graduate jobs market.

Research Methodology

Researchers from both studies are staff in post-1992 universities, all having experience of working in Further Education and coming from similar socio-economic / social class backgrounds. Their positionality (Holmes 2020) is shaped by a shared socialisation within

WP-focused HE institutions. This background offers contextual understanding and insight into the significance of students' backgrounds fostering solidarity, while also being informed by an awareness of the institutional weaponisation of empathy where students may be welcomed affectively but remain unsupported structurally, producing cruel optimism (Reay 2018B).

We draw on data from two West Midlands-based studies. Data gathering for the first study (hereafter Study A) took place across 2022-3 in the post-pandemic period in which an 'economic fallout was unequally shouldered by people aged 18–24' (Tomlinson and Reddy 2023, p. 487) while Study B (Sumner 2023) took place in 2018: a more stable employment environment for young people and graduates.

Study A was an evaluation of a WP intervention programme, *Reach Out*, which was designed to explore pupil and staff attitudes to and experiences of WP interventions in regional schools. This study was produced in response to OfS concerns about the quality of evidence being used in evaluating WP spend (OfS 2019). Study A had an epistemic stance consistent with interpretivist and narrative traditions (Schwandt, 1994). It adopted an experiential interpretivist approach with a descriptive evaluative orientation, privileging participant accounts of lived experience as the primary source of knowledge (van Manen, 1990, Hammersley, 2013) while bracketing structural and policy-level analysis.

The second study (hereafter Study B) on the other hand, researched the pathway choices of first-generation applicants and students within a case study post-1992 university. It explored the lived experiences of participants, spanning their decision to attend the university, their perceptions about their university experience and their expectations regarding graduate employment. In contrast with Study A, Study B was informed by a critical epistemic stance – being concerned with how knowledge is shaped by power, inequality and ideology. Study B aimed to expose the social conditions that gave rise to participants' experiences, understanding knowledge production as inherently political and orientated towards exposing and challenging structural relations of power (Kincheloe and Mclaren 2005).

Study B threw into relief how a discrete evaluative focus on WP outreach activities (like that of Study A) potentially provides a distorted picture of their perceived benefits. By taking account of the experience of students from social groups targeted by WP strategies after gaining entry, while on course and after graduation, Study B contextualised the successes of *Reach Out* and opened important questions about marketised HE, the role of WP, in particular for post-1992 universities. The rest of this section will present the research design of each study in turn.

Study A focused on the impact of *Reach Out*: targeted at school students aged 14-18 living in twenty-five low-income postcode areas in the West Midlands and delivered by a partnership of universities and colleges (Smith et al. 2023). Opportunistic sampling (Patton 2002; Cohen et al. 2018) was used to provide insights and experiences from a range of stakeholders: students, school staff and senior programme staff were identified by *Reach Out* staff for interviews carried out between November 2022 and March 2023. Participants were drawn from four urban institutions (with nine students and six staff) and one rural (two students and one staff member) from across the regional partnership. Participants included: students involved in *Reach Out* activities in school and identified as coming from backgrounds without a tradition of HE study by their schools (n. = 10), one ex-student; school staff delivering the programme (n. = 4) and WP staff overseeing the programme (n. = 3) (see Table 1 below).

Pseudonym	**Staff or student**	**Rural / urban context**	**Method**
Nosheen	Ex-VIth form student	Urban	Focus Group
Ilhan	VIth form student	Urban	Focus Group
Charlotte	VIth form student	Urban	Focus Group
Rani	VIth form student	Urban	Focus Group
Sîan	VIth form student	Rural	Focus Group
Michael	VIth form student	Urban	Focus Group
Pádraig	VIth form student	Urban	Focus Group
Ernest	VIth form student	Urban	Focus Group
Tilak	VIth form student	Urban	Focus Group
Stephen	VIth form student	Urban	Focus Group
Dave	VIth form student	Rural	Focus Group
John	Staff (Overseeing Programme)	Urban	Teams Interview
Margaret	Staff (Overseeing Programme)	Urban	Phone Interview
Mavis	Staff (Overseeing Programme)	Rural	Teams Interview
Bill	Staff (delivering programme in school)	Urban	Teams Focus Group
Kanika	Staff (delivering programme in school)	Urban	Teams Focus Group
Naomi	Staff (delivering programme in school)	Urban	Teams Focus Group
Satvinder	Staff (delivering programme in school)	Urban	Teams Interview

Table 1. Participants in *Reach Out* study.

