The Shifting Subjectification of the ‘Widening Participation’ Student: The Affective World of the ‘Deserving’ Consumer

Abstract
In this chapter we focus on the emotional dimensions of widening participation (WP) that are often obscured through much activity and evaluation surrounding NCOP. We consider, using data collected with young people, what focusing on their affective worlds or emotional states might reveal about current and future imaginings of the ‘potential’ higher education (HE) student, as well as the current state of play within the practices of WP. This draws from our experience leading regional research and evaluation of Phase 1 of the Office for Students funded UK wide National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), which ran from January 2017-July 2019. In this chapter, we draw predominantly on insight from qualitative learner data generated through individual and group interviews with 83 young people aged between 11-18, carried out as part of a larger mixed methods data set. We argue that the targeting of geo-demographic measures, and the surrounding socio-economic and policy climate risks obscuring the persistence of more pervasive forces against HE progression beyond the individual or community levels.

Keywords
Widening Participation, Higher Education, Geography, Outreach, Emotion
Introduction

Access to becoming a higher education (HE) student in the UK is increasingly mediated through an outreach industry in which the academy's opportunities are communicated and distributed from education providers to prospective applicants and their communities. These outreach practices are traditionally ordered though foci on particular elements of disadvantage including lower socio-economic status, those who are first in their families to go to university, ethnicity, disability and age, with the intention of widening access to these previously underrepresented groups. This chapter draws from our experience of Phase 1 of the Office for Students' funded UK wide National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP)\textsuperscript{ii}, which ran from January 2017-July 2019. Both authors were seconded from academic education roles with focus around HE participation and inequalities, to lead regional research and evaluation of this £60 million per year funding initiative in England. NCOP was established to support the UK government’s social mobility goals by rapidly increasing the number of young people from underrepresented groups who go into HE. NCOP does not include any targeted focus on older learners, although in Phase 2 providers are able to work with this group but without any incentive to do so. In practice this severely limits opportunity for outreach professionals to work with older learners.

NCOP Focus is on university progression ‘cold spots,’ postcode areas where HE participation is lower than might be expected amongst young people who choose not to go to university despite achieving or being on track to achieve the entry requirements. Phase 1, which completed in June 2019, included particular focus on the target groups of young men from disadvantaged backgrounds and BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) learners, who have been identified as much less likely to progress to HE (Boliver, 2013). NCOP has since been extended with a second phase to run until July 2021.

Widening Participation – what, why and with whom?

HE inequalities are the outcomes of educational gaps that start early and open up as people move through their education journeys (Crozier, 2005). This necessitates the development of deep and wide understanding into the relevant factors at play. The mechanisms that inform
progression pathways are a complex constellation of individuals’ own contextualised decision-making, and that of other decision-making gatekeepers in their educational trajectories, including school and university teachers as well as outreach professionals. These influential others are invariably well-intentioned and committed to supporting equity in educational progression, often informed by coming from widening participation (WP) backgrounds themselves. There is a need to develop greater understanding of the complex confidence growing and decision-making processes that take place between individuals, their families, and key education professionals in their lives, within the surrounding nexus of wider social context and trends.

What constitutes WP activity aimed at encouraging students into HE comprises a variable set of practices – from outreach work in the community to specialist summer schools or mentoring programmes. Traditionally, this agenda has appeared to be directed from HE institutions themselves in specialist outreach departments, yet with concurrent pressures on schools to demonstrate progression and further education colleges providing HE programmes, the sector has proliferated. Elsewhere we have noted that ‘there is seldom guidance on good practice for academics’ (Johnson et al. 2019:3) engaged in outreach work. Indeed, there remains a lack of compelling evidence either produced by or to guide this diversified outreach sector. This includes paucity of information around what activity constitutes effective WP, as well as which groups it should be aimed at and how it should be delivered.

The UK has traditionally been perceived as leading the agenda to widen participation in HE (Burke, 2013), and successive governments have been keen to emphasise their success in both increasing HE participation and closing the gap in participation between rich and poor. There have been undoubted substantial gains both in actual participation and in wider cultures of understanding and commitment in the half century of successive British governments’ WP agendas (Hinton-Smith, 2012). However, it is important that growing participation does not necessarily negate the persistence of inequalities.

