Reframing widening participation towards the community: a realist evaluation

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.22.2.184

Abstract This article draws on an evaluation of Go Higher West Yorkshire (GHWY) Uni Connect – an initiative by the Office for Students (OfS) to reduce educational inequalities through collaborative widening participation (WP) outreach across West Yorkshire. It contributes to wider debates on widening participation policy through demonstrating how Higher Education Progression Officers (HEPOs) normalised 'progression' based on community and learners' needs. We deploy realist evaluation to examine the role of HEPOs in a range of educational contexts where young people historically do not progress on to higher education (HE) at the same rates as their peers when GCSE results are taken into account. While there are complexities around the introduction of WP resources in such communities, the article highlights the importance of contextualised WP, and offers a new model of community-focused WP that incorporates learners' needs, educational institutions and the wider community space in which they reside.

Key words Widening participation; higher education; realist evaluation; sense of place; community outreach

Introduction

Since 2010, all universities in the UK have been required to implement widening participation (WP) strategies to ensure students from underrepresented communities can access higher education (HE) (Harrison and Waller, 2017). In 2015, the Office for Students (OfS) (formerly the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Office for Fair Access) established the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), with two key objectives: to double the numbers of young people in low participation neighbourhoods [i] progressing into HE and to increase numbers from black and minority ethnic backgrounds by a further 20% (Smith and Hubble, 2018). This programme was the response to the deeply stratified nature of higher education (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016), and

poor HE participation rates regarding socially underrepresented young people – as well as targets set by the UK government in 2015 (Tazzyman et al., 2018).

In 2016, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) announced a bidding process to deliver the NCOP (HEFCE, 2016) – now known as Uni Connect. This built on an existing framework whereby the UK government made access and participation plans mandatory for any institution charging tuition fees at more than the base rate (i.e. over £6000 per year) in 2006–07. Annually, £833.5 million is spent on WP programmes by the UK Government in the HE sector (Smith and Hubble, 2018), and WP policy and practice has become firmly embedded as fundamental to HE provision. Yet with increased policy focus on access to HE, there has also been significant demand by UK government to improve methods of evaluation of WP activity at local and national levels (Department for Education, 2019: 77). The establishment of Uni Connect was instrumental in engaging partnerships to 'deliver outreach programmes to young people in years 9 to 13 (aged between 13 and 18 in schools and colleges)', explicitly targeting areas 'where higher education participation is lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who live there' (OfS, 2019). Analysis identified a gap between average GCSE results and expected progression to HE (Crawford et al., 2016), and that such 'gaps' were observable at the 'ward' level (HEFCE, 2016). This indicated that access to HE is mediated through other forms of social and cultural inequality (Crawford et al., 2016: 570).

Further, the extensive nature of social deprivation in many UK communities means that improving access to HE remains challenging and deeply stratified in terms of social class, ethnicity and gender (Harrison and Waller, 2017; Social Mobility Commission, 2017: 55; Reay, 2018). There has been some increase in underrepresented communities accessing HE as numbers of state-funded students in receipt of free school meals increased from 17.4% in 2008 to 25.6% in 2016/17. However, significant socioeconomic inequalities remain. In 2018, 43.3% from higher-income groups entered HE in comparison to 25.6% from lower-income backgrounds (Department for Education, 2018: 4). Accessing research-intensive Russell Group universities introduces additional social inequalities (Harrison and Waller, 2017), and there are also specific geographical areas where HE participation drops to 10% (Social Mobility Commission, 2017: 1). Moreover, there is a need to acknowledge the impact of 'significant and

growing social class, ethnic and spatial inequalities' on how young people frame HE participation and choice (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018: 22).

Spatial inequality refers to disparities in social resources between groups that can be observed at local or community level (Levin and Pryce, 2010). In terms of WP, outcomes for young people may be dictated through proximity to local higher education institutions (HEIs), limiting options for low-income entrants who may prefer to live locally (or cannot afford to leave home) when entering HE [ii] (Social Mobility Commission, 2017: 69). Acknowledging aspects of spatial inequality means an increased emphasis on engaging with the community to overcome such barriers, including:

> 'A reluctance to take on a maintenance loan to fund accommodation, cultural issues or attitudes to risk, more caring responsibilities at home or the need to keep a local job while studying.' (Social Mobility Commission, 2016: 107).