The research methods used were a mixture of online and face to face semi-structured interviews (Bathmaker et al 2013, Scott and Usher 2011) and focus groups (Breen 2006). Interviews and focus groups were used for students to explore how they understood HE and how their attitudes were shaped through experience and interaction (Archer et al. 2003, Reay et al 2005). There were eleven pupils in total, five females and six males. Two encounters were online and one took place in person. Interviews and focus groups with staff provided a robust method of eliciting accounts of how WP activities shape students' orientations to HE (Stevenson et al 2010, Burke 2012). Students were asked about activities they had participated in and to give examples of how the programme had impacted on them. Staff were asked about which elements had been deployed in their organisation and their impact.

Study B used biographical narrative interviews (Wengraf, 2001; Rosenthal, 2004) that enabled exploration of how family, school, and community narratives shaped participants' views of higher education. Study B gathered data about the views of first-generation students (Crozier et al. 2008) at different ages from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds with parents who worked in technical, semi-routine or routine occupations or who were unemployed. A purposive sampling strategy using targeted emails, social media posts and staff referrals recruited twenty first-generation students for the study. The participants were at three separate points in the student lifecycle: VIth Form students from a local senior school (n.= 3) and access to HE students from a local college (n.=2); on-course students from a range of subjects (n.= 8); and graduates with a range of degrees (n.= 7). Individuals self-selected, confirmed they met the criteria (first-generation and parental employment within NS-SEC 5–8) and were then invited to arrange interviews during 2018. VIth form participants were attending a school that had had no HE-led outreach programmes and did not belong to the regional partnership that was the focus of Study A. This was ascertained during the initial contact with liaising school staff. Instead, the school provided in-house HE advice and guidance and arranged occasional individual university visits. The two Access to HE participants were mature first-generation prospective students whose friendship groups included peers witnessed someone in similar circumstances to their own opting to go to university, thus opening access to HE as a viable option. Neither had any experience of WP outreach programmes during their school years.

Study B used a stratified sample of pre-course students, on-course students and university alumni. Sampling students at different ages enabled exploration of how attitudes towards higher education develop and change across the student lifecycle, reflecting the well-established view that orientations to HE are shaped cumulatively and at key transitional points (Ball et al., 2002; Ecclestone et al., 2010). The interviews took in decisions to apply to university, experiences while on course and expectations for the future. Study B participants were studying a range of subject areas and from diverse backgrounds as identified in the table below:

Pseudonym	**Stage**	**Subjects Studied (aggregated to aid anonymisation)**	**Age**	**Ethnicity**
Farhaan	VIth form student	Computing, Criminology, Mental Health, Nursing, Paramedic Science & Social work.	18	British Asian (Pakistani)
Cherry	VIth form student		18	Dual Heritage – White and Black Caribbean
Leena	VIth form student		18	British Asian (Indian)
Liz	Access to HE student		25	White British
Freya	Access to HE student		33	White British
Arieta	Undergraduate	Drama, Early Childhood, Criminology,	22	Kosovan
Caprice	Undergraduate		18	Black Caribbean
Shamsun	Undergraduate		19	British Asian (Pakistani)

Karolina	Undergraduate	English Lit, English Lit and creative writing, Psychology & Textiles	18	Polish
Chrissie	Undergraduate		38	White British
Danni	Undergraduate		22	White British
Olivia	Undergraduate		18	White British
Beccy	Undergraduate		20	White British
Malisa	Graduate	Criminology, Fashion, Media and English, Nursing, Radio Production & Psychology.	23	Portuguese
Emma	Graduate		30	Dual heritage (White and Black Caribbean)
Joe	Graduate		24	White British
Abbie	Graduate		23	White British
Eddie	Graduate		22	White British
Afia	Graduate		45	British Asian (Pakistani)
Leah	Graduate		26	White British

Table 2: *Participants in the Study B.*

On-course and alumni participants took part in semi-structured narrative interviews to explore their experiences as first-generation students within a case study post-1992 university. The interviews provided personal accounts of their educational journeys and the factors influencing their choice of pathway and facilitated access to rich and ‘thick’ data (Wolcott, 2001) about their experiences of and knowledge about HE which illuminated the ways in which personal histories were ‘used to interpret university life’ (Maunder et al. 2013, p.139).