Persistent gaps in HE participation are not only the residue of stubborn past inequalities, but can be seen as mapping to new and emergent insecurities. In the UK this includes the
introduction of tuition fees in 2010 and ensuing concerns around the perceived balance of costs and returns of investing in HE moving from the tax payer on to the individual student (Hinton-Smith, 2016). It also includes the end of the Aimhigherlii WP Programme, the demise of which effectively ended universities’ external accountability for the success of their WP activities. Further, the replacement of universal Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) with the National Bursary Programme ended universal entitlement to financial support for further education students aged 16-18 from poorer families while they studied, closing the gateway into HE for many whose parents could not afford for them to remain at home without a financial contribution (Hinton-Smith, 2012). Sitting within the wider context of welfare reform, austerity, and wider instability such as the protracted unsuresness around Brexit, these developments have raised the challenge for the UK HE sector as it works to increase participation from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The combination of influencing factors in mediating the HE progression journeys of those from the most financially vulnerable backgrounds has been referred to as a ‘toxic mix’ (Finlay, 2014), and the stresses suffered by students can be seen reflected in rising mental health problems, including anxiety, loneliness and substance misuse (Insight Network, 2019).

NCOP draws together attainment and geography as proxies of disadvantage represented by a postcode indicator. Yet we argue that this particular targeting, and the surrounding socio-economic and policy climate, has shifted the imaginary of how these ‘WP’ students are understood within the UK context. Within this discourse, prospective students become positioned as agentic choosers who need only to be persuaded to take up the opportunities open to them. This can inform approaches to WP that focus on telling rather than guiding decision making, and alter conceptions of those who fail to capitalise on the opportunities presented as being available to all. The potential for disjuncture between education market agendas and the anxieties of prospective students is exacerbated within the context of increasingly marketing and recruitment approaches to WP, set against legitimate fears of prospective students and their families around uncertain futures in terms of the job market and potential gains of making what has become an individual investment in HE (Brown, 2013; Crawford & Erve, 2015; Crawford et al., 2016). It is argued that the UK student loan system has become increasingly regressive, with the highest costs being paid by those who get the least return from their participation (Johnston, 2013), and that increased costs have
encouraged those from less advantaged backgrounds to become more strategic university decision-makers (Clark et al., 2015). An awareness that the risks of university are not distributed evenly have led to HE funding policies being identified as a contributory factor in widening inequalities (Calendar & Mason, 2017). Further, an approach to WP that has such a specific agenda is seen as out of sync with supporting individual choice. It also implies an increased responsibility for universities to interrogate the targeting and impact of their institutional policies to both widen access and increase student numbers.

**Theorisation**

The theoretical context for our conceptualisation of the responsibilities of WP is, as we have discussed elsewhere, informed by the principle that this what? (Can you name – form of participation?) ought not to be reduced to recruitment (Johnson et al., 2019: 7). There is a need for collectively developing more nuanced conceptualisations of the intricate web of individual’s lives as they interact with education and a limited definition of ‘value’ that rarely moves beyond quantitative measures.

The perceived importance of aspiration and individual responsibility for academic success or failure arguably problematises the marginalised for their own exclusion, resonating with criticisms of much of the wider discourse of WP in HE over recent decades (Hinton-Smith, 2012b). This emphasis on individual aspiration intersects with identification that without targeted parental investment of the economic and cultural valued in education, less privileged students have to struggle to get to university, requiring a strong self-reliance (Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010). In contrast it is suggested that universities frequently position marginalised students negatively as deficit or replete in capitals as a result of their background (O’Shea, 2015); this includes lacking the right kinds of knowledge, experience and social networks (Bathmaker et al. 2013). Furthermore, working-class parents are frequently perceived as deficit in providing the ‘right’ kinds of support (Gazeley, 2012; Gewirtz, 2001).

