Pictures on Water:
An Exploration of the Policy Cycle of Widening Participation Evaluation in English Higher Education

Benjamin Surinder Hart
Kellogg College, University of Oxford
Department of Education

DPhil Thesis
Michaelmas Term 2024

Acknowledgments

Though it is only my name that appears on the front of this thesis, it would not have been possible without a great many friends, mentors, and teachers over the years who have directly impacted my personal and intellectual journey (whether they know it or otherwise!), from influential teachers, particularly Russell Charlesworth, through to all those at OUEFC whose Monday night sessions provided a regular and needed break from thesis writing.

I am grateful to my supervisors, James Robson and Steve Strand, for their support throughout my thesis. James, for trusting me to pursue any intellectual avenue that interested me, and for the rich conversations that we had in supervisions. Steve, for keeping me on track and putting up with my 'flowery writing'(!). I was interviewed by Steve for entry to the MSc in 2018 and immediately afterwards, he told me how beautiful the Department is, being nestled next to University Parks. This is something that has stuck with me to this day and I write these acknowledgements whilst sat in the Parks under a tree, watching the cricket. Alongside my supervisors, Ariel Lindorff has been particularly influential throughout my time in Oxford as my lecturer, and subsequently as a colleague and friend. Her rigorous approach to research and sincere dedication to students are characteristics that I hope to emulate.

There are many people I feel lucky to have met throughout my Oxford journey, not all of whom can be mentioned, but all of whom were significant. Neal Hepworth, with whom I discovered EggBags and who has supported me with friendship from afar in Vermont. Ed Penn with whom I have worked both academically and professionally and who has been a thoroughly dependable friend. Antonin Charret, Tony, without whom this entire experience would have been significantly less enjoyable and less horizon-expanding, and on whom I have relied for his unwavering support in difficult times. Most importantly, to Mirna Šumatić, whose support, companionship, and intellectual stimulation made time spent in the ppu a cherished part of the DPhil – and of whom I am proud.

Finally, to my parents Ian and Ruby, for their unwavering support throughout both my educational journey and every other aspect of my life. Without them this would not have been possible, or even thinkable. My mother is forever my number one supporter, keeping me grounded even in difficult situations, and without her support I would not be the person I am today. My father opened my sociological imagination when I was young, exposing me to various sociological and philosophical thinkers, and frequently reminding me of the importance of making a difference through thinking: "Remember, Ben, as Marx said, philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it!". This thesis is for both of them.

Abstract

This thesis explores the complex and evolving landscape of widening participation to English higher education with a particular focus on the discursive construction of conceptualisations of widening participation at different levels - ranging from a sector wide focus to practitioners' own experiences. Widening participation is focused on as an example of the complex and dynamic way in which policies are enacted. In the context of an intensified focus on widening access, evidenced both by the significantly increased financial investment in the area, as well as strengthened widening participation policy activity, this thesis asks: 1. How is 'widening participation' discursively constructed by higher education institutions in England? 2. How do institutional differences influence institutional level widening participation discourses? 3. How do practitioners understand the discursive construction of widening participation? 4. What are the consequences for practitioners of widening participation discourses?

The empirical component of this thesis uses a mixed-methods approach which combines machine learning (topic modelling) analysis of a novel corpus – the Access Corpus – created for this thesis, and semi structured interviews with widening participation practitioners from five English universities. Analysis conducted on the Access Corpus indicates discursive shifts towards marketisation, increasingly prescriptive regulation, and 'scientific' language in widening participation discourses. It is discovered that discourses vary to a great extent by institutional *type*, and that high prestige institutions are less affected by changes to the higher education landscape. These findings accord with the policy cycle lens of this thesis which states that policy enactment is not simply a linear process but is instead a complex and dynamic process of negotiation and iteration mediated by institutional, regulatory, and practitioner factors.

The theoretical contribution of this research is located in the development of a novel conceptual framework, Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus (DICA). This provides an analytical framework for understanding how discursive shifts occur. In the DICA framework, distinct discourses interact with one another to create an emergent space in which new discourses are formed and older discourses are modified.

The implications of the empirical component of this thesis are described as: substantive, theoretical, methodological, and conceptual. These have implications for a multitude of actors across the field as they affect policy makers, universities, and widening participation practitioners. Recommendations include: effective training of practitioners; advocacy of precision in the use of technical and specific language; utilisation of sector wide insights into the widening participation field to inform the work of policy makers and practitioners; a plea for epistemic plurality in the widening participation space.

Contents

Chapter One: Introduction 6

Chapter Two: Literature Review 19

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods 48

Chapter Four: Understanding Widening Participation Discourses Through the Access Corpus 97

Chapter Five: Institutional Differences in the Access Corpus 165

Chapter Six – Part One: Practitioner Understandings of Widening Participation Discourses 204

Chapter Six – Part Two: Consequences for Practitioners of Discursive Construction of Widening Participation 229

Chapter Seven: Discussion and Synthesis of Findings 247

Chapter Eight: Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus 272

Chapter Nine: Conclusion 302

References 313

Appendices 341

Chapter One: Introduction

The first part of the title of this research - "Pictures on Water" - alludes to a footnote in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1954: 97). This contains a peripatetic reference "for dream pictures, like pictures on water, are distorted by movement" (Büchsenschütz, 1868: 65). In its original context, this simile is used to illustrate how the best interpreters of dreams are able to see the original 'picture' that the subconscious warps and projects onto the mind throughout the process of dreaming, simply by viewing the distorted and transformed result. Although this simile is taken from a highly specific context, this does not diminish its potential explanatory power when applied within other contexts. The message of distortion and transformation over time is not limited to the attempt to interpret dreams but can also be applied to the sphere of education policy. It is the task of this research to explore the nature, nuances, and dynamics of widening participation; to observe and note the ways in which policies and discourses change over time, and to examine the diverse ways in which different actors shape and bend, either consciously or subconsciously, policy meanings through their individualised interpretation of policies and documents within the context of wider discourses. One can view the dynamic interpretation and application of education policies as akin to 'pictures on water', distorted by their movement through the sector and the "rich underlife to policy intention" (Riseborough, 1993: 37).

One of the key changes to the higher education landscape over recent years can be observed in the tripling of tuition fees in 2012 when it was mandated that students be required to pay up to £9000 per year during their undergraduate degrees which is striking when compared to the previous charge of £3000 per year and the fact that at one point fees were non-existent (Andrews, 2021). Whilst the £9000 fee was intended as an 'upper limit', and that universities would be able to charge less than this, it was the case that they

almost unanimously adopted this figure: there was concern amongst institutions that if they decided to charge a lower rate of tuition fees, students would perceive the courses at that institution to be of lower quality compared to those that charged the upper limit. The perceived connection between the *price* of a commodity and its *quality* thus became a driver of the level of tuition fees that institutions felt were appropriate to charge their students, and it could be argued that at this point the grip of market concepts on higher education activities began to tighten with particular force.

This particular episode of commercial thinking which emphasises having regard for the practices of competitor institutions is part of a longer history of HE marketisation which arguably began in earnest with the introduction of tuition fees in the wake of the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997). In combination with the changes to student funding there developed an increasing culture of marketisation in the university system whereby degrees were increasingly regarded as a vital means for individuals to obtain a better paying job; this is a consideration affecting both students and institutions which became increasingly concerned about a number of key metrics (for example, graduate employability and student 'success' rates). Whilst contemporary discourses now tend to emphasise *primarily* the value of higher education in terms of providing the individual with access to professional levels of employment and higher paid jobs, this stands in contrast to discourses which highlight the benefits of HE in relation to its role as a public good (Marginson, 2011). In the latter case, higher education was viewed as a process of intellectual and personal development in which the individual student would increasingly acquire critical skills and the ability to 'think' whilst simultaneously developing their character and exploring their sense of personal identity. It was widely believed that such individuals would become more informed and active citizens within society and thereby be able to make more substantive

contributions to their communities and society in general. However, in contrast to this account it is comprehensively argued in the literature that increased marketisation in the higher education system has led to the prevalent view of the student as a consumer of goods (which are provided by the higher education institution) and that HE has become a means to an end whilst simultaneously becoming less valued as a process of intellectual and personal change for the individual student who is increasingly ascribed an instrumental motivation for pursuing higher education.

Another key change to the higher education landscape was the introduction of the current higher education regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), in 2018. The consequences of this development have been profound for the sector as a whole: universities are under more intense scrutiny to conform with a strict set of regulations concerning student access to, and participation in, higher education. In relation to widening participation, institutions are necessitated to produce an Access and Participation Plan when required by the Office for Students and this document must be approved by the regulator: if it is not approved, institutions may be financially penalised by the regulator. The increasingly prescriptive regulatory atmosphere that has developed in HE was critiqued by the House of Lords in their report "Must do better: The Office for Students and the looming crisis facing higher education" (House of Lords, 2023). The report stated that the relationship between the regulator and the government was too close, and that the OfS did not hold strong positive relationships with either institutions or students.