Both research studies gained Faculty Ethics Committee approval. All participants were given a pseudonym. Importantly, only the students in Study A had experienced HE-led WP interventions. Their perceptions of *Reach Out* and its influence on choice-making were positive. Study B participants had clear but quite different views relating to their pathway choices. The main ethical issue related to the reflexivity of the Study B researcher who was guided by 'an ethic of care' (Phillips and Zavros 2013, p.53) emphasising the value of empathy and a dialogical approach between researcher and participant.

Process of analysis

Data from both studies were analysed through abductive thematic analysis (Thompson 2022) – a creative approach that engages with empirical data alongside extant theories but seeks to build on these. We started by identifying the most 'abductive' moments (Brinkmann, 2014). which allowed us to look for patterns, "glowing data" (Maclure, 2010) and the resonances (Clandinin, 2014) between accounts as they emerged. We engaged with the data from each study separately, each bringing particular theoretical ideas to the analysis. The movement between data and theory and back was iterative in testing the 'fit' of the theory. The process was also a creative one (van Hulst and Visser 2025) requiring us to discuss the extent to which particular concepts were illuminating. The challenge here involved making judgements as to the explanatory power of different concepts – as applied to human experience and revealing the structural and ideological forces shaping that experience. The process was individual before we came together to share individual insights to look for congruence. Different theoretical perspectives were tested on the data before an overall theoretical framework was agreed on. Once we had agreed on significant and inter-related themes, our analysis proceeded through an ordering of the data using these themes when the data resonated with the theoretical framework we had established.

Findings and analysis

Choices in the HE Field: changing attitudes

The WP strategies employed by HE providers in Study A involved granting unconditional offers to students from partnership schools and activities geared to 'changing attitudes' (Ni Chorcora et al. 2023). *Reach Out* was an integral recruitment strategy that utilised Widening Participation Practitioners (WPPs), recent graduates who self-identified as first-generation, to enter schools in urban and rural areas and act as role models offering a personal take on transitioning to university. The *Reach Out* data provided clear evidence of changing attitudes:

> I kind of see it as like a chance to be the first in my family to do that.… I thought I wanted to go to college... and then just go straight into work, like a crèche or whatever. But I've realised that I do want to actually complete my academic er journey, up to university, at least, and then maybe even further. (Study A, Charlotte, urban VIth Student)

This passage shows how the programme has acted on Charlotte's existing knowledge and understanding of HE and her store of HE-related cultural capital. Significantly, it is characterised here as a realisation of a nascent desire: 'I've realised that I do want to...' that displaces a clearly defined pathway (college and then into work) that Charlotte 'thought [she] wanted to do'. In this, a clear vocational pathway has been replaced by a more sketchy pathway: an 'academic journey… to university and then maybe even further'. This presents success in the WP goal of increasing social mobility in that, for Charlotte, accessing HE offers opportunities to accumulate symbolically prestigious social and cultural capital, albeit possibly delimited by her choice of university within the hierarchy. However, the extent to which this accumulation might transform into economic capital through employment is also likely to be shaped by the market environment.

School staff remarked that the success of *Reach Out* was heavily shaped by VIth formers' perceptions of the WPPs as role models:

> It has a ridiculous amount of significance for our students. They hear the message from us every day…. Someone who's maybe more relevant to them, or someone that's more their age group – our (WPPs) were straight from university… we found that had a massive impact, basically. That… (our students) would be more engaged, they'd get bigger takeaways from it. (Study A, Margaret: rural VIth form teacher)

It is perhaps an obvious point to make but the relatability and credibility of the WPPs in delivering the *Reach Out* message had a much greater impact in challenging students' preconceptions. Coming from under-represented backgrounds, the APPs can be understood as embodying and transmitting a form of cultural capital, that is accessible, proximate, and recognisable as legitimate by the VIth form students. Effectively, their role involves mobilising capital across fields (Bathmaker et al 2013).