The repositioning of responsibility for the cost of participating in HE in England reflects changing deeper assumptions around the positioning of its value, centred around a growing consumerist model built on the assumption that it is an individual good that can be relied
upon to deliver individual benefits (Clark et al., 2015; Callender & Mason, 2017), so long as people make informed choices. Widening conceptions of the individual and collective value of and responsibility for successful HE engagement is essential to acknowledging the unsureness of individual instrumental returns. Theoretical insights around the identified risks of HE participation for all, but particularly less advantaged students, have been central to informing our approach to developing understanding of the complexities of progression decision-making that deviate far from depoliticised and emotionally neutral assumptions around information, opportunities and choice.

HE participation is an investment, but a risky one because of the uncertainties of securing a well enough paid job to make the financial investment worthwhile (Dwyer et al., 2013). The extent to which fear of debt influences decision-making is debated (Harrison 2019). There is argument that young people as a whole are more accepting of debt now given that it is so often unavoidable; yet also identification of a widening gap in attitudes according to family background, with those on lower incomes becoming more debt averse (Callender & Mason, 2017). Low-income students have been shown to more often perceive university costs as debt rather than investment compared with wealthier peers (Callender & Jackson, 2008); with it being suggested that increased debt aversion among those with least financial resources is better understood as aversion to the increased risk of debt rather than direct aversion to debt itself (see Barr, 2012). More widely, this links to sociological perspectives on risk that have increasingly acknowledged the significance of socio-demographic factors in influencing individuals’ apprehension of and responses to risk (Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006). Rather than chastising less advantaged students for failing to grasp the promised opportunities of HE, we suggest the need for more respectful and emotionally aware approaches to WP. These approaches should legitimize the astute appraisals of HE’s precarities by prospective students and their parents, and engage with these in direct and honest ways rather than seeking to brush them aside in pursuit of student numbers. This theoretical underpinning informs our methodological approach to developing, evaluating, researching and capacity-building within outreach, including in this work as explored further in our methodological discussion below.

Given the critiques above around the failure to socially contextualise individual experiences of educational marginalisation, we draw theoretically on Gordon’s (2008, 2011) work on
‘haunting’ to argue that perceptions around the ‘deserving consumer’ of WP outreach are deeply linked to the affective pasts, presents and futures of individuals. By affect, we refer to a broad range of intensities of emotion that are constructed, re-produced and performed within and through the social world. This includes reflections on self-confidence and striving to succeed which emerge from participant histories and reveal themselves in everyday feelings of being, for example, deserving/undeserving. These ‘feelings’ that punctuate a learner journey into, through and beyond HE may emerge in the individual but, we argue, are revealing of social, historical and political constructions of the WP student.

Methods

The data we draw on in this chapter was collected between October 2017 and December 2018 as part of regional research and evaluation of Phase 1 of NCOP. The data we draw on here forms part of a larger dataset that included participant evaluation of funded outreach activities (1,150 responses), a learner survey (1258 responses) and a staff survey that included teachers and WP practitioners (38 responses). This data generated important insights into experienced and perceived benefits of measured gains including knowledge, self-confidence, aspiration and ability.

Our qualitative research data, which was smaller in scale, yet provided some important areas of deeper insight into the contribution and challenges of this programme and outreach provision more widely. Developing insight into the complexity of individual journeys and the nuancing of success can be challenging, and require more in depth understanding than that provided by standard tracking requirements. Indeed, there are a complex mix of reasons for why this might be the case, most notably the challenges in attributing a ‘decision’ to a specific moment or activity provided. Our qualitative data collection engaged with 108 participants representing diverse key stakeholder groups within the region. This included focus group interviews with 76 young people aged between 14 and 19 years old drawn from four 11-16 schools selected to capture diversity within the region in terms of school profile, locality and opportunities; and 7 ‘walking interviews’ with NCOP learners that took place within their Further Education Colleges of study. Alongside learner interviews we carried out 25 interviews with key adults that included education and outreach practitioners, careers advisors, and parents.
In this chapter, we draw predominantly on insights from the qualitative learner data generated through the individual and group interviews with a total of 83 NCOP learners aged between 11 and 18 years. Participants were spread across four schools in one region, and we also accounted for gender and ethnicity distribution and attempted to present a range of pathways and experiences. Within these schools, we ran two separate focus groups each for Year 9 and Year 12 NCOP pupils. This reached approximately 39 Year 9 learners and 37 Year 12s. The first focus group asked about some of the challenges young people face in thinking about their progression into HE, as well as some of the opportunities HE might provide, with responses noted in a poster and through verbal feedback. In the second focus group, we asked young people to design an outreach activity using a worksheet. These focus groups were digitally recorded and we kept copies of the worksheets and posters.