With increased scrutiny of their activities, institutions have been investing more human and financial resources into their widening participation departments. Indeed, the government states that around £900 million is invested by institutions annually: "in the

academic year 2015–16 universities and colleges invested £725.2 million in widening participation through access agreements…From academic year 2019–20, access and participation plans replace access agreements. Across the whole sector, in institutions with or without access agreements, the total spend was £883.5 million" (Parliament, 2018). There has been an increased focus both in the academic literature and in universities on the fact that unequal access to higher education is a significant social problem that must be solved: "despite over two decades of focus on widening participation by multiple governments, inequalities persist and students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to go to university than their more advantaged peers" (Bains *et al.*, 2024: 629). This, however, is by no means a new phenomenon since successive governments have sought to 'level the playing field' in higher education as evidenced through a range of initiatives such as Aimhigher (2004-2011), National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) (2014-2016), the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) (2017-2019) and, currently, UniConnect (2019-present). Each of these programmes have intended to address access gaps in higher education by facilitating cross-institutional collaboration between higher education institutions in geographical proximity. The amount of money pledged to these schemes has been significant, but declining, with £136 million received by Aimhigher in 2004 and £30 million received by UniConnect for the academic year 2023/2024.

What is perhaps a more recent phenomenon is the increasingly prescriptive approach to widening participation activities taken by the Office for Students which stands in contrast to the way in which the previous Office for Fair Access (OFFA) operated. An example of the more prescriptive approach can be seen where the OfS have mandated that widening participation evaluations *ought* to be conducted in particular ways and have sought to ensure that institutions increasingly strive to achieve more 'robust' data on the impact of their

efforts to widen participation. OfS policies increasingly link the task of producing more robust data on the success of widening participation activity with the adoption of 'scientific' techniques of inquiry. In particular, the promotion of specific evaluative techniques, such as Randomised Control Trials, has become increasingly prevalent and there is now a stronger focus on requiring institutions to use a range of metrics to ascertain or prove the success of their widening participation endeavours.

Given the current changed circumstances of higher education – where both market forces and the constraints of central regulation increasingly act upon the sector – emerging policies are likely to be viewed differently by various actors as they proceed through the policy cycle stages. Indeed, the process whereby policies proceed through different bodies, groups, and individual actors can create tensions, particularly where different parties have their own (differing) agendas and expectations. It is important to 'take stock' of the consequences of differing government regulatory bodies and the discursive shifts that have occurred over the past 20 years. Policy formulation itself is not a straightforward process and may involve a range of actors that shape the nature of its expression. Rarely is policy defined by single author homogenously, but rather it usually embodies the contributions of a number of individuals who approach the substantive issues addressed in diverse ways. There is a dynamic relationship between policy formulation and implementation and the range of actors grows significantly during the stages of implementation which is a complex and multifaceted phase of the policy cycle. It is important to note that the life of a policy is complex and shaped by a wide range of social, economic, and political factors operating at the sector, institution, and individual level. This thesis seeks to generate insights into each of these levels in order for us to understand more clearly how, in practice, policy processes are navigated. The main intended outcome of this research is to throw light upon processes

which are often opaque and this, in turn, has the potential to improve the way in which policy processes are implemented within higher education settings.

The research questions are:

1. How is 'widening participation' discursively constructed by higher education institutions in England?
2. How do institutional differences influence institutional level widening participation discourses?
3. How do practitioners understand the discursive construction of widening participation?
4. What are the consequences for practitioners of widening participation discourses?

The goals of this research – to gain a deeper insight into the widening participation policy process and, in turn, to investigate the discursive construction of widening participation and particularly its evaluation – are achieved through multiple methods which include corpus linguistic techniques, machine learning techniques (topic modelling), and qualitative semi-structured interviews. These methods, in combination, allow for both macro level and micro level understandings of both the discursive construction of widening participation (and its evaluation) *and* the impacts of these specific discursive constructions on widening participation practitioners across the higher education sector.

Several different theoretical frameworks permeate this thesis which reflect the different levels of discourse that are explored: semiotic, semantic, and individual. The three key frameworks which are utilised to a greater or lesser extent are: Discursive Integration of

Conceptual Apparatus; a refiguring and extension of Ogden and Richard's (1977) triangle of reference, and a policy cycle approach (Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992) – the Methodology and Methods chapter will further explain what is meant by these terms, and how they are used in later empirical analysis. These three theoretical tools aid in the research process and provide clarity about the way in which I approach both discourse and policy more broadly; Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus encompasses macro-level understandings of discursive shifts, the triangle of reference aids in an exploration of the semiotics and semantics of discourse, whilst the policy cycle and, in particular, recontextualization, helps to elucidate practitioner level hermeneutics – defined here as the active process by which individual actors ascribe meanings to concepts they utilise in carrying out intellectual and practical tasks. It should be noted that each of these frameworks is not similarly *active* in this research, meaning that, for example, Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus is developed and used in an active and explanatory way whereas the policy cycle is more *passive* and should be borne in mind as part of the backdrop of this research. The policy cycle approach is a lens through which this research is conducted, but is not necessarily referred to explicitly throughout the entirety of the research, whereas the Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus is foregrounded in discussions relating to understanding the findings of this research.

This research covers a number of key and essentially contested areas of widening participation endeavour such as: philosophical underpinnings, theory and practice, and structure vs agency, all viewed through the aforementioned theoretical and conceptual perspectives. The insights gained through the production and analysis of rich data create novel understandings of the discursive construction of the enterprise of widening

participation and widening participation evaluation and aims, through the production and analysis of rich data, to improve practice throughout the sector.

Rationale and Aims

Widening participation and its evaluation has increased in importance over the past 20 years, and particularly over the past 5 years as a more or less direct consequence of the introduction of the higher education regulatory body, the Office for Students. With an increasing amount of political focus on widening participation matters and very significant annual expenditure devoted to this undertaking it is important to fully understand the ways in which the sphere of widening participation operates on a discursive level, since this influences several factors which are necessary for its success, including, but not limited to: how policies are implemented; how money is spent; where departments use their resources; how the nature of 'success' is defined; and, ultimately, how successful the widening participation endeavour is.

The analysis and findings presented are particularly timely given the juncture in which we are presently situated: a fairly new government which is developing plans for the higher education sector and increased scrutiny on the workings and impact of the Office for Students which, a House of Lords report notes, can be regarded as both too close to government and as not establishing particularly effective relationships with universities and students. Indeed, the title of the House of Lords report encapsulates its critical appraisal: "Must do better: The Office for Students and the looming crisis facing higher education" (House of Lords, 2023).

The principal aim of this study is to provide insight into the complex and messy field of widening participation policy, practice and evaluation, from both an historical and a contemporary perspective. The results of this research have the potential to be of significant interest to policy makers, higher education institutions, practitioners, and academics working in this area, particularly in the context of an increase in the importance placed on both widening participation and on evaluation.

Enacting widening participation policy creates a number of challenges for institutions and practitioners, including those arising from understanding and interpreting policies in order to create the meanings which inform the actions comprising widening participation strategies. Interpretation and construction of meaning is a complex and dynamic process involving a range of institutional actors and this study aims to explore and analyse these processes at different levels (macro, meso, micro). As previously described, evaluation is critical to the Office for Students' view of how the widening participation agenda should continue to develop. The outcomes of widening participation evaluation have the potential to transform the ways in which widening participation programmes are carried out and it is therefore important to critically understand the effects and ramifications of policies and discourses as interpreted and acted upon by actors 'on the ground'.

The final contribution of this thesis is theoretical and conceptual and lies in the development of a theoretical framework entitled Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus. This seeks to understand how discourses change and shift over time and is applied to the findings of this research to explain *how* these discursive shifts have been affected. It should be noted that this framework is applicable beyond the bounds of the field of 'education' and may usefully be applied elsewhere. Some of the central tenets of

Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus include: a focus on the configurations of 'generic spaces' in different discursive landscapes which can align and allow for the synthesis of apparently distinct discourses; cross-space mapping of different components of distinct discourses; emergence of a blended space which is not an *addition* of the original two discourses, but is instead a space of its own with emergent properties and characteristics.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter One – Introduction starts the thesis with an explanation of the analogy "Pictures on Water" (from the title) which is a metaphor for policies as they proceed from inception through to enactment; both distorted by movement (through water / through the higher education system). Broad changes to the higher education landscape are discussed, with a focus being placed on the increasing pecuniary investment within the field of widening participation. The research questions are outlined, conceptual framework briefly explained, and rationale for the study justified. **Chapter Two – Literature Review** examines the historical and contemporary landscape of widening participation in higher education institutions in England. Considers ideological shifts in the landscape over the past 50 years, the impact of regulatory bodies, and debates around equity in education. Outlines key theories in widening participation, for example, Bourdieu's notion of habitus, 'small steps', and possible selves. **Chapter Three – Methodology and Methods** outlines the philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of this research. Describes the research design; a mixed methods approach which includes corpus linguistics, machine learning, and semi-structured interviews. Discusses the research questions and how the combination of methods allow for understandings at both the macro and micro level. **Chapter Four – Understanding Widening Participation Discourses Through**

the Access Corpus explores the discursive landscape of widening participation by analysing the Access Corpus – a novel dataset created as part of this DPhil thesis. Outlines the topics that are written about by universities over the past 20 years and, perhaps more importantly, how they change over time. Highlights themes such as: marketised language, regulatory influences, and scientific language. Discusses the implications of these discursive patterns. **Chapter Five – Institutional Differences in the Access Corpus** analyses differences in widening participation discourses across institutions by examining how institutional prestige shapes discourses. Discusses the impact of these differences on access initiatives; a focus is placed on regulatory and market pressure on institutions. Identifies key themes in the discourses of higher vs lower prestige institutions. **Chapter Six – Part One: Practitioner Understandings of Widening Participation Discourses** focuses on the perspectives of widening participation practitioners, examining how vastly different interpretations of language (often from policy documents) can be. This chapter explores how practitioners conceptualise their roles in the context of a higher education ecosystem which is shaped by regulatory pressures, institutional hierarchies, and multiple beliefs about the nature of widening participation. **Chapter Six – Part Two: Consequences for Practitioners of Discursive Construction of Widening Participation** examines the direct impacts of widening participation discourses on practitioners. Discusses challenges they face in their role, including conflicts, regulatory compliance, and hierarchical pressures. **Chapter Seven – Discussion and Synthesis of Findings** synthesises the findings from the empirical parts of this thesis and links them to the theoretical frameworks used in this thesis. Discusses the paradigm enforcement evident in the field of widening participation, the pressures of quantification and the ideology-driven approach of the OfS which not only has the potential to lead to scientism, but also leads to direct conceptual shifts in widening participation language. **Chapter**

Eight: Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus introduces a novel theoretical framework Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus which was developed as part of this thesis to help explain the ways in which discourses shift over time. Discusses DICA's potential applications far beyond the field of education and provides examples of these given that it provides a lens through which to understand discursive changes more broadly, in whichever domain. **Conclusion** provides an overview of the thesis' contributions to knowledge which can be split between: substantive, theoretical, methodological, and conceptual. Implications for practice are considered and detailed, and finally directions for future research are outlined.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Widening Participation (WP)

The English Higher Education system is weighted in favour of those from relatively privileged backgrounds (Chowdry et al., 2013) who are more likely to attend university (Younger *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, a UCAS report suggested that school-leavers who live in the highest-participation neighbourhoods are 2.4 times more likely to attend a higher education institution when compared to their peers who live in the lowest-participation neighbourhoods. This appears to be widely recognised by Higher Education Institutions in England where the agenda to 'level the playing field' can be observed through the existence and organised activities of their WP departments – although it should be noted that some institutions evidently have more ambitious WP targets than others. It would, however, be misleading to portray WP as solely an institution-led endeavour; national funding and regulatory bodies have played a large role, specifically HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) in the past and currently the Office for Students (OfS) where the latter requires individual HEIs to set WP goals and provide different levels of support – an issue discussed further on in this literature review. The size of this field is illustrated by the fact that in 2017-18 £248 million was spent on widening participation (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020).

WP is a broad term used to describe a number of processes and activities through which students from underrepresented groups are informed about the different benefits of a higher education experience and encouraged to attend HE institutions. A more formal definition can be found in government briefing papers: "Widening participation straregy [sic] aims to address discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different under-represented groups of students…[who] may face barriers to entry to higher

education. Widening participation schemes attempt to remove these barriers and improve access to education…" (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018: 3). Historically, WP activities have been run by university outreach teams which facilitate events such as Summer Schools, Visit Days, and Open Days (Lewis, 2002). However, more recently, cross-institutional consortia have emerged to provide collaborative based outreach activities. An example of this collaborative approach can be observed in the work of the NCOP (National Collaborative Outreach Programme) scheme whereby HEIs in local areas joined together and were funded to operate as a larger unit; for example, the NCOP that includes Oxford University is named "Study Higher" and includes 6 other universities.

Widening participation has, historically, been an ideologically driven, politically sensitive movement with its roots in the access to higher education agenda of the 1970s and 1980s (Hinsliffe-Smith, Gates, & Leducq, 2012). The principles underlying this agenda were inclusive and intended to support individuals who had not taken up (for various reasons) the opportunity to participate in level 3 courses (enabling access to HE) but for whom Higher Education could otherwise be regarded as an option: "Access to HE courses are targeted at those who have the ability to benefit from a course of HE but have not previously had the opportunity to do so…to meet the needs of those who may have few, if any, prior qualifications, or those whose education progress has been limited by their particular social or education circumstances" (QAA, 2007).

Though early Access to HE programmes were generally well received in education, in the 50+ years since their inception, the focus on *why* they are important seems to have shifted; this can, in large part, be explained by the increasing marketisation and neoliberalisation of English universities and the ascendancy of human capital theory (Becker, 1964). There

has been a marked shift from a largely social justice led movement in the 1970s, to a more economically minded movement in the present day (Marginson, 2019).

One of the key tenets of human capital theory is that education is a benefit for the individual who can expect a financial reward for their investment in pursuing education, that: "education drives the marginal productivity of labour and marginal productivity drives earnings" (Marginson, 2019). This view of education has been pervasive throughout the development of widening participation thinking and is often couched in terms of the neoliberalisation of higher education: "universities are now regarded in neoliberal policy as producers of knowledge and the products of knowledge that can enhance individual and collective human capital and so positively affect economic growth and development" (Patrick *et al.*, 2013: 3). Indeed, the historical origins of this view can be found in the writings of Adam Smith who promoted the idea of the 'invisible hand' of the state; in their self-interested development, individuals unintentionally also help society: "By pursuing his own interests he frequently promotes that of the society more effectively than when he really intends to promote it" (Smith, 1902: Book IV, Ch. 2, Par. IX). In the present context, those who hold this position suggest that higher education is an investment which leads to graduate jobs with increased earnings potential and the ability to be upwardly socially mobile. Though human capital theory has been comprehensively critiqued (see Marginson, 2019), it still has an effect on the ways in which widening participation is promoted in England.

Since WP's key policy inception in the 1970s there have been multiple major initiatives supported by governments; two relatively recent programmes are briefly outlined here: Aimhigher and NCOP. The most recent scheme - NCOP which started in 2017 - was

designed to promote the cross-pollination of ideas within larger groupings of higher education institutions; it is too early to fully analyse the successes of this project (which has subsequently been rebranded as Uni Connect). However, the key goal of this initiative is similar to many other WP projects: to reduce the gaps in higher education participation between different groups in society.

Aimhigher was a national programme introduced by the DfES (Department for Education and Skills) and initiated by HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) in 2004 with the broad aim of improving the opportunities available to students from disadvantaged backgrounds to progress into higher education: "originally conceived as a programme for increasing applications to higher education among a variety of socio-economic and geo-demographic groups that were generally constructed by government as having a 'poverty of aspirations'" (Harrison & Waller, 2017: 10). The programme was closed down in 2011 by the then Universities minister David Willetts who did not consider that the programme was achieving the desired results quickly enough (Willetts, 2008). This view (held by many in the government at the time, including the former prime minister, Boris Johnson (Sanders, 2006)) was based on a belief that the programme had not produced evidence of clear and direct impact (Gorard *et al.*, 2006) on the HE participation problem.

Increasing participation by under-represented groups in HE was central to the task of Aimhigher and it was assumed that this would have a corresponding effect on social mobility through access to the professions and the higher salaries and social positions that this would entail. It was further argued that the main constraining factor on HE participation among those from socially and economically disadvantaged communities was their lack of *aspiration* for higher education and that if this aspirational deficit could be

addressed then the numbers entering HE would be positively transformed. However, since the time of Aimhigher there has been an increasing focus on the importance of *attainment* as a fundamental factor affecting the predisposition of individuals to participate in higher education (Harrison and Waller, 2018). Put simply, unless the educational qualifications required for entry to higher education are achieved then even very high levels of aspiration will not be sufficient to enable participation. There is also growing recognition that the level of educational attainment at 16 (GCSE or equivalent) or 18 years ('A' level or equivalent) is itself strongly influenced by socio-economic factors which affect the individual's educational journey from the very early stages: "Given that differences in attainment can explain much of the participation gap, and that these arise early, there is a lack of evidence on the impact of interventions happening earlier in the student life cycle" (Robinson and Salvestrini, 2020: 5).