This article draws on the results of a realist evaluation of the Go Higher West Yorkshire[iii] (GHWY) Uni Connect programme. The programme has established WP initiatives in schools and further education (FE) institutions throughout all of West Yorkshire (in Northern England), focused on both urban (three large cities) and rural contexts (smaller towns and villages). It offers a new model that sifts through the complexities of WP practice in differentiated underrepresented communities. The first section situates how recent policy has accentuated the need for spatial and community approaches to WP in the UK. The methods section outlines our realist evaluation approach in examining the role of Higher Education Progression Officers (HEPOs) – dedicated staff who are responsible for GHWY's WP outreach activity within Uni Connect target schools and colleges in the region. Our findings section draws on the theory of 'sense of place' (Cresswell, 2009) to show how different outcome patterns occur when normalising WP in new community settings, based on focus groups with HEPO staff and one-to-one interviews with senior leaders. The discussion section argues for a model of future HEPO practice that takes into consideration spatial and community aspects of WP and the context in which it is introduced. Alongside innovative contributions made through outlining the operationalisation of a realist approach, this article further suggests that a reflexive, inclusive and multi-dimensional model comprising institutional space (such as schools and colleges) and the wider community should become a platform for outreach-based WP provision in the UK.

A community approach to widening participation in the UK

Widening participation in the UK refers to programmes that attempt to increase numbers of students from underrepresented backgrounds going into HE (Smith and Hubble, 2018), which continues to be deeply stratified in relation to ethnicity, gender, disability and social class (Greenbank, 2006). It has become increasingly important for WP to be active in community spaces where social and spatial inequalities are present (Scull and Cuthill, 2010), as young people's trajectory to education or the labour market are 'woven into regional and cultural economic histories' of that broader community (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018: 976). Examples of spatial inequality that shape young people's choices include parental disparities around knowledge of HE (Brooks, 2003), spatial mobility (Christie, 2007) and specific challenges faced by minority communities, especially in regards to 'contingent choosers': groups of young people for whom 'going to university involves […] becoming a person different from the rest of their family and many of their peers' (Ball et al., 2002: 354).

More broadly, however, socio-economic disadvantage continues to shape educational attainment outcomes, as 'children from the most advantaged English neighbourhoods remain nine times more likely than their peers in the least advantaged areas to get three A's by age 18' (Dorling, 2016: 5). As such, since the establishment of Aimhigher – a programme that introduced a range of WP initiatives from 2004 to 2011 – more targeted and localised approaches to WP have been adopted to narrow such inequalities (Harrison and Waller, 2017), while WP delivery has become increasingly localised as HE institutions have been organised into regional partnerships through the Uni Connect initiative (Harrison and Waller, 2017).

To achieve positive progression outcomes, dedicated staff (HEPOs) have been embedded within schools and colleges attended by learners from GHWY Uni Connect target wards (GHWY, 2018a). This localised approach, specific to GHWY, engages learners from Year 9 to Year 13 (ages 13–18), providing the support they need to make informed choices about their future. Rather than an 'off-the-peg' approach, HEPOs develop delivery plans aligned with the particular needs of the young people in their school or college (GHWY, 2018b). Such an approach takes account of the social and cultural context of the school or college and the wider community within which it is situated. For example, young people in inner-city Leeds are likely to have different needs and different attitudes to young people in the ex-mining

communities that surround Wakefield, and a more dynamic, bespoke approach to outreach delivery can take this into account. As such, the activity HEPOs plan and facilitate can range, for example, from role-model work to inspire and build resilience in boys at risk of disengagement, to travel-confidence initiatives for young people in more remote areas. Such bespoke outreach activity complements the more traditional staples of WP delivery, such as personal statement workshops, mentoring, student finance talks, parental engagement and residentials that HEPOs also coordinate in collaboration with the wider partnership of GHWY stakeholders (GHWY, 2018a; OfS, 2018a: 13).

Crucially, HEPOs are able to identify distinctive approaches that work within their institutional/community contexts, through their knowledge of the young people with whom they work (GHWY, 2018b). Specifically, this type of WP outreach develops approaches that tailor WP towards individual communities. This is because the context a young person has grown up in has significant influence on their decisions about higher education (as well as the types of HE institution in which a young person may feel most comfortable). Further, how young people acknowledge the social construction of space may frame feelings of 'belonging' (Hinton, 2011) and the construction of self-imposed limits on what an individual may feel is 'possible' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Establishing sense of place, therefore, is of relevance to the practice of WP within schools and colleges (Creswell, 2009: 2). Tapping into social and community surroundings becomes necessary to understand the perspectives of young people when making choices about progression, as WP frontline staff (such as HEPOs) can introduce resources that relate to different socio-cultural settings and crucially, over time, begin to normalise progression to HE.