Reach Out also influenced course choices:

> We had the mentoring meetings and the woman I was with… would always, like, give me the multiple options, like 'You could do A levels, you could do BTEC,' … it definitely helped me to decide what I want to do now… she helped me find something that was more suited for me. (Study A, Ilhan urban VIth Form student)

Interactions like the one described here, set within a stratified HE field that devalues some degrees and universities, illustrate how, through personalised outreach interventions, WP activities can impact on students' individual habitus. Here the WPP acts as an embodiment of experiential history bridging 'the active presence' (Bourdieu 1990, p.56) of Ilhan's past habitus to a range of HE course choices. The intervention is transformative in that an internalized opinion related to education is revised and an HE alternative made possible. Prior to contact with *Reach Out*, VIth form participants' choices were often rooted in financial considerations of parental income:

> Before (*Reach Out*) I thought I would go to college and just get a job…. It was… the idea that, that my family could actually afford for me to go to university… Because they talked about student loans and scholarships… So that, personally, has made it much more realistic for me to actually be able to go to university. (Study A: Stephen urban VIth form student):
>
> And:
>
> We had someone come into the school about Student Finance, so we attended with our parents, and like, this woman, she went through it with us, and I just thought, that it really helped. And she… went through… what we needed to know and what we needed to do. (Study A: Sîan rural VIth form student)

These passages again illustrate the persuasive power of *Reach Out* as Stephen and Sîan and her parents are reassured about the financial implications of 'getting in' by hearing what they 'needed to know'. In both examples, a persuasive rhetoric is deployed as part of a discourse of optimism around university entrance. Participants' feel they are being provided with information to navigate a pathway into HE successfully, seemingly giving them a viable route to the 'good life' of career and financial stability. There is a moral ambiguity in the blurring between promotion and recruitment here that once again is expressive of the marketisation of the HE field and plays out in the sophisticated and personalised mode of delivering 'market information' that obscures perspectives on the 'classed' field of HE. That there are financial interests for universities in recruiting these students remains obscured by a discourse of optimism that draws on egalitarian social justice tropes of students transcending low-income backgrounds.

In effect, the WPPs acted as brokers embodying the optimism discourse that underpins *Reach Out.* Given that the significance of HE's market hierarchy is downplayed by government rhetoric and its impact rarely addressed in policy discourse, it would be ungenerous to blame individual WPPs for providing information that was partial. Like the potential students they are advising, they function in HE spaces dominated by universities' self-promotional discourse where boundaries between advertisement and information are indistinct. However, the consequences are that HE is presented as an unambiguous good: a doxic message of optimism that ignores how the promise of financial stability and secure, well-paid employment once offered by HE is no longer realistic (Brown and James, 2020), especially, as evidenced in Study B, for WP students attending post-1992 universities.

The views expressed by the *Reach Out* student participants contrast strongly with those from Study B who had not been exposed to WP outreach interventions. Study B's data show students, their families and friends connecting 'getting in' to university closely with future employment prospects, with risk featuring more prominently:

> [The family] told me not to go to uni, because you know they've seen how difficult it is, and they've talked to other people and they've said you know, the degree it holds value, but because everyone is asking for experience nowadays it would probably be better to go for an apprenticeship. (Study B: Farhaan, VIth form student)

Farhaan is here influenced by existing cultural capital in the form of community knowledge (Yosso 2005) that provides insight that the market value of a degree as compared with other more vocational pathways, in this case apprenticeships, with no associated debt and a more secure pathway to employment. This chimes with Burke and Hayton's (2011, p14) point that:

> often it is those without a cultural tradition of HE study who are put off by media stories of students with high levels of debt, which is understandable as these

> groups tend to be most vulnerable to the wider economic instability we are facing in the UK.

-although here the stories are not from the media. With tuition fees rising and economic uncertainty increasing, for students who choose post-1992 universities, legitimate questions remain as to whether the social mobility offered warrants the debt incurred by university entrance.