It can be argued that the emphasis that programmes like Aimhigher placed upon increasing access to HE *per se* tended to underestimate the significance of type of institution attended. All HE institutions are not the same and the consequences for the individual's progression to top professions and higher graduate salaries varies significantly according to the university attended: "High-status universities, such as the Russell Group and universities established before 1992, typically have higher earning graduates" (Belfield, 2018: 6). Increasing participation to HE for those from under-represented groups needs to be considered alongside the issue of access to higher status institutions because of the implications of this for subsequent graduate level earnings and also entry to higher status professions. However, access to higher status universities for those from disadvantaged backgrounds is problematic (Boliver, 2013) even when identical qualifying grades have been achieved. It is therefore important to ask whether institutions are evaluating not only their success in widening

participation to HE as such, but also facilitating access to traditionally selective universities as this factor has a bearing upon issues of social mobility and social justice.

Widening Participation does not simply mean access, though, and it must be acknowledged that there are several other key debates which occur frequently in this domain. Academic research has investigated the *outcomes* of students from underrepresented background when they do gain access to higher education institutions, and in particular, elite higher education institutions. One key study provides evidence which suggests that students from "blue-collar households" performed less well compared to their "white-collar" peers at the University of Bristol (Hoare & Johnson, 2011: 32). There is also an issue in relation to 'progression', it has been found that students from underrepresented backgrounds are more likely to 'drop out' of their degree programme for whatever reason: "Drop-out rates are higher among minority ethnic groups (combined) than for White students...The gap in drop-out rates between male and female students was greater for those from more deprived areas, with male students from more deprived areas more likely to drop out" (Parliament, 2021). In recent years, discourses about fair access to higher education institutions have become increasingly focused on issues pertaining to *race* in higher education.

Policy Enactment

This section discusses the disorganisation and dislocations that often emerge from the process of policy enactment with a specific focus on plurality of interpretations, and primary/secondary adjustments (Riseborough, 1993). This area of study is a vitally important, yet rather undeveloped, area of widening participation and whilst some of the literature explored must necessarily be directly related to policy enactment in the domain

of widening participation, often critical discussions relating to policy enactment in other fields are equally useful.

Though often assumed to be a straightforward process, the creation of policies and policy documents is a multi-layered process which involves a range of actors at various levels of seniority playing key roles. Given that multiple authors, with numerous and unique underlying assumptions, contribute to the creation of policies, the final policy document that emerges can be seen as the conclusion of a complex and messy process. Indeed, recognition of the internal conflict that policy formation usually entails is important in attempting to create an accurate understanding and interpretation of the meaning of policy documents; "The texts are the product of compromises at various stages (at points of initial influence, in the micropolitics of legislative formulation, in the parliamentary process and in the politics and micropolitics of interest group articulation)" (Ball, 1993: 10). The very fact that many individuals are often involved in the creation of an education policy means that an unambiguous, fully internally coherent set of prescribed statements is often hard to find and, therefore, in such a context meanings can easily become contestable and open to varying interpretations.

The complexities and compromises that are masked in final policy documents are compounded by the ways in which they are subsequently interpreted. Policy documents are read by individuals in different positions of seniority, with different job roles, and with different predispositions and perspectives. The policy enactment process is made more complex by a plethora of unique interpretations: "for any text a plurality of readers must necessarily produce a plurality of readings" (Codd, 1998: 239). Policy is not enacted in isolation from other forces; it is created and interpreted in the world, and thus carries with

it the unevenness manifested within that world (Ball, 1993: 11). Indeed, policy analysis can fail at an early stage if it does not appreciate the extent to which documents are mediated by their readers' positionality; "Policy scholarship resists the tendency of policy science to abstract problems from their relational settings by insisting that the problem can only be understood in the complexity of those relations." (Grace, 1995: 3).

It is not possible to achieve a comprehensive understanding of a policy by looking at textual statements in isolation. Indeed, policy documents often make more sense when they are contextualised both historically and politically; from a Foucauldian perspective, the unities that bound such a document as an atomised text should be suspended which would allow that "an entire field is set free" (Foucault, 2002: 29). By viewing such documents as part of an *oeuvre* one can explore more clearly the underlying discourse (Carusi, 2021). The idea that texts can, and should, be viewed as part of wider discourse is further explicated as follows: "what tends to be excluded in policy science research is the relation of surface social phenomenon to the deep structure of historical, cultural, political, ideological and value issues" (Grace, 1995: 3).

When policy documents are distributed and filter down for enactment through organisational structures, it is important to remember that meanings are necessarily mediated by the particular positions that actors hold. Those who receive the document at the very senior levels of a 'knowledge chain' may, for example, choose to summarise the key points for communication within the organisation (Wallace, 1988); even if the document is widely circulated, individual practitioners may decide that they do not need to read it themselves. One key piece of research indicates that often "some texts are never even read first-hand" (Ball, 1993: 12). Clearly the interpretation of texts is unpredictable

and it is not simply the case that the outcomes of policy documents can be predicted by conducting a textual analysis; texts are the progenitor of conflict which is unique to each specific circumstance, and which determines the nature of response to policy (Offe, 1984). Indeed, there are parallels to be drawn between discussions relating to policy interpretation and the Gricean meaning/use distinction (Grice, 1957).

More recent literature in relation to the enactment of policy within widening participation has explicitly noted the gap that exists in research; "In-depth analysis of the role of practitioners in policy enactment is an unresearched gap" (Rainford, 2021: 3). Rainford's paper is useful in the way that it builds upon debates concerning the aims of widening participation practice (i.e. should it be to benefit the student or the institution), and it attempts to focus on the configuration of individuals as i. transgressive or compliant, and ii. institution focussed or individual focussed. The paper suggests (although the idea is not significantly developed) that practitioners' experience levels within widening participation may mediate the extent to which they are transgressive: as people gain more experience, they become more empowered in performing their job would perhaps be an obvious, but important, conclusion to draw. There are also several key details missing such as the different levels of seniority of individuals; it is clear from this research that attempting to explain such complex ideas, to "conceptualise their [participants'] orientations to policy enactment" (Rainford, 2012: 3), through overlaying a simple metric (transgressive or compliant) is insufficient for creating insightful inferences.

Other recent research has attempted to explain how processes of policy enactment propagate the perpetuation of university hierarchies; for example, though conducted only in a Welsh context, Evans *et al.* (2019) explored how the contextually contingent nature of

policy interpretation (and enactment) can help to explain the continuation of these hierarchies. The important conclusions of this research suggest that higher status universities target younger 'traditional' students, whereas lower status universities target older 'non-traditional' students. The theoretical underpinnings of this research, particularly relating to discursive construction, will provide fruitful material for this DPhil project.

There are, of course, alternative approaches to the study of policy which do not take such an overtly Foucauldian lens. One such approach explicates the agency of individuals within the policy process who can act as a 'policy entrepreneur'; this approach developed out of the multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 1984). Cairney notes that policy entrepreneurs are able to effectively appeal to policy makers to allow their solution to a problem to be foregrounded in resultant policy: "Policymakers have to ignore most policy problems and most ways to understand and solve them. When their attention lurches to a problem, it is too late to produce a new solution… [policy entrepreneurs are] like surfers waiting for a 'big wave', but in small subsystems they can be like Poseidon moving the 'streams'" (Cairney, 2018: 200). This approach to policy still maintains the underlying theme of *irrationality* and *contingent* policymaking and enactment which is also discussed by Ball, but perhaps places even more of an emphasis on creative agentic action. Indeed, it is argued that policymakers must, by necessity, focus their energies on a finite number of issues and solutions and make decisions without always fully understanding the issues they are addressing (Cairney & Kwiatkowski, 2017).

Higher Education Regulator

For a more comprehensive understanding of the higher education regulatory landscape, the timeline below illustrates a few of the key moments of flux over the past 20 years:

2004 – Regulatory Body: HEFCE

2004 – Higher Education Act

2004 – Creation of OFFA

2006 – Introduction of variable tuition fees

2010 – Publication of the Browne Report

2011 – End of Aimhigher

2012 – Tuition fees increased to £9000 per year

2015 – Removal of the cap on student numbers

2017 – Introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework

2017 – Higher Education and Research Act (designed to: "create more competition and choice that will promote social mobility; boost productivity in the economy; ensure students receive value for money from their investment in higher education; strengthen the UK's research and innovation sector" (Department for Education, 2016))

2018 – End of HEFCE

2018 – Introduction of the Office for Students

The regulation of the higher education system has clearly changed substantially over the past 20 years; this is evident in the change in regulatory body from the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to the Office for Students (OfS). One of the key differences between these two bodies is in the amount of power that they hold over institutions. Whilst OFFA did not have powers to sanction institutions and appeared to institutions to be more advisory, the Office for Students, in contrast, has significant amounts of power to sanction institutions based on its own criteria. The OfS can evaluate, monitor, and oversee institutional performance in several distinct domains and, based on its evaluation, monetarily punish

institutions if they deem that the institutions are not performing to the requisite standard. Indeed, the ability to intervene in the higher education landscape in such an overt way is clearly a marked shift in the *type* of regulatory atmosphere that prevailed when OFFA existed; there is a clear move from the *soft* power of OFFA, to the *hard* power of the OfS.