Our role in these focus groups was to listen and to gently guide, informed by Kvale’s (1996) metaphor of the researcher as ‘traveller,’ ‘wandering together with’ their participant in the process of arriving at insight (p. 4). As researchers, we were informed by principles of social justice, in playing close attention to how data gets collected, produced and interpreted. This provoked a desire to rethink the impacts and ‘value’ of outreach beyond quantitative measures as well as consider broader contextual issues that shape how outreach might be received, understood and valued. It also included awareness of the need to utilise and empower the voices and expertise of multiple stakeholders as partners in our research. For example, we were mindful of the dynamics of academic researchers entering classrooms as ‘transient’ strangers asking young people to give experiences and perspectives with us. Our approach to interrogating and developing the success of WP work has been guided by work theorising the value of more participatory forms of research relationships that seek to dissolve distinctions between researcher and researched (Pain et al., 2011). We wanted to set up opportunities for young people to tell adults engaged in WP what they think rather than the other way round, being guided in our approach to the research by the principle of speaking ‘next to’ rather than for (Trinh, cited in Chen, 1992). Consequently, we ensured these focus groups were led by their voices and ideas for what they would like to see in future outreach activity, rather than us priming them for what we wanted to hear, at the expense of articulations of experience (Tremlett, 2015).
The research data was coded using NVivo software which generated a series of common or significant themes. In this chapter, we focus on an emergent theme, broadly defined as ‘affect’ which we explored in light of our theoretical understandings of consumerism, debt and educational inequalities. In offering a critique of some elements of NCOP, we explore both the state of the ‘WP market’, and the potential ‘students’ it imagines.

**Discussion**

**The affective worlds ‘behind’ postcode data**

A static reading of space and place using target postcodes within NCOP resulted in scant attention being paid to the affective dimensions of transitioning into HE, specifically how does it *feel* to be positioned as a recipient of outreach and to negotiate the progression journey in the context of wider complex life stories? Young people were acutely aware of being ‘more than’ their WP selection criterion. In our discussions, they revealed experiences of affect in terms of their excitements and anxieties about their possible educational futures and how this related to them being targeted for specific opportunities and interventions because of their home postcode.

As a proxy measure of educational disadvantage, the use of postcode was felt by young people to be too blunt and did not enable attention to other relevant aspects of identity and experiences. One learner described it as a ‘*bit of a stereotype*’ in that:

> ‘I come from a poor estate and I want to go to university. But there are people on rich estates who don’t want to go to university’

*(Year 9\(^1\), Beach Green\(^2\))*

The quote describes the simple fact that postcode reveals something, but not everything, about educational trajectories and obfuscates other factors such as ethnicity, gender and the complex other economic, social and material factors informing socio-economic class.

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1. This is the year of UK schooling in which pupils are normally between 13-14 years old. It is also significant in being the time they choose which subjects to focus on in their GCSEs, which are exams taken at the end of secondary school, aged 15-16.
2. Our four schools, Townside, Church School, Beach Green and Academy schools were spread across the Sussex region, a county in the South East of the UK. Schools were a mix of faith, academy and local authority funding models and were from different geographic locations e.g. coastal and city.
Importantly, this person did not feel defined or determined by place. He was keen to state how he was more than his estate but, at the same time, by contrasting his experience with the ‘people on rich estates’ as being exceptional he indicated the presence of place as a limiting of possibilities. Using Gordon (2008), place and its concurrent histories and connections to formations of class, becomes a malevolent spectre in that it ‘emerges uninvited...to mess up boundaries and protocols’ (p. 148). For the young person exemplified above, postcode should not matter and yet something remained as mattering significantly and inescapably. Similarly, in a focus group with Year 9s in Townside, one girl said she would be nervous of stating where she lived on her UCAS form in case this might put universities off in positioning her as being someone ‘like them’. This prompted further discussion within their small group about why they had been selected to take part in the focus group which was revealing for some - ‘Oh I didn’t realise you were from there’. For others, shared postcode was a clearer categorisation. As we asked Year 12s in Church School why they thought they were here, the group laughed, echoing ‘it’s because we’re from a shit area’. While place clearly played a part in perceptions of possible futures, postcode did not accurately define what place represented. Indeed, a discussion with Year 12s in Townside focused on the nuances of selection:

‘In a deprived area, it’s difficult to, sort of, know where that area starts and finishes, difficult to pick out which areas are less well-off and which areas are more well off. And sometimes that will go wrong, and people who are already quite well off will end up getting resources that could be going to someone who’s not so well off’.

(Year 12\(^3\), Townside)

In echoing a discourse of deservedness, young people were clearly aware of the WP selection game and how postcode shaped the allocation of opportunities. The use of ‘well off’ and ‘resource’ in this quote reveals how postcode alone provides scant information about current economic realities of young people and their families. Waller, Harrison and Last (2015) interviewed regional directors of one of the most substantial programmes to widen access to HE in the UK – Aim Higher (2004-2011). Their analysis found that the use of geo-demographic

\(^3\)This is the year of UK schooling in which pupils are normally between 16-17 years old and studying qualifications in a school or a sixth form college. The January of this academic year is the normal deadline for applying for university and we conducted the majority of our focus groups in the preceding October and November.
markers like postcodes for targeting offered a quick measure where other data was lacking but equally they caution that ‘uncritical or mechanistic’ (p.2) applications could offer limited information about young people’s lives. Within our study, postcode was seen to be too blunt in both not providing enough information about lives and experiences, as well as not accurately representing what might be the educational disadvantages these learners faced in their future HE participation.

Indeed, what we were struck by in our data was the emotional intensity of our conversations with young people and how this co-existed alongside the reductive postcode measure. Indeed, words such as worry, risk, pressure, fear, unclear and overwhelmed arose as significant themes in our data. This was most often presented in terms of whether the financial, social and emotional investment in HE would offer a meaningful return. This risky payoff was described predominantly in financial terms set against fears of loans and debt:

‘We are going to need degrees to get most jobs, so it’s going to benefit you in the way of, you’re going to get a better paying job. But also it’s a huge risk, like it’s such a gamble because if you go there for four years and then at the end you pass or you don’t pass or you just go back to the job you had before, then was it worth it?’

(Year 12, Townside)

‘Young people struggle to get jobs nowadays so you might have the qualification just working or you might as well just go into a job straight away because then you’ll get money and you can actually pay for your apartment and stuff. In the sense like, it’s not qualifications that make the world go round. It’s money that does. So what’s the point?’

(Year 12, Church View)

In these discussions, debt was not an abstract concept but an embodied worry as both a risky undertaking but also shaping everyday practicalities such as living at home or the opportunities to find part-time work easily. This supports Barr (2012) who described how it was the risk of debt and concern whether it would prove worth it, rather than the debt itself, was of most concern, particularly those from low incomes. Importantly, risk was described as a ‘gamble’ that was to some extent out of their control and this was connected to other worries and fears around a lack of agency in terms of their education and life transitions.
For example, participants described HE as a further pressure to perform and succeed, layering on top of the demands expected to achieve GCSEs at age 16, and then progressing on to succeed at A-Levels by age 18:

‘A level is such a jump and it’s just like, so stressful and with university it’s another jump and like, I’m a bit scared’

(Year 12, Townside)

‘It’s more of a mental effect, like university has more, like, pressure and it’s rushed. They make you want to grow up faster than you are so they’re like hurry up and get the grades.. So a lot of people are rushing into it [uni]...And you have so many tests and it’s like stress’