Cruel Optimism, responsibilisation and risk

As outlined above, the expansion of horizons of choice was a feature of the impact of *Reach Out* student participants. A discourse of optimism was evident as they were excited by the range of subjects on offer at university that positioned them as empowered choosers:

> There were loads of different choices… you can basically decide what you do… in terms of the courses themselves, like, you could do… different types of the same thing, just on a different branch of it. (Study A: Tilak urban VIth form student)

This prospect of increased agency, the possibility of belonging and achievement in HE characterised much of the pupil participant data in the *Reach Out* study. However, the opening of horizons of choice for these *Reach Out* participants contrasts vividly with the experience of Leena from Study B. Leena adopted a risk-averse disposition that meant despite an original desire to do Art, she felt that a Social Work degree offered more security:

> I'd love to do an Art degree but I'm just like [sigh] it's not going to get me anywhere so there's no point even stressing about it. There's no jobs for it and I just think that like they don't really tell you about the careers you can have after it as well, so… that's why I didn't choose Art. (Study B: Leena VIth form student)

The agency and pragmatism in Leena's understanding of the employment market is admirable here. It seems likely that her habitus informs this risk-averse choice-making. This passage illustrates how her practice as a student is shaped by a reflexive understanding of capitals and habitus and is also a product of social conditions and the field of HE. The interplay between desire (studying art) and practicality (gaining secure employment) shows her aspirational desire to enter HE extends beyond 'getting in', to a consideration of life after university, something that is largely absent from accounts in the *Reach Out* study. While it would be wrong to dismiss instrumental orientations to choice-making as less legitimate than an education 'for its own sake' attitude (Haggis 2006, p.527), this becomes problematic when a hierarchical and 'classed' HE serves to reproduce existing social relations under which middle class students, cushioned by financial, social and cultural capital, are able to pursue 'academic' degrees without jeopardising their employment prospects. Leena's choice highlights the ethical ambiguity in WP interventions aimed at 'changing attitudes'. We might interpret her choice as originating in her understanding that she does not have the social or cultural capital to recoup the investment in an Art degree. Instrumental motivations for HE study could be considered a characteristic of post-1992 university students – being as many post-1992 universities were once polytechnics offering vocational and 'technical' courses. Either way, coming from an under-represented background, she has a narrower horizon of choice.

Finnegan et al. (2019, p.160) discuss how a neoliberal meritocratic education *doxa* functions within the HE market to position students as accountable for their own success and failure. In this scenario, the 'responsibilised' subject (Pyysiäinen et al. 2017), is tasked with resolving (their own) social problems and risks even when those are situated and highly stratified. Leena's concerns about indebtedness and how that limits her choices evidence an internalised regulation that HE students from affluent homes are less likely to have. Here, responsibilisation disproportionately affects students from under-represented backgrounds, reducing choices and opportunities**.** Leena's longer-term perspective factors in the future risks associated with investment in a degree, contrasting sharply with the perspectives of student participants in the *Reach Out* study:

> I think [*Reach Out*] has given me sort of a plan for my future, like nothing really specific, but just seeing the university… I was just going to go to college and get a job, but I didn't know what job or anything. (Study A: Rani, urban VIth form student)

Rani's imagined future feels full of promise contrasting with the majority of Study B participants, who chose 'safe' vocational subjects like Social Work or Nursing. This suggests the social/cultural/financial risks perceived by participants in Study B meant they 'adjusted their aspirations to [what they perceived to be] their objective chances' (Bourdieu 1984, p.110). This situated choice-making founded on the promise of a safer route to financial security is also exemplified by Cherry and Farhaan in Study B:

> I think just getting a good job really, finding good employment, to get the job, and that's what matters really, that's what I want. (Study B, Cherry, VIth form student)
>
> That's a big thing for me to get a good paid job, that's what it's all about isn't it, at the end of the day. (Study B, Farhaan, VIth form student).

Farhaan's critical pragmatism here overturns 'undergraduate premium' narratives that underpin the optimism agenda promoted by WP discourses. In Study B, it was also evident that despite their lack of role models and knowledge about going to HE, the participants' social capital /networks gave them an enhanced perception of risk:

> A lot of people that I talk to that go to uni end up getting a degree and everything but end up getting a job that's not related to what they study, like working in a call centre. (Study B, Cherry, VIth form student)

Study B’s stratified design of pre-HE, on course and post-HE, provided powerful insights into the validity of this heightened sense of risk. As graduates, Leah and Malisa had both struggled to find graduate employment:

> I’ve really struggled to find a job that I actually want… At times you feel like oh I’ve got a dream that I can’t even really put to use, it’s quite frustrating in a way. I don’t want to be stuck in retail. (Study B, Malisa, graduate)