It has been argued that this 'hard power' that the OfS wields is potentially exploitable by the central government who have placed pressure (soft, or hard) on the regulatory body: "It is clear that the OfS has not sufficiently prioritised the promotion of student choice as originally intended, and this has been exacerbated by a rapid turnover of Ministers whose personal political priorities have led to distractions and mission creep into areas which are not essential to the functioning of the higher education market, e.g. freedom of speech, sexual misconduct." (Parliament, 2023). This is particularly alarming given that the OfS is intended to be an arm's length body; a part of the machinery of government that is independent from ministers within the government, but still attached. Thus, the accusations that the OfS acts under the influence of ministers and MPs signals concern that the mission and aim of the OfS are under threat.

The House of Lords report, mentioned in the introduction, further supports the concerns that the OfS is not acting as originally envisioned. The report is damning with regards to the impartiality of the Office for Students, as can be seen from the two quotations below:

"The OfS is a non-departmental public body and, in theory, operates with a degree of independence from the Government. Under HERA, the OfS is not to be regarded as "the servant or agent of the Crown". The Act's explanatory notes also state that the OfS will operate at "arms length" from the Government" (House of Lords, 2023: 77)

"The DfE's guidance to the OfS is often specific about what the Government wants the OfS to do, in contrast to other models this Committee has observed in its scrutiny of other regulators…by way of example, the Government's guidance to the OfS on strategic priorities for the financial year 2022-23 explicitly says the OfS should include its approach to dealing with sexual harassment "in a condition of registration as soon as possible"" (House of Lords, 2023: 78).

These quotes effectively encapsulate the current state-of-play of higher education regulation in the UK higher education sector, which is clearly experiencing a moment of instability.

The Rise of a Science Society

There has been an increasing focus on 'science' and 'scientific methods' in the field of education for a number of years now, this is perhaps best illustrated through the example of Ben Goldacre's foray into the field of education in a 2013 Department of Education paper entitled "Building Evidence into Education" (Goldacre, 2013). Goldacre's essential argument is that the teaching profession should take the same route as the medical profession, and start conducting Randomised Control Trials, which is the "only" way to "find out what works best" (Goldacre, 2013: 4). Whilst potentially well intended, the document is filled with statements which diminish the expert role of teachers and those working in education, for example:

"I think there is a huge prize waiting to be claimed by teachers. By collecting better evidence about what works best, and establishing a culture where this evidence is used as a matter of routine, we can improve outcomes for children…" (Goldacre, 2013: 4)

"There are many differences between medicine and teaching, but they also have a lot in common. Both involve craft and personal expertise, learnt over years of experience. Both work best when we learn from the experiences of others, and what worked best for them. Every child is different, of course, and every patient is different too…" (Goldacre, 2013: 4)

"We need academics with quantitative research skills from outside traditional academic education departments – economics, demographers, and more – to come in and share their skills" (Goldacre, 2013: 15)

The above quotations, and indeed the rest of the report, can seem like the teaching profession are being preached to by a 'doctor on high', who knows all of the answers – other fields should simply follow medicine and do exactly as they do. The document can be seen as lacking both nuance *and* knowledge of the education system, not to mention the evidence of ignorance of social science research more broadly. The document does, however, provide a perfect example of epistemic trespass.

Epistemic trespass is usefully defined as follows: "Epistemic trespassers are thinkers who have competence or expertise to make good judgements in one field, but move to another field where they lack competence – and pass judgment nevertheless" (Ballantyne, 2019: 367). Some key examples are provided in Ballantyne's paper which include a novel prize winning Chemist who later stated that mega-doses of vitamin C could cure diseases such as cancer; and a famous evolutionary biologist who poses as an expert on religion and theology. Another example of epistemic trespass can be seen in the move of Ben Goldacre

into the education sphere; his competencies in the field of medicine and public health do not appear to equate to a competency in the totally distinct field of education research.

The influence of 'scientific thinking' in the social sciences is by no means a new phenomenon, and the nascent social sciences included key debates about the nature of inquiry in the social world – we can see in this in the competing views of two of the 'forefathers' of sociology: Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. The most recent manifestation of this pressure on the social sciences to emulate the 'successful' methods of the *hard* sciences can be seen in the proliferation of not only the What Works? ideology, but also concretely in What Works? centres which emphasise the need for hard evidence and 'rigorous' methods of inquiry – an ideal, broadly speaking, which does not appear to be opposed by many. What is contested, however, is the meaning of hard evidence and rigorous methods in this context. The What Works? centre for higher education is entitled Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (more commonly referred to as TASO), whose aims are as follows "Our vision is to eliminate equality gaps in higher education. Our mission is to improve lives through evidence-informed practice in higher education" (TASO, 2024).

One of the key critiques of the What Works ideology is published by Biesta and can be distilled into three key strands: "first, the extent to which educational practice can be compared to the practice of medicine, the field in which evidence-based practice was first developed; second, the role of knowledge in professional actions, with special attention to what kind of epistemology is appropriate for professional practices that wish to be informed by the outcomes of research; and third, the expectations about the practical role of research implicit in the idea of evidence-based education" (Biesta, 2007: 1). These arguments are

supported by a call for a values-based approach to education; whilst there is not enough room to expand on this concept here, more information can be found in Biesta's 2010 article: Why 'What Works' Still Won't Work: From Evidence-Based Education to Value-Based Education (Biesta, 2010).

The increasing focus on the superiority of the 'scientific method' must also be problematised given the mischaracterisation of science and the history of science. Indeed, it can be argued that there is no *singular* and *unified* scientific method given that the history of science is filled with discoveries and breakthroughs that were the result, not of a careful application of a unified scientific method, but instead because of contingent circumstances, and random accidents. One of the many examples of this type of breakthrough can be seen in the discovery of the first antibiotic, penicillin, which occurred only because a bacterium managed to make its way into a petri dish (unintentionally). Clearly this is a one off discovery that does not necessarily say anything about the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of the *scientific method* but the sheer number of breakthroughs in the natural sciences that were not helped by the *scientific method* is vast. It has been suggested that even since 1900, a significant number of key scientific breakthroughs did not utilise a classical *scientific method* "25% of all discoveries since 1900 did not apply the common scientific method (all three features) – with 6% of discoveries using no observation, 23% using no experimentation, and 17% not testing a hypothesis" (Krauss, 2024: 112).

These observations have even led to the strong argument that the only scientific method is in fact *no* method, this is the argument made by Feyerabend in *Against Method* (1988): "science is much closer to myth that a scientific philosophy is prepared to admit. It is one of the many forms of thought that have been developed by man, and not necessarily the

best…it is inherently superior only for those who have already decided in favour of a certain ideology, or who have accepted it without ever having examined its advantages and its limits" (Feyerabend, 1988: 295).

Evaluation

It can be seen from the preceding discussions that the issue of evaluation is one that is relatively long-standing within the history of widening participation; this applies equally in the case of the direct evaluation of the impact of individual higher education institution programmes and also with respect to national initiatives such as Aimhigher. However, in recent years, discourses surrounding the evaluation of widening participation have taken on a renewed vigour; this is in large part due to the policy stances adopted by the Office for Students (OfS).

The OfS website contains several evaluation tools that can potentially be used by HEIs, one of which aims to show institutions "whether their evaluation plans and methodologies go far enough to generate high quality evidence about the impact of activities in their Access and Participation Plans" (OfS, 2019). The current emphasis on comprehensive evaluation coincides with the introduction of Access and Participation Plans (APPs), which require every higher education provider to provide information about how they will support widening participation and equality of opportunity within their organisation. These plans are mandatory for HEIs since, if they do not receive approval from the OfS, they may no longer charge their students the 'higher' rate of fees. Not being able to charge higher rate fees to students would have a dramatic and significantly detrimental effect on the financial health of HE institutions. It is clear from the pronouncements of the OfS

outlined above that evaluation is at the heart of their vision for the future of the widening participation agenda.

The recent surge of interest in evaluation has in a sense been precipitated by a number of *how* and *why* questions concerning the impact of widening participation interventions; there is a concerted effort to determine which interventions are effective and should be promoted and, ultimately, funded. In spite of this, and perhaps because widening participation has its roots in social justice, practitioners can become territorial and show adherence and loyalty to methods they have used historically and have come to regard as most appropriate from experience. The key problem here is that practitioner views on what is best practice often vary; both when looking at how interventions should be evaluated, and the precise nature of the intervention itself. This quandary is not aided by the obfuscation created by unreliable data (Passy & Morris, 2010). In one key piece of research, a widening participation practitioner noted that: "you've always got enthusiasts who want to do the sorts of activities that they enjoy. Some things go down well because they fit in better with the school timetable and ethos…rather than because they are necessarily effective" (Harrison & Waller, 2017: 18).