(Year 9, Beachside)

‘As soon as they get to that point where they want to pick it [university], some people may go, I don’t know, it’s too scary, I don’t want to do that’

(Year 9, Townside)

In the first quote, the educational ‘treadmill’ was experienced as highly problematic. The thought of HE was fraught with concerns around whether young people could sustain the levels of pressure they were experiencing in their current schooling contexts. In the second quote, this young person was almost breathless as they described how university might represent even more stress on top of what they were facing as they approached the start of their GCSEs and their desire to slow down and feel in control of their future choices. The third quote echoes similar themes of worry and fear. Stress was conceptualised as a barrier for educational progression and yet this was rarely explicitly addressed within WP initiatives that these young people had taken part in or within the broader discourse we were aware of as researchers and practitioners.

What these data excerpts suggest to us is the importance of paying attention to the considerable emotional terrain of HE decision making. The use of postcode within the NCOP programme offered very limited data or concurrent measures of ‘success’ around young people’s thoughts and feelings as they negotiated whether or not HE was a possibility for them, although there was a connection between place and its relationship to complex classed formations of possibility. In addition, risk and uncertainty, worry and stress were normalised
within the lives of young people we spoke to as they contemplated HE yet these ‘affective worlds’ (and the policy landscapes that shaped their emergence) were rarely addressed in WP interventions they had experienced or we had observed in our wider study.

**The positivity industry of WP**

Our data suggested that, where emotions were addressed within WP discourse, this operated under individualised discourses of young people needing to be more resilient or to upskill their coping mechanisms. For example, our regional NCOP funded a number of interventions focused on ‘Grit and Resilience’. These took the form of confidence raising activities, often linked to an extra-curricular task such as sport or music, in which young people were supported to challenge their attitudes and perceptions towards their existing capabilities and future possibilities. The underlaying philosophy was of a growth mindset which argues that you can improve intelligence, ability and performance through cognitive and psychological work (Dweck, 2017). Such initiatives were very popular among young people in our region and had benefits in terms of improved self-confidence in the short-term. However, much like the concept of aspiration in WP work, growth mindset narratives can serve to apportion ‘blame’ at an individual level (Sellar & Storan, 2013) and suggest that educational disadvantage can predominantly be ‘thought away’ through cultivating the correct, positive frame of mind around one’s individual circumstances and opportunities. This starkly contrasted with our data, particularly around the financial fears of HE, which felt insurmountable for those in our study.

For example, we interviewed one young woman, Karli, about her views on HE and she described how involvement in confidence building opportunities had increased her self-belief that she might ‘fit’ at university. Here she describes her feelings about attending a university open day talk:

‘I went along and I went, oh, I don’t think I want to go to university. It proper scares me. I don’t think I’m educated enough. But, you are.'
...It doesn’t matter how academic you are, as long as you have the mindset to want to achieve and do well, and to persevere and to actually work your butt off, then you’re going to achieve, I think.’

These quotes attest to the success of the event in raising her self-confidence, as well as her echoing the growth mind-set discourse that she had been exposed to. However, the defining factor shaping her decision not to go to university was that she saw it to be less risky to continue in her part-time work as a personal trainer and build a career for herself by taking on short courses at college. Even as she contemplated university in the future, she continually repeated the need to be working:

‘You’ve always got to have a back-up plan. So, I could do personal training as a part-time job, as well as studying in university, if I wanted...to help pay and live comfortably... Being in part-time work to help support my parents as well as myself, that would really help’

This is not to suggest a lack of value in confidence-raising work for Karli, but that it seemed to offer a limited understanding of the ‘spectre’ (Gordon, 2008) of the emotional, socio-political and financial barriers of HE that shaped her need to have a ‘back up plan’ that could not simply be gotten over through positive psychological thinking.