Empirical evidence has identified the importance of such community contexts to engage learners regarding progression and HE access. As Harrison notes:

> '[the] sociocultural context thus provides an initial starting point of what sort of selves are known about within the family and/or community, and therefore viewed as possible in the broadest sense—e.g., "me as a solicitor" or "me as a parent".' (Harrison, 2018: 5).

This approach has also been proven to be effective in ensuring the wider community feels a sense of ownership through contributing to progression-based initiatives (e.g. parents supporting learners in the home) (Scull and Cuthill, 2010). It has been found that established relationships in the

community enable more trusting relationships with students (IntoUniversity, 2017: 27). As such, this community-focused approach is embedded in all GHWY provision – by acknowledging spatial inequality, broader community context and different needs of learners in schools and college settings – and so 'cold spots', where the progression rate to university is lowest in the UK (Social Mobility Commission, 2017), can be approached in a more inclusive and participatory way.

Methodology

The study used a realist evaluation approach (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) to understand the nature of WP resources in distinctive community/institutional settings. This is a theory-driven form of evaluation of social programmes. It identifies relevant 'programme theory' that underpins 'how programme activities are understood to cause (or contribute to) outcomes and impacts' (Westhorp, 2014: 4).

In particular, realist evaluation offers a distinctive approach to understanding the role of context, as it asks, 'what works for whom, in what circumstances and why' (Emmel et al., 2018: 7). This helps build nuanced understandings around the circumstances in which particular WP programmes or activities work (or do not). In particular, Pawson (2018: 212) notes that 'contexts are most definitely not limited to location' and can refer to a much wider set of characteristics, such as individuals (who are running the programme), interrelationships (between stakeholders), institutional arrangements (including physical spaces where the programme has been embedded) and the wider infrastructure (wider social, economic and cultural settings). This makes realist evaluation ideal to analyse the role of HEPOs and how they fit into their respective institutional context(s) and the various communities in which they operate (Lumb and Roberts, 2017; Formby et al, 2020).

To begin, three programme theories were developed around the ideal practice of HEPO staff, based on a series of initial interviews and focus groups conducted with GHWY staff involved in the Uni Connect programme. This helped 'ascertain the rationale regarding the assumptions of stakeholders around how a programme works' (GHWY, 2018: 6). The three programme theories relating to the role of the HEPO, and the empirical starting points for the assumptions they articulate are mapped out in Table 1.

Table 1: Programme theories of GHWY HEPO outreach staff

Programme theory	Empirical research
Good quality continuing professional development (CPD) will equip school/college-based staff with the skills and information to support young people to make informed choices.	Increased guidance and support for young people is essential in regard to progressing to HE, although this can be both 'formal' and 'informal' (Hughes et al., 2009).
Dedicated progression staff in schools/colleges will have more time to invest in young people and support them in planning for their future.	The Department for Education (2010: 26) found that progression staff have a 'role in providing careers support to individual and small groups of students'.
Facilitate the delivery of outreach activity aimed at helping young people to make informed choices.	Dedicated progression staff increase the amount of outreach activity in the school/college. The Department for Education (2010: 26) notes: 'they may also provide support to students during work experience and other work-related educational activities'.

Realist evaluation tests how and why programme theories achieve their respective aims (Marchal et al., 2018: 83). In this case, programme theories were split into several hypothetical CMOs (context(s), mechanism(s) and outcomes) through analysis of GHWY documentation, literature reviews on effective WP outreach and discussion with GHWY about the HEPO role. This illuminated the need for individual responses from HEPO staff and management to uncover wider cultural models relating to the normalisation of WP in school/college institutions, as well as wider societal/community factors outside the institution that may impact the HEPO. As such, the realist evaluation employed both realist interviews (n=11) with managers of HEPOs and two focus groups with HEPO front-line staff (n=8) to determine and refine valid CMO configurations. Both data-collection methods are highly effective at identifying contexts and mechanisms that produce variant outcomes (Dalkin et al., 2012: Manzano, 2016) and elucidating key aspects of the HEPO role. Topic guides (Figure 1) were created in conjunction with the GHWY team focusing on existent WP cultures, types of WP activity and the integration of the HEPOs in the school/college.