> My dad every time he rings me he asks if I’ve applied for any jobs. They don’t get it. My dad he thinks I can just walk into a job now, but it isn’t like that. I’ve got no experience, I haven’t been to a prestigious uni, no-one is interested. (Study B, Leah, graduate)

These accounts strengthen an argument about the broader contextual constraints that undermine the social justice ideals of WP. In an employment market characterised by precarity (Brown and James 2020) in which employers favour graduates from elite institutions and class backgrounds (Friedman et al. 2015), the social justice purposes of WP, diminished and individualised, are displaced by the meritocratic aims of social mobility with their associated risks. These excerpts illustrate the outcome of market pressures and the deployment of discourses of optimism against students from under-represented backgrounds. In this, responsibilisation functions to either limiting these students’ choices according to their social class background or frame them as responsible for their HE choices (which may not necessarily lead to salaried employment) whilst concealing the underlying power structures which determine the opportunities available to them (Tiainen et al. 2019).

In contract to Cherry and Farhaan, some of the on-course participants in Study B had internalised the discourse of optimism in relation to university. In this way they had entered the field of HE fully believing in and 'actively pursuing the prize it offers' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.19):

> Going to university is an opportunity, it can open doors (Study B, Shamsun, undergraduate)

> I feel like just because my family doesn't have much money that doesn't mean I can't be successful. Just because my nan is a cleaner it doesn't mean I have to be a cleaner, just because my mom works in a shop it doesn't mean that I need to work in a shop, even though I do now. Being at uni can open those doors for me (Study B, Karolina, undergraduate)

Optimism for a better future, in line with a meritocratic discourse, was a recurring theme in Study B. For some participants, this optimism transcended the structural conditions which had restricted their access to dominant capitals. Berlant (2011, p.2) sees optimism as a form of 'excitement at the prospect of the change that's gonna come', yet cruelty lies within the fact that hoped-for change may not always materialise.

When asked about their hopes for the future, the majority of the participants in Study B focused on being financially secure, as opposed to obtaining elite careers. In this way the university was framed as a site of desire, and gaining a degree was seen as a pathway to 'the good life' (Berlant, 2011):

> I think like: will I ever get a job and earn that much? *(over the loan payment threshold of £24,000)* that does worry me constantly… But I do really want to like get into a good job, because you know that's what you want financially, because in the future… you need money to survive that's what I see it as (Study B, Shamsun: undergraduate)

> Really I just want to earn good money in a job I'm happy in, you know, to be comfortable (Study B, Beccy, undergraduate)

It's significant that in these passages the 'good life' narrative, driven by the 'fantasy' of a secure future (Bone, 2020) is couched in such modest terms. The participants imagine 'surviving' or being comfortable. This could be interpreted as a dawning understanding of the cruelty of a precarious present that conceals the compromised conditions of possibility as shaped by neoliberalism. Shamsun and Beccy's hopes for their graduate futures suspend questions of 'the cruelty of the now' (Berlant 1997, p.222).

The promise of change, undercut by a concern that the risk might not yield the promised (financial) rewards, surfaced in many of the Study B interviews. Afia suggested that students were being sold misleading information, illustrating an awareness of the way in which cruel optimism was being mobilised in HE:

> I do think universities need to be honest, in their interviews, when it comes to certain degrees. They need to have those conversations in the interview process because a lot of people are deluded when they start because their expectations are unrealistic. They think they're going to get from A to B really quickly and it doesn't work like that. (Study B, Afia, graduate)

Here, Afia voices her opinion that university recruitment practices for some degree courses are knowingly obscuring the precarious realities of the current employment market (Tholen and Brown, 2017). This illuminates how WP activities like *Reach Out*, through the deployment of a meritocratic individualised discourse, marketisation distorts and subverts the social justice goal of WP, placing university's commercial self-interest before the interests of students.