One of the key debates within the field of evaluation concerns the extent to which evaluation procedures *should* and *do* include one's own values. Since evaluators are necessarily located within a structure of some sort and are *in the world,* it can reasonably be assumed that they will naturally be afflicted by certain biases. If they do not acknowledge this, it may ultimately be to the detriment of the success of the evaluation project: "evaluators sometimes tend to see themselves as outside the real world, in a kind of protected, buffered space where common biases and pressures do not affect them. In being

unaware they are vulnerable" (House, 2015: 65). It may be useful here to think about a concrete example of how values inadvertently affect even our routine day to day judgements; if an individual walks into a pub and is tasked afterwards with describing the scene witnessed, they would not be able to include in their account every last detail. Rather, they must necessarily abstract what they deem to be the most important and salient aspects (Krathwohl, 1980). This principle also holds for evaluators who must decide on what to report, what questions should be asked, what methods would be the most suitable – all of which are framed and conditioned by the evaluator's values. Values are thus at the core of evaluation and in no way inimical to its aims as long as there is awareness and recognition of the inevitable constraints on researcher 'objectivity'. It is important to understand the core philosophical assumptions that underpin evaluation practice, such as those relating to the role of values in evaluation, in order to successfully align theory and practice.

The Language of Widening Participation

This section deepens further the ideas of policy interpretation, but focusses more specifically on the nature of language and conceptualisations within widening participation discourse. First, the nature of a 'concept' is discussed and, second, the distinction between meanings and use is explored. Language is the means through which policy is communicated whether this is in the form of written policy statements and guidance or in the form of debates and discussions between practitioners.

Conceptualisations necessarily inform all forms of policy articulation and their interpretation takes place within contexts which affect their 'reading' and understanding. For example, current widening participation evaluation policy signals the importance of striving for increasingly robust evidence of which activities are to count as successful in the

task to widen participation to HE. However, defining success in this context is critical and may vary according to standpoint: does 'success' mean simply increasing the number of under-represented students in HE or does it mean increasing the proportion of under-represented students attending higher status universities? Moreover, what is to count as more 'robust' evidence? It may be that the most robust evidence – demonstrating *causation* – is more problematic in practice than might be assumed from the emphasis that seems to be placed by the OfS upon the value of methods such as randomised control trials. Examining the way in which concepts are used and defined throughout different aspects of the policy context is important and needs to encompass official documents as well as the interpretation and understanding of actors involved in its implementation.

A number of conceptual ideas form key strands that bind together much widening participation discourse; yet the idea of a 'concept' is often assumed to be present as tacit knowledge. It is important to understand how conceptual terms are utilised, for example 'widening participation', 'success', 'access and outreach', 'evaluation'. An individual's understanding of the world is necessarily mediated by their sense-data - sight, taste, smell etc. As such, the world in which we live and move is, in Schopenhauerian terms, *representation* (Schopenhauer, 1958). If we were to take a material perspective, we would simply be ignoring our own mental processes that lead to our theorisations: "For materialism is the philosophy of the subject who forgets to take account of himself" (Schopenhauer, 1967: 29).

With the above in mind, the world of representations can be seen as a continuum of abstraction; the closer to our sense data an idea is, the more easily it is captured, and the more likely it is that our interpretation of this object is shared with other people. We can

point at more concrete phenomena, such as, for example, a rock, yet we cannot point to other less tangible items, for example 'justice' and 'virtue'. Thus, it can be argued that for every concept used in describing the world there are a range of interpretations and that more abstract concepts necessarily have an increased range of interpretations: "every concept, just because it is abstracted representation, not representation of perception, and therefore not a completely definite representation, has what is called a range, an extension, or a sphere, even in the case where only a single object corresponding to it exists" (Schopenhauer, 1958: 42).

In much the same way as the concept of a 'game' is nebulous, and yet most people would readily claim to know what is meant by the term, the same may also hold true of concepts like 'widening participation' and associated terms. There is not necessarily one characteristic that is shared by 'games' and yet individuals find it a more or less readily identifiable concept: "And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" (Wittgenstein, 1953: 32). This *familienähnlichkeit* (family resemblance) between different conceptualisations may not be experienced as problematic on a day to day basis, but it may be the source of great confusion when it comes to practitioner and policy decision making. This is compounded in widening participation work by the overlaying of increasingly complex and abstracted ideas within the discourse, for example social class, cultural capital, socio-economic disadvantage and gender. It is therefore argued that it is necessary to further examine the ways in which individual conceptualisations of key terms within the field are understood and the implications of this for widening participation practice.

An important distinction to make in relation to the texts of widening participation is between meaning and use. As discussed earlier, the link between a policy text and an outcome of that text cannot simply be 'read off' the document itself unambiguously. The text is mediated by multiple actors whose interpretations may lead to various primary and secondary interpretations (Goffman, 2017). Indeed, the gap between meaning and use can be significant in some cases and has implications for the successful alignment of theory and practice; both for practitioners and for policy makers. Grice posits that context is one of the key factors in interpreting actions: "in cases where there is doubt, say, about which of two or more things an utterer intends to convey, we tend to refer to the context (linguistic or otherwise) of the utterance and ask which of the alternatives would be relevant to other things he is saying or doing" (Grice, 1957: 387). As outlined previously, texts are interpreted within the context in which they are read and, therefore, the alignment between theory and practice has the potential to be skewed through this additional dimension of complexity. In light of the duality present within texts (mentioned above) we can apply this thinking to recent findings (e.g. Evans *et al.*, 2019) that have suggested the process of policy enactment perpetuates university hierarchies and note that this could be related to the specific ways in which policy documents are interpreted in universities in particular mission groups.

A review of the literature relating to language use within widening participation would not be complete without mentioning the use of 'causation'. More recently there has been a shift towards issues concerning the relative merits of different evaluative methods; institutions appear to be particularly keen to establish a *causal* link between their outreach activities and the resulting participation in higher education of underrepresented groups. The search for

a method that can provide a causal inference from which one can measure the impact of outreach activities has led some practitioners to pilot Randomised Control Trials (RCTs).

Debates concerning the ways in which evaluative policies should be framed within the context of widening participation have their foundations in the philosophy of science (Cook *et al.*, 2010). Specifically, in relation to epistemological positions that are suited to gathering the most useful kinds of information (again, a contested issue). In very recent times, there has been a strong emphasis in support of the introduction of Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) in education (Goldacre, 2013) and it can be seen that the domain of widening participation evaluation has also been included (Crockford *et al.*, 2017)

The current pressure towards more 'rigorous' methods of evaluation has been clear since the formation of the OfS in 2018; this is evidenced in documentation designed to help universities decide which methods are most effective in evaluating their WP activities: "Evaluations utilising longitudinal tracking, regression discontinuity design (RDD), and RCTs are some of the stronger designs. RCTs have the highest evidential results" (OfS, 2019). Whilst an alternative point of view has been put forward in the debate - arguing that establishing causality is often complex and may be impossible in many circumstances – there remains an emphatic drive in the direction of types of research design that aim to show causation. Indeed, the types of evidence suggested (apparently from least rigorous to most rigorous) are: Type 1: Narrative, Type 2: Empirical, Type 3: Causality (which includes RCTs) (OfS, 2019: 2). What particularly stands out in this discourse is the relatively uncritical use of the term causality. Not only is it assumed that evidencing causality can, and should, be the goal of evaluative research in widening participation, perhaps more contentiously, it is further assumed that RCTs are both desirable and

possible within the context of widening participation evaluation. The branch of philosophy concerned with causality has a rich history and a contested present which is simply not reflected in present day debates addressing the evaluation of HE widening participation programmes.

Theories in Widening Participation

Several theories and theorists dominate the field of widening participation – notably, the key theorist is Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu is used in some way or another in significant amounts of the widening participation literature; particularly, the concepts habitus, field, and cultural capital are leant upon heavily in contemporary discourses and, indeed, have been for decades. Other theories which have more recently gained traction include possible selves, and small steps. These three key theoretical usages are explained in this subsection through exploring key papers which utilise them.

One of the key papers that uses possible selves, and indeed, which could be argued to have popularised the theory as relevant and usable in the widening participation context was published in 2018 and entitled: Using the Lens of 'Possible Selves' to Explore Access to Higher Education: A New Conceptual Model for Practice, Policy, and Research (Harrison, 2018). Interestingly, the paper introduces the concept of possible selves in the context of what the author believes to be the 'deficit thinking' found in universities' attempts to raise the aspirations of disadvantaged students: "it is increasingly understood that aspiration-raising is unable to explain patterns of participation and that it risks 'blaming the victim' by failing to appreciate the structural constraints forged through their sociocultural context." (Harrison, 2018: 209). In this context, a possible selves approach is viewed as an alternative, which seeks to "explain how we all conceive and develop visions of ourselves

in future states. These images create a motivational impetus for actions in the present in order to achieve a like-to-be self – or evade a like-to-avoid self" (Harrison, 2018: 209). Indeed, it is interesting to think about what is *added* by an approach focussing on the *expectations* of actors as opposed to the *aspirations* of actors. It may be argued that the premise of both of these approaches is 'deficit thinking' given that they both presuppose that disadvantaged students' mindsets needs changing for them to more successfully access higher education; having said this, and despite potential deficiencies as a *theoretical* tool, there are perhaps effective uses as a *practical* reflective exercise which asks students to think about their possible selves. Indeed, several recent papers have been published which take a possible selves approach to widening participation (Rainford, 2023; Jones *et al.*, 2022).