Focus group topic guide

Context(s)
C1: How have you found the experience of CPD?
C2: How available is CPD training in your institution?
C3: What is your experience in relation to providing support for students around HE progression?
C4: What role do dedicated progression staff play in your institution?
C5: Has the implementation of HEPO led to an increase in time to help students?
C6: In what ways are HEPOs at your institution engaged with WP activities?
C7: Outside of the HEPO initiative, what other activities are run to help students in regards to supporting them to make informed choices?
C8: How long has the programme run in your institution and how does this intersect with the current school system?
C9: How are HEPOs integrated with current 'progression' based resources in the institution?
C10: Can you tell us about how the role of a HEPO sits in regards to the administration of the central team – specifically relationships to management?
C11: What type of WP/progression activities do you employ in your school or college?
C12: What is the impact of financial resources in the school or college on the HEPO role?
C13: How 'widening participation/progression' was approached in community by HEPOs (outside of school or college).

Mechanism(s)
M1: What is it about having more time that leads to better informed students regarding HE? What type of knowledge gain do we see?
M2: Have you seen students become more confident through these processes? How does such confidence support student choice?
M3: What specific benefit do you get from CPD training that facilitates better outcomes?
M4: How does increased visibility/awareness of the HEPO (throughout whole institution) normalise student engagement?
M5: Does having expert resources (close to hand) remind teachers and students to engage with 'progression' based support?
M6: Does the increased take-up of HEPO programme allow for a wider cultural change in the institution?
Mechanism 7: Does direct contact time lead to better relationships with students?
Mechanism 8: How does increased time ensure that HEPOs understand the needs of students?

Figure 1: Realist topic guide (focus groups)

Sample

The evaluation utilised realist sampling strategy and focused on identifying respondents for their CMO investigation potential (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This meant identifying experiential accounts relating to HEPOs and the organisation of WP provision in target GHWY schools and colleges to understand how the programme was intended to work (Emmel, 2013: 83). Accessing both HEPOs and senior leaders ensured ideas could be tested and refined (Emmel, 2013), while respondents were selected on the basis that they maximised variance to capture a range of contexts and sites (Weiss, 1998). The two focus groups comprised GHWY HEPO front-line staff. The 11 one-to-one realist interviews were with senior leaders who all had responsibility for HEPOs, as well as specific expertise regarding the efficacy of WP delivery in their institutions. These interviews were important to locate programme logic from managers regarding the expectations of the HEPO role.

Analytical strategy

All interview data were transcribed and analysed by the evaluation team. The analysis sought to identify and refine regular and semi-regular context-mechanism-outcomes patterns across data (Dalkin et al., 2015). First, regarding focus groups, each individual HEPO respondent was matched to their host institution in the focus group data, allowing for clearer individualised demarcation of context, mechanism and outcome for each respondent (and background institution). All names were removed and identifiers removed to preserve anonymity. Realist interview data with senior leaders were similarly organised to reflect different institutional contexts, for example, matching institutional type with a HEPO's background and experiences. Second, analysis of interview and focus group data set out to identify general themes relating to the different contexts of HEPOs, approaches of HEPO roles and overall outcomes. The analysis of qualitative data attempted to find 'wider configurational explanation' (Manzano, 2016: 357). Emerging findings were continuously refined through feedback and iteration with the wider GHWY team, once fieldwork was completed.

Findings: the need to establish sense of place

The realist evaluation highlights the importance of integration when HEPOs engaged with settings where WP outreach is a relatively new development. Specifically, the extent that HEPOs created spaces for WP activity in school or college institutions relied on establishing sense of place.

Utilising this theory allows for a broader causal account that illuminates where the HEPO role has worked, for whom it has worked, the circumstances in which it has worked and why (Emmel et al., 2018: 7). Further, it provides some practical suggestions around how outreach should be conducted in the future.