This reductive psychologising of barriers to further study was linked to a broader trend of positivity within the WP industry in which HE was seen as an unproblematised part of the ‘good life’. For example, young people described how HE was almost always sold to them in highly positive and idealised ways and that this felt at odds with their current experiences of study. They also felt that higher HE’s benefits were universally lauded with little attention to how their specific circumstances would enable/disable them from capitalising on their earned qualifications compared to those who were more socially privileged. This is illustrated by the following discussion between two Year 12s at Academy School:

A: ‘You deal with stress here, you’ve dealt with stress during your GCSEs. College isn’t perfect, but I enjoy college. I enjoy going to school here. And that was stressful. I don’t see the point in saying, oh yes, uni is perfect...Just don’t tell us what we want to hear, tell us what we need to hear. Because otherwise we’re going to be in for a big shock’
In this discussion, ‘stress’ was so normalised in these young people’s lives that they found it unusual that this was not something talked about often in outreach work. Moreover, awareness of what university is like from older friends or siblings made them hyper-aware of what messages were silenced, particularly around the ‘struggles’ such as the pressures of independent working or the cost of living. They knew that studying at university can be challenging and that people drop out for a variety of reasons. These nuanced understandings contrasted sharply with anxieties sometimes present in WP around perceived lack of aspiration to be corrected through outreach. Instead they conveyed ability to decode dominant narratives of promised gain. These young people showed sophisticated grasp of the precarity of promises around graduate outcomes, that is in line with the analyses of expert commentators (e.g. Shildrick et al. 2012). However, the vision they were presented with was hyper-positive, potentially leading to a sense of being unprepared for what might be to come or to being suspicious of such ‘marketing hyperbole’. Shortly after attending this focus group, we went to a national training for WP practitioners in which we were encouraged to loudly chant ‘outreach works’, suggesting that critical messages around both university and the success of WP did not fit with current narratives. This likely reflects the shifting agendas of the WP sector which has blurred the lines between outreach and recruitment (Johnson et al., 2019), with the consequence that a key performance indicator of outreach is return on investment in student numbers.

Grit and resilience work enabled ‘fixing’ the emotional concerns of the applicant but there was little WP practice that sought to challenge the affective challenges of the institution and, in its slide to recruitment, risked becoming a ‘positivity industry’. While there is considerable work being done to address the mental health concerns of young people in schools and for university students, there is a potential ‘transition’ gap in outreach work that could better recognise that making choices around h is a deeply emotional, not just a strategic, process.
Complex lives/idealised targets

In our focus groups, we found that the most marginalised young people experienced chaotic lives and engaged in complex decision making, with few support structures. The strategic, well-informed student, making ‘logical’ choices from a plethora of HE products, supported by an educationally rich family was atypical for many NCOP learners. This was highlighted most strikingly in a discussion with Clara, in Year 12 in Academy school. We asked her, what she’d like to do when she leaves her sixth form and she responded:

‘I’ve always wanted to be a Primary School Teacher. My whole life. And so I’m definitely going to university. I’ll need to do some sort of teaching degree because I don’t want to be a teaching assistant... I think I’m going to stick around Sussex because I’m living with my Dad now. But I’m not sure whether I’m going to go to the MET [Local FE college] to do Hair and Beauty first. So once I have finished that course, I can then go to university and have a job as a hairdresser whilst I am at uni.... I thought I’d get it to be a fall back whilst I’m at uni to earn money.

...‘I’ve always been quite interested to go somewhere I’ve never been before. I haven’t really looked at it because obviously I’m not going to go there anymore. I just thought it would be nice to go somewhere else away from where I’m used to, but I think I’ll be a bit more comfortable sticking with where I am’.