The second notable theoretical development in the widening participation sphere concerns widening participation evaluation specifically and is entitled 'small steps'. Based on Pawson & Tilley's 'realistic evaluation' (Pawson & Tilley, 1997), this approach to evaluation attempts to move away from the traditional approaches of tracking and trials in widening participation evaluation: "This is intended to signal a partial rejection both of long-term tracking (although this may have value for understanding key junctures at which change occurs) and of unwieldy and over-engineered trials (although they may have some value in evaluating short-term activities)." (Harrison & Waller, 2017: 85). It is proposed that there should be five key tenets to evaluation which include: "Articulation of a clear theory of change…Criticality about causality…Criticality about measurement…Using appropriate timescales…A focus on educational disadvantage…" (Harrison & Waller, 2017: 85). This approach is not highlighted in this literature review for any originality in thinking that it shows, or indeed for any envisaged potential field-changing contribution, but instead

because it has been picked up by others within the field and has been used in several published journal articles

Having said this, the usage of 'small steps' in these articles does not necessarily signify any particular added value that should be associated with the approach given that the principles of small steps are often violated. An example of this can be seen where, in the conclusion of one article, which heavily draws upon small steps, it is stated that "However, for widening participation interventions, programme theory may be more appropriate as it emphasises the 'causal links between the mechanisms released by an intervention and their anticipated outcomes' (Blamey and Mackenzie 2007, 445)" (Pickering, 2021: 126) this is directly in opposition to Harrison and Waller's statement that one of the *key* tenets of small steps evaluation is "criticality about causality" (Harrison & Waller, 2017: 85)

The final key theories often used in the field of widening participation were formulated by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and are entitled: habitus, field, and cultural capital. The ubiquity of Bourdieu citations in widening participation literature, but also generally in the field of educational sociology is illustrated by the fact that if you search "Bourdieu" in one of the key journals relating to the sociology of education (British Journal of Sociology of Education), 831 journal articles are returned with 40 being from only the past year (accessed October 2024). Of the three key Bourdieusian contributions to widening participation discourses, habitus is the most prevalent. Its prevalence, however, does not mean that there is a clear and unified definition; the best attempt at this can be found in Diane Reay's work where she explains (by use of the Bourdieu quotes below) that a few of the key tenets of habitus include (Reay, 2004):

Embodiment of habitus: "A socialised body. A structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world" (Bourdieu, 1998: 81).

Individuals providing some agency, but a *constrained* agency: "The habitus, as a system of dispositions to a certain practice…the effect of the habitus is that agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances" (Bourdieu, 1990: 78).

Habitus as constituted by individual and collective experiences: "the subject is not the instantaneous ego of a sort of singular cogito, but the individual trace of an entire collective history" (Bourdieu, 1990: 91).

These key notions which Diane Reay uses to help constitute the concept 'habitus' (Reay, 2004) provide a basis for an understanding of the term by using primary materials from Bourdieu himself. One of the pitfalls of the use of Bourdieu can be found in the widespread uncritical deployment of complex conceptual terms like habitus, indeed Reay's paper which explains so clearly the idea of habitus is entitled: "'it's all becoming a habitus': beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research". Given that this was published in a high profile journal 20 years ago and has been cited hundreds of times, one would perhaps expect the trend of using Bourdieu uncritically to provide legitimacy to research to have curtailed somewhat – there is no evidence of this. This is not to say that Bourdieusian concepts have no place in the widening participation literature, but it is to say that its use has been so ritualised within the field that the importance of the concepts

has perhaps been diminished through overuse; many of the key tenets of habitus, for example, are violated in its use in much of the literature.

Conclusion

This literature review has outlined key contextual information and prominent debates within the area of widening participation more generally and in terms of the evaluation of widening participation activity more specifically. From broad discussions about the history and nature of widening participation, it proceeded to explore the nature of policy enactment, emphasising the contextual and structural nature of its interpretation. Finally, it concluded with an explication of language use within widening participation. Policy enactment within widening participation is an undertheorised and undeveloped area of education research, and this literature review has uncovered a number of theoretical and empirical gaps. Research is particularly lacking in relation to a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms of policy enactment, and how the messy use of language within broader widening participation discourses are a potentially obfuscating force working against the well-intentioned actions of widening participation practitioners. This DPhil thesis attempts to fill some of the key gaps in research by focussing on *how* widening participation is constructed by institutions and actors within the field, and thus how widening participation policy is enacted within institutions. This includes a focus on, for example: the nature of the conceptualisations of key terms, how institutional actors navigate their roles, and the alignment between theory and practice.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

Research Questions

1. How is 'widening participation' discursively constructed by higher education institutions in England?
2. How do institutional differences influence institutional level widening participation discourses?
3. How do practitioners understand the discursive construction of widening participation?
4. What are the consequences for practitioners of widening participation discourses?

Philosophical Commitments

The ontological commitments informing this research, and the methods that underlie it, broadly align with idealism and Rortian pragmatism and therefore this research shines a spotlight on the contingent and contextual nature of 'truth' in the social world: "The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold belief. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that." (Rorty, 1989: 6). The essence of this idealism proposes that, although there are indeed *things* in the world external to our individual psyche, it is impossible for us to reach and definitively describe or capture the essence of them.

Humans have described and attempted to explain the world in different ways for thousands of years with the intention of making predictions; for example, what will happen to *x* if I change *y*? Rorty contends that these predictions do not necessarily represent the world: "there is no sense in which *any* of these descriptions is an accurate representation of the way

the world is in itself. These philosophers regard the very idea of such a representation as pointless" (Rorty, 1989: 4). This pragmatist view extends Schopenhauer's earlier idealism - "For materialism is the philosophy of the subject who forgets to take account of himself" (Schopenhauer, 1967: 29) - to a much further degree by stating that we do not attempt to explain the 'truths' that are 'out in the world', since these truths are not simply there to be found, but instead are manifest and created by the language with which we speak and the relations between concepts that allow them to form and take shape. Instead, we should focus on understanding and interpreting the world as constructed and seen through different available lenses.

The epistemological position underpinning this research follows from, and is perhaps conditioned by, the ontological commitments outlined above. I hold that *things* are not 'out there' to be measured or discovered, instead knowledge is acquired by active production, through an event; "[a] sign does not wait in silence for the coming of a man capable of recognizing it: it can be constituted only by an act of knowing" (Foucault, 1970: 59). The view of knowledge outlined in this section precludes the adoption of certain methods of social research. It should be noted, though, that this narrowing of choice is a necessary and unavoidable part of the research process in order to maintain coherence between ontological commitment, epistemological position, and research design.

Development of Social Science

It is important to buttress the above discussion, relating to the philosophical assumptions necessarily inherent in the present research, by briefly outlining the way in which I

understand the development of social science as an intellectual field, since this directly impacts the way in which the current research has been conducted. I maintain a pluralist approach to science which holds that there is no *one* scientific method (Feyerabend, 1988) but that, instead, the most effective way for science to proceed is through methodological pluralism within different academic spheres. This is a view proposed by a number of key thinkers in the philosophy of science. However, these discussions often exclude social science in their analysis and focus instead on natural science subjects such as chemistry (Chang, 2012) or astrophysics (Ruphy, 2010).

Chang outlines twin benefits that a plurality of methodological approaches, or, "active normative epistemic pluralism" (Chang, 2012: 253), can achieve for scientific and, in my view, social scientific development. These two benefits are toleration and interaction, described by Chang as follows: "Benefits of toleration arise from simply allowing multiple systems simultaneously, which provides insurance against unpredictability, compensation for the limitations of each system, and multiple satisfaction of any given aim. Benefits of interaction arise from the integration of different systems for specific purposes, the co-optation of beneficial elements across systems, and the productive competition between systems." (Chang, 2012: 253). In other words, different approaches support each other by potentially reducing the weaknesses and strengthening the positives of the other approaches.

The view of the development of a scientific system which embraces a pluralistic approach is not antithetical to the, now familiar, Kuhnian concepts of *normal* and *revolutionary* phases in scientific development (Kuhn, 1962). However, it is important to make a distinction relating to the idea of knowledge accumulation inherent in Kuhnian *normal science*;

specifically, that there is a metaphysical *and* epistemological difference between empirical and theoretical knowledge and, therefore, also a difference in the way in which one may think of each as cumulative: "Facts do not add up to constructs or establish relations between them. Facts get their meaning from our powers of observation, but constructs get their meaning from their mentally established relations to each other" (Willer & Willer, 1972: 483). It follows from this that the nature of theory in social science research may not be cumulative in the traditional sense, and, as is the case in some empirical research, one can further develop pre-existing constructs and theories to establish meanings from empirically realised facts.