Sense of place is of relevance to the practice of WP within schools and colleges, as these are 'activity spaces': they comprise networks, connections and locations 'within which a particular agent operates' (Massey, 1994: 55). For HEPOs, familiarity with institutional sites is necessary to organise WP activity and embed the notion of progression in the social relations of that institutional space. As Pretty et al. (2003: 274) argue, 'location itself is not enough to create a sense of place. It emerges from involvement between people, and between people and place'. An important distinction is made regarding the introduction of physical resources and WP activity and the sense of place associated with community norms that enabled HEPO staff to enhance WP provision (Cresswell, 2009).

The next section examines what these conditions were based on and a thorough analysis of CMO configurations from the realist semi-structured interviews (with school management) and focus groups (with HEPO front-line staff). It examines the specific approaches of HEPO front-line staff as they establish WP practice. It draws on the theory of sense of place to elaborate a broader causal account that explains different outcome patterns of normalising WP in new community settings.

Schools and colleges where HEPOs established sense of place

All HEPOs focused on enhancing current WP strategies or introducing new resources (based on the needs of the institution). This was crucial, as both HEPOs and management emphasised that existing cultures (and knowledge) of progression were strongly associated with high quality WP practice. In both the focus groups with HEPO staff and the one-to-one interviews with senior leaders, there was general agreement that WP practice was always enhanced through HEPOs. However, more specifically, in institutions that had a better understanding of WP, HEPOs found much more support to engage with a range of WP-based activities (such as one-to-one mentoring, HE-focused events and campus visits). These institutions had existing knowledge through previous schemes (as well as some current career/progression-based provision). Essentially, where there were existing

cultures and knowledge of WP – specifically relating to previous initiatives, WP activities and practice – the HEPO role was more effective throughout the institution. This led to increased visibility of WP activity (of varying types) among students and staff:

> 'I think in terms of my institution, it was already normalised within the school anyway, so in terms of my place in the school, it's just about reinforcing those things, so yeah, it's already quite well known within the school and I can just really start to get it in place.' (HEPO A, 2018).

This was also mirrored in senior leaders' understanding of the HEPO role, in that they were able to quickly identify the potential contribution of the HEPO in terms of delivering WP progression outcomes, as well as the specific ways the HEPO could support these aims:

> 'Out of the three schools I have worked in, two have had NCOP staff and there has been a significant difference in outcomes. There has been better partnership working, better results in terms of participation and more bespoke delivery.' (College Social Inclusion Manager, 2018).

At a more individual level, varying CMO configurations illuminated 'effective' WP practice regarding HEPO frontline staff. When HEPO first went into a school or college, they were keen to engage with teachers who were invested, thus a platform could be created for WP activity. Other contextual factors included institutional knowledge and understanding of WP and positive timescales (e.g. the time to set up new WP initiatives at the beginning). This 'normalised' WP throughout the wider institution and broadened the range of activities available:

> 'It has been a powerful lever in our widening participation agenda. To have a dedicated member of staff who is able to focus on GHWY activities is astonishing. The sheer variety of activities offered […], from the progression module and campus visits. She has been invaluable in so many ways, particularly adding capacity.' (School Headteacher, 2018).

Effective WP, it was felt, was also based around approaches that prioritise student need. Institutions that allowed some degree of autonomy through the provision of WP activities (such as mentoring, campus visits and progression modules) allowed trust to be built among HEPOs and students. In addition, HEPOs learned more about individual student interests and future progression-based aspirations, resulting in more tailored advice and guidance and a deeper understanding that, in turn, informs future delivery planning. There was broad acknowledgment that the HEPO role both reinforced pre-

existing cultures of WP and extended it further through the practical support they provide. HEPOs establishing institutional sense of place increased programme mechanisms relating to increased volume of tailored WP interventions, leading to increased normalisation of WP in the institution overall. This meant WP was physically embodied and cemented by the creation of the HEPO role. Integrating dedicated members of WP staff meant a dedicated place for the WP work they did, ensuring WP became an integral part of the business of the school or college.