On one hand, it could be interpreted as highly strategic for Clara to gather a qualification that might secure a regular income to support future studies. On the other hand, while we do not have reliable data on those who enter HE directly after studying vocational courses in further education, this ‘extended’ route is likely to be atypical of those she’d meet on the, highly competitive, teaching courses offered at the local universities. In addition, her decision making around HE took place against a dominant concern about staying local to live with and support her family. Moreover, as Clara contemplates a move away, she is ‘haunted’ (Gordon, 2017) by associations of place drawing her back to where she feels she belongs. The complex factors at play in her decision making stood at odds with policy constructions of the strategic consumer of an educational product. For example, the underpinning narrative of the NCOP initiative is to understand which WP activities have the greatest ‘impact’ and, crucially here, impact is measured in terms of an individual’s likelihood of becoming a future student. In such recruitment and marketing dominated provision, WP becomes an input/output educational process, which is out of sync with supporting young people’s own choices as agentic decision makers in highly complex lives.
A further possible outcome of such an input/output WP model is an opportunity marketplace in which some and not others could thrive as idealised ‘targeted’ learners. This could occur at a targeting/policy level within universities, schools and colleges. For example, the marketisation of WP as described by commentators (Johnson et al. 2019) creates a ‘safe’ approach to WP practice that discourages working with those young people and staff who need it most. Instead WP practitioners can avoid risking investing in those for whom they do not feel confident that their efforts will translate into acceptance of a place and success at their institution. NCOP used the terminology of ‘quick wins’ for those learners who were likely to attend and who required only minimal intervention to produce this return on investment. These young people become idealised subjects of WP, the ones for whom the work ‘pays off’, rather than the more complicated cases, lives and experiences of those such as Clara. As WP becomes increasingly about measurability, it is seen as important that identifying value and success needs not to become buried only in measurable targets, with a concurrent risk that social justice agendas get left behind (Harrison & Waller, 2017).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we have argued that the particular targeting employed by NCOP of geo-demographic measures, and the surrounding socio-economic and policy climate, has shifted the imaginary of how these WP students are understood. The provision of targeted outreach that identifies and focuses on how intersections of geography and demography impact distance from HE, can imply the problem to have been addressed. Such an approach risks obscuring the persistence of more pervasive forces against HE progression beyond the individual or community levels, in our wider socio-economic and policy contexts. We have argued specifically that such a static reading of space and place using target postcodes results in scant attention being paid to the affective dimensions of transitioning into HE. Alongside more commonly understood concerns around debt and future employability, participants in our research, astutely expressed more affective anxieties around ‘risk’, ‘pressure’ and ‘fear’
as they narrated their educational decision making. These insights presented pictures of challenges to mental health and well-being. While outreach activities focused on grit and resilience ostensibly speak to recognition of this affective dimension to HE decision making; they can be seen as effectively undermining the legitimacy of such responses, through positioning the ‘good’ subject of outreach who demonstrates aspiration, grit and resilience in the face of adversity. The seemingly positive and empowering outreach message that everyone is capable of succeeding if they believe and apply themselves, overlooks that capabilities are a complex mix of external as well as internally composed resources, and that they are not evenly distributed (O’Shea, 2019). In contrast to dominant constructions of motivation and achievement within outreach discourse, we argue a persistent and powerful place for ‘affect’ as politically and socially located and experienced as embodied feeling and, consequently, something that cannot be reduced to an individualised and psychologised barrier that can simply be ‘thought away’. Finally, our readings of students’ affective worlds and complex lives stood at odds with policy constructions of the strategic consumer of an educational product. This created a context in which outreach opportunities similarly became an opportunity marketplace, where some and not others could thrive as ‘targeted’ learners, but with little space for concern to understand or address the complex structural barriers that prevent some from embracing and thriving in response to the educational opportunities on offer.

With this in mind we argue a pressing need for a new approach to outreach to more explicitly and sympathetically acknowledge and speak to the emotional realities of HE decision making. This involves attending to the complex interplay between structure, agency and serendipity in individual lives; forcing more sophisticated understandings of the potential of outreach, that redistributes responsibility for success and failure more equitably across stakeholders more widely from parents to policy makers, beyond polarised assumptions of students as agentic choosers decision-making within a vacuum in response to outreach advice. Such an assertion is far from value free; rather it is politically loaded in tapping into the ever bubbling but often obscured rub in WP between social justice and neo-liberal agendas. While we may strive to work together across stakeholder groups, the challenge remains to continue to search for creative and collaborative new practical approaches to bridge different aims and
understandings, to work effectively within the context of such diametrically informed agendas.

References


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i The regulatory body for higher education in the UK.

ii https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/ncop-two-years-on/

iii A UK Government initiative providing investment in UK widening participation between 2004-11.