In this research, I build upon empirical educational research as a foundation and attempt to further add to this body of knowledge using multiple methods – outlined in the following sections – some of which are uniquely used within this research context. The choice of methods aligns with a pluralist approach to scientific development, since there are multiple ways in which this research *could* have been conducted, and it is believed that the use of novel methods in this domain has the potential to uncover empirically grounded phenomenon not previously observed. As mentioned previously, the approach to research adopted here benefits from interaction, including both integration and co-optation. Integration can be explained as follows: "There are situations in which not one of the available systems by itself, not even all of them additively, can achieve a certain aim. In such cases we may attempt to reach a better result by an *ad hoc* integration of different systems…" (Chang, 2012: 279). Co-optation supports this integration: "one system can be helped in its development by the use of ideas and results taken from another…one may co-opt various types of elements from another system of knowledge: empirical results,

theoretical ideas, mathematical techniques, instruments, materials, etc…" (Chang, 2012: 281).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework utilised in this research can be split into three distinct but overlapping areas concerning different levels of discursive analysis. First, Bowe, Ball & Gold's (1992) theorisation of the policy cycle and policy enactment informs much of this research. Second, this is supplemented by an extension and refiguring of Ogden and Richard's (1977) semiotic triangle; these two, taken together, provide a rich underpinning conceptualisation for the understanding and, ultimately, analysis of language. Finally, I use Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus, as a means to facilitate the understanding of discursive shifts. The first part of this section of the methodology chapter focusses on both Bowe, Ball & Gold's policy sociology approach and the semiotic triangle. I see these two frameworks as complementary and mutually beneficial; Ogden and Richard's work explicates a system of signs and their use in language which supports the policy enactment framework where great importance is placed on the process of interpretation. Indeed, Ball notes that it is often the case when analysing complex social issues that "the complexity and scope of policy analysis – from an interest in the workings of the state to a concern with contexts of practice and the distributional outcomes of policy – preclude the possibility of successful single theory explanations. What we need in policy analysis is a toolbox of diverse concepts and theories" (Ball, 1993: 10).

The idea of utilising multiple theoretical tools is not novel and stems from the same intellectual tradition as Levi-Strauss' *bricolage* which is introduced by Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* as a subordinate approach, and defended vigorously by Derrida: "The *bricoleur*,

says Levi-Strauss, is someone who uses 'the means at hand', that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him…If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*" (Derrida & Bass, 2001: 360). It is argued that the combination of these three distinct theoretical tools, from different disciplines, will facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the policy process and the hermeneutical work that key stakeholders within the widening participation sphere must conduct as they implement their practice.

The formation and, indeed, the naming, of the policy 'cycle' reflects the non-linearity of the policy process, from the formation of inchoate discursive objects through to the stage of implementation. A focus is specifically developed which recontextualises the policy process on three fronts: i. context of influence ii. context of policy text production iii. context of practice.

Contexts of influence refer to the discursive construction of what is considered to be important; to use Bowe, Ball & Gold's example: "It is here that policy discourses are constructed. It is here that interested parties struggle to influence the definition and social purposes of education (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992: 19). There is a strong connection between contexts of influence and *contexts of policy text production* – which, notably, does not restrict the term 'text' to the more traditional definition as comprising written words, but also encompasses speech, words in interviews, and verbal commentaries within the media, all of which influence the production of policy texts. One of the key features of the theorisation of the policy cycle is an acknowledgement of the inherent messiness that it involves – this is especially pronounced in the context of policy text production: "The individual texts are

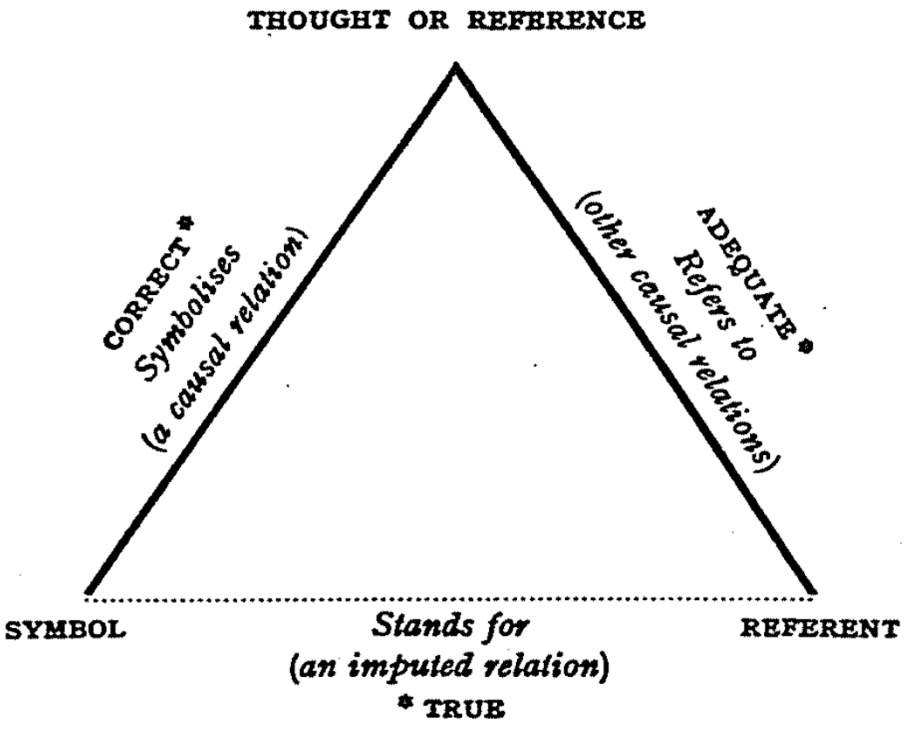
not necessarily internally coherent or clear. The expression of policy is fraught with the possibility of misunderstanding, texts are generalized, written in relation to idealizations of the 'real world', and can never be exhaustive" (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992: 21). The final context – *context of practice* – is perhaps the most significant aspect for this research; within the ambit of this study, it is taken to refer to the active implementation of policy by access to higher education practitioners. On this account, actors are not 'passive dupes' through whom policy is passed, unmediated; they are, instead, actors who have the potential to disrupt the ostensibly smooth passage of policy through its enactment and application in the world.

Policies are therefore directly influenced and shaped by the micro-politics involved in recontextualization; this contradicts those notions of policy which tend to emphasise the linearity and hierarchical nature of the policy process – as something 'done to' practitioners who have no real agency. Given this, and the fact that "most of the struggles go on behind closed doors but occasional glimpses of the dynamics of conflict are possible" (Ball, Bowe & Gold, 1992: 21), it is important that the choice of methods reflects this conceptual understanding of the policy process. More specifically, and when focussing on the context of reinterpretation, it is important to understand the specific ways in which *meanings* are produced by individual practitioners through their interaction with policy documents.

Ogden and Richards note early in *The Meaning of Meaning*: "Meaning, that pivotal term of every language, cannot be treated without a satisfactory theory of signs" (Ogden & Richards, 1977: 48). This research is directly concerned with meanings, and particularly the meanings which practitioners and other stakeholders confer to policy documents and,

more specifically, to language choices within these documents. As such, it is vital to have a conceptual framework which directly concerns itself with the ways in which meanings are encoded and decoded (to use the semiotic parlance). Ogden and Richards acknowledge social and situational impacts on the understanding of language and the inherent difficulties that holding a causal understanding of language use entails; this specifically refers to the relationship between *symbol*, *referent*, and *thought or reference*. They hold, as is conventional in modern linguistics, that words only make sense when they are *ascribed* meaning by people and society; this is developed further to explain the relationship between the above three terms, and is represented in the figure below.

Figure 1. Semiotic triangle (Ogden & Richards, 1977: 11)



Relationship between Thought and Symbol

The relationship between Thought and Symbol is, in Ogden & Richard's view, causal in nature: "the symbolism we employ is caused partly by the reference we are making and partly by the social and psychological factors…the proposed effect of our symbols on the other persons, and our own attitude…When we hear what is said, the symbols both cause us to perform an act of reference and to assume an attitude which will, according to circumstances, be more or less similar to the act and the attitude of the speaker" (Ogden & Richards, 1977: 11).

Relationship between Thought and Referent

The relationship between Thought and Referent is also causal, although it can be more or less convoluted in nature, as this is "more or less direct (as when we think about or attend to a coloured surface we see), or indirect (as when we 'think of' or 'refer to' Napoleon), in which case there may be a very long chain of sign-situations intervening between the act and its referent: word – historian – contemporary record – eye-witness – referent (Napoleon)" (Ogden & Richards, 1977: 11)

Relationship between Symbol and Referent