Schools and colleges where HEPOs partially established sense of place

Most HEPO staff had integrated into their institution (and shifted the overall approach to WP within it), yet some noted contexts that had specific institutional barriers relating to supporting students with HE progression, resulting in contexts where HEPO integration and sense of place was only partially established. These included: organisational challenges (often at the commencement of the role), larger institutions (e.g. schools with more than 1000 students), and a less developed culture of WP knowledge and practice among staff, students and the wider community**.**

Typically, HEPOs had students at different stages (both school and college), limiting space available for effective WP in parts of the institution where it had not been utilised previously**.** Overall, this created challenges in normalising WP practice**.** In some cases, this was compounded by a lack of initial organisational support from the host school or college, particularly in terms of engaging teachers and other staff in the WP agenda. This caused difficulty in building platforms and space for WP practice, limiting key mechanisms relating to the normalisation and visibility of WP. Over time, however, HEPO front-line staff sought to shift wider cultural practices towards effective WP outreach. For instance, establishing support from senior leaders allowed HEPO staff to open up space for WP throughout the institution:

> ‘It was only two months ago that my headteacher finally realised that I don’t have to only work with sixth form; he just assumed that I only work with sixth form … [but] now that I’ve got that link with that senior management ... we have this kind of regular meeting every three weeks; he’s really excited about it.’ (HEPO B, 2018).

The establishment of WP activity created space for mechanisms to enhance WP outcomes (such as knowledge gain, increased contact time and increased

visibility of WP more broadly). Other approaches taken by HEPO staff reflected the needs of students within the community settings, especially in relation to the amount of information students need to negotiate regarding progressing to HE.

> 'Right at the start when I asked my student to fill in their survey, they said that they constantly get information and this is shoved down their throats – and [for us] "we feel like we're coming in from a new perspective - not just another person there to shove stuff down their throat."' (HEPO C, 2018).

In particular, HEPOs developed new arrangements in institutions, yet experienced difficulties in engaging the wider community: for instance, where there were language barriers and different levels of knowledge of HE in the community. This became apparent when HEPO participants reflected on engaging in WP outside the institution. HEPOs explicitly noted that difficulties around engaging parents were made more challenging as a result of the unfamiliarity with HE and progression discourse. Opening up spaces to engage about the future of young people was challenging.

> 'It's a barrier with a lot of parents sometimes, if they come from, like … a real working class background and then you're sort of like putting in the idea that the head of, like, you know, the kid can go into university; it's as though you– they can sort of see that as an attack on them, it's being like, "Oh, they have not done so, therefore they are not good enough."' (HEPO D, 2018).

This echoes the heightened challenges that many young people face, in that progression to HE is presented as a risk to their community identity. Conversely, 'living at home and maintaining ties with the local community is a way of minimising that risk' (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005: 92). Indeed, HEPO staff show sensitivity and awareness to such issues by emphasising the importance of engaging with the community to avoid 'deficit model' approaches (Holdsworth, 2009), and note the need to extend WP provision to the community setting.

> 'So, like, stuff to come to the school, it's something that perhaps we [could] focus on – like, within the colleges, going to community centres and all that. That sort of angle, of getting embedded in the community, so it's not the bulk of our job, but it is something I think most of us think would find really useful to do.' (HEPO E, 2018).

This raises an additional challenge for HEPOs, as even when ideal institutional causal conditions exist to ensure that they sufficiently embed WP

practice, the role is still limited by wider societal forces that they cannot always shape or access. Such relationships would also ensure that communities (and families) had some degree of 'buy-in' in relation to progression. This emphasises that establishing sense of place holistically is not simply a matter of introducing resources into institutions, but we must also identify ways of supporting learners in the community space as well.

Discussion

The evaluation aim was to understand the differences in approach of HEPOs in community settings – specifically, examining logics and approaches of HEPO staff to WP. Our realist evaluation has shown that HEPOs both complemented existing arrangements in settings that already practised WP and introduced new WP activity that shifted the wider cultural practice in settings where WP resources had been introduced for the first time. In all institutions, both management and staff emphasised positive outcomes and the overall contribution of HEPO staff. This is the ideal formation of the HEPO role in schools and colleges. All HEPOs utilised their CPD training and the wider resources from GHYW to tap into institutional sense of place to create a presence around progression to HE and shape the delivery of WP activity. HEPOs facilitate broad-ranging collaborations with the GHWY partnership and provide varied and bespoke support for learners that fit Uni Connect criteria (Woods et al., 2010). For HEPOs and senior leaders, several steps emerged in how the HEPO staff attained positive outcomes:

- Understanding the needs of the institution and students (working out where the role fits and where to target provision).
- Opening up space for WP practice (securing support organisational and management support).
- Introducing new forms of WP (resources such as mentoring, and large activities that engaged other external partners).
- An overall normalisation of WP practice (raising the profile of progression throughout the institution).
- Engaging with the wider community (through participatory and inclusive means).