Despite the insights into limited job opportunities offered by Malisa and Leah, Study B data do support research showing students from under-represented backgrounds gain significant personal benefits from HE (Crew 2015, Byrom and Lightfoot 2013). The graduate participants all reported a sense of personal achievement and increased confidence in completing their degree, even if this had not led to hoped-for employment outcomes:

> I've always had confidence but now I have it in a different way… I learned so much, I don't think I'll ever know how much I learned but I learned a lot! (Study B, Eddie, graduate)

> Uni for me was life changing, (pause)… I think university has allowed me to be, to find out who me is (Study B, Abbie, graduate)

These passages demonstrate the transformative benefits for individuals of post-1992 degree courses but how these personal benefits connect with the employment market is not immediately apparent. For Study B participants Leah and Malisa, studying at university 'ignited a sense of possibility' (Berlant, 2011: 2) of what they might achieve. Yet, their attachment to unfulfilled hopes for the good life had a negative impact on their happiness and sense of self, leaving them feeling they had 'nothing to offer'. Cruel optimism here caused significant emotional harm, impacting on their overall wellbeing, at least in the short term. Such evidence needs to inform the delivery of WP interventions, highlighting as it does the ethical implications and consequences of persuasive and strategic recruitment practices.

Concluding thoughts

Several factors are interacting in the current context to affect the enactment of WP. A shifting employment market with an increased precarity of work, an erosion of traditionally secure professional roles (Ross and Savage 2021) and employers adopting elitist perspectives about the differential value of degrees (Friedman et al. 2015). Framing this, increased marketisation, the imposition on universities of WP targets and tuition fee caps, all incentivise the adoption of competitive recruitment practices.

We acknowledge there are methodological limitations that make it unwise to draw more than tentative conclusions from the two studies presented here. *Reach Out* is an example of a regionally implemented WP intervention, so generalisation across the wider field would be unwise and Study B is focused on a single post-1992 university. In addition, our analyses do not focus on participants' intersectional positions (Crenshaw 1989) within the HE field. Still, we believe that together the studies reveal complementary insights that contribute to an understanding of how HE marketisation is distorting and derailing the historical social justice purposes of WP. Within a competitive market, OfS targets for the recruitment of under-represented groups incentivise a 'bums on seats' approach: each student being regarded as contributing to the university's income stream. Leah and Malisa's contributions illustrate the ethical stakes of this and bear out the caution of risk-averse Study B participants who questioned the wisdom of university study.

Marketisation relies on the production of performance data and in UK HE, these are as imperfect as in many markets (Adisa et al 2022). WP is positioned uneasily within such a context. Ostensibly, Study A provides evidence of *Reach Out*'s 'success' in WP, but changing attitudes to applying for university while being quite narrowly focused on 'getting in' appears myopic in the light of Study B's data. Participants from Study B showed a sophisticated understanding of the interconnecting fields of HE and employment that questions the doxa that HE study is an unambiguously good thing. While some of the Study B graduates had yet to find work (in the relatively favourable employment conditions pre-COVID), this information had filtered down to the VIth form participants and their families: a form of cultural capital casting a critical light on initiatives like *Reach Out*.

The HE field is configured against post-1992 universities. To begin with, for students of post-1992 universities, the student debt to potential earning ratio gives serious grounds for concern (Evans and Donnelly 2018). The labelling of post-1992 universities as offering ‘rip-off degrees’ (Bekhradnia 2024 p.9), seems likely to favour recruitment in elite universities possibly leading to post-1992 university closures and /or mergers (Brown 2013A), once more impacting most significantly on students from under-represented backgrounds who favour them. The failure to address this, in the light of the existing market hierarchy and the competitive advantage of elite universities, positions the OfS firmly on the meritocratic pole of the social mobility/social justice continuum.

For post-1992 universities, the challenge is great and calls for integrity and reflexivity. The Bourdieusian formula applies equally to practice in universities. An adaptation of institutional habitus that takes account of the unequal playing field of HE, its increasing marketisation and the consequent strong representation of students from under-represented backgrounds in their intake would seem to be the response best aligned to the *primum mobile* of WP. This would position post-1992 universities as active stakeholders in bringing about an equitable society, the goal being to equip students to function in a changing, socially stratified employment environment.

Our analysis signals that WP policies must go beyond inclusion to transform the field itself, challenging the symbolic hierarchies that devalue certain institutions and students, to revisit the purposes of HE. Afia’s point above about the instability of employment routes and universities needing to be ‘honest’ when recruiting students is a powerful appeal for authentic student / university relations that transcend the transactional. Ultimately, the meaning of WP activities rests on *all* universities establishing authentic/ethical relations that dignify prospective students from under-represented backgrounds. Without these, universities will lay themselves open to charges of exploitation and of functioning to consolidate existing entrenched social inequalities.

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