This positive model of WP was contingent on HEPOs adopting approaches that were meaningful to the institutions in which they were situated, particularly in the case of learners in that community. Identifying practices in

conjunction with ideas and values around HE progression, and considering institutional context, opened up spaces for student engagement. This required a visible presence throughout the institution and being available to students at different stages of the student lifecycle (often contingent on the nature of the school or college). For instance, HEPOs targeted WP learners that were most at need of progression-based support. These developments precipitated encouraging relationships with students that allowed HEPOs to tap into student perceptions of identity in that wider, imagined community. As Norton (2001: 166) argues, 'a learner's imagined community invite[s] an imagined identity'. Therefore, outreach provision in communities where access to HE is historically low needs to participate in the social relations of that community. In doing so, impactful and inclusive provision can be facilitated and a stronger sense of place is established for outreach staff.

Furthermore, it is necessary to reflect on the wider role that situational 'community context' plays in WP, and how this can differ from community to community (Lumb and Roberts, 2017: 22). By taking into account the wider community context, situated circumstances beneficial to WP activity can be found (Formby et al., 2020). Preparing HEPOs – and other outreach staff in similar positions – for such work should, therefore, involve consideration of the intersection of community, institutional need and how space is practiced, used and lived (Cresswell, 2009: 2). This ensures that WP is embedded institutionally to support young people to expand a range of 'possible selves' through opportunities attached to higher education (Harrison, 2018).

Achieving such outcomes is contingent on HEPOS achieving a sense of place, however, and as we have argued, this is sensitive to wider contextual factors. Specific spaces HEPOs found challenging to access, such as the community outside schools and colleges, highlight a substantial challenge for contemporary WP; it is unlikely to be enough to introduce WP resources into institutional spaces alone, and wider consideration must be given to the community space. The realist evaluation stressed why community-embedded approaches to WP are so important. HEPOs emphasised both the need for deeper relationships in the community space (IntoUniversity, 2017) and the specific challenges in creating such relationships. It is not clear how sceptical attitudes towards HE can be shifted when links between HE and overall life success remain unclear (Reed et al., 2007), especially where 'expectations may be wholly realistic given the history of structural disadvantage within a community' (Harrison, 2018: 14-15). This is an area that future research should consider.

Yet by moving beyond the confines of the educational institution, there is scope to redefine what WP means for the communities it aims to support. More broadly, considering the extent that access to UK HE continues to be deeply socially stratified (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016), situating WP resources in socially deprived contexts begins to tackle high levels of social and spatial inequality that limit learners from accessing HE. This requires an approach that joins up schools and colleges, external partners, learners and the wider community. Further, considering how effective HEPOs are within institutional spaces (as indicated within this realist evaluation), there is scope to reflect on the ways that HEPOs could be involved with the community space. WP outreach staff are uniquely positioned: they have high levels of progression knowledge and are also able to coordinate how resources are deployed to best support learners. Moreover, this would likely enable the facilitation of innovative and effective forms of WP practice that are likely used as it is based around community need. Our realist evaluation shows the value in utilising outreach staff in imaginative ways, and suggests they must have a substantial role in future WP. In schools and colleges, the community space and the wider WP landscape, outreach staff are integral to how outcomes in institutions play out and in how 'widening participation' becomes framed in contemporary society. They play a vital role in helping learners realise their futures.

[i] From the beginning of Uni Connect, the core target learners have been those from low participation neighbourhoods: what are termed as POLAR 3 and POLAR 4 (participation of local areas). These are geographical measures of disadvantage (OfS, 2020) used to identify where HE participation rates are low.

[ii] Proximity to HE is not the only factor, as social mobility is also determined via educational qualifications and attainment (Social Mobility Commission, 2017: 69). Early academic achievement retains significance in this regard (Goodman and Gregg, 2010).

[iii] Go Higher West Yorkshire is a partnership of 13 higher education providers that aim to prepare people for further learning (GHWY, 2019). These include: University Centre Bradford College, the University of Bradford, University Centre Calderdale College, the University of Huddersfield, Kirklees College, Leeds Beckett University, the University of Leeds, University Centre Leeds City College, Leeds Arts University, Leeds College of Building, Leeds Trinity University, Leeds College of Music and University Centre Wakefield College.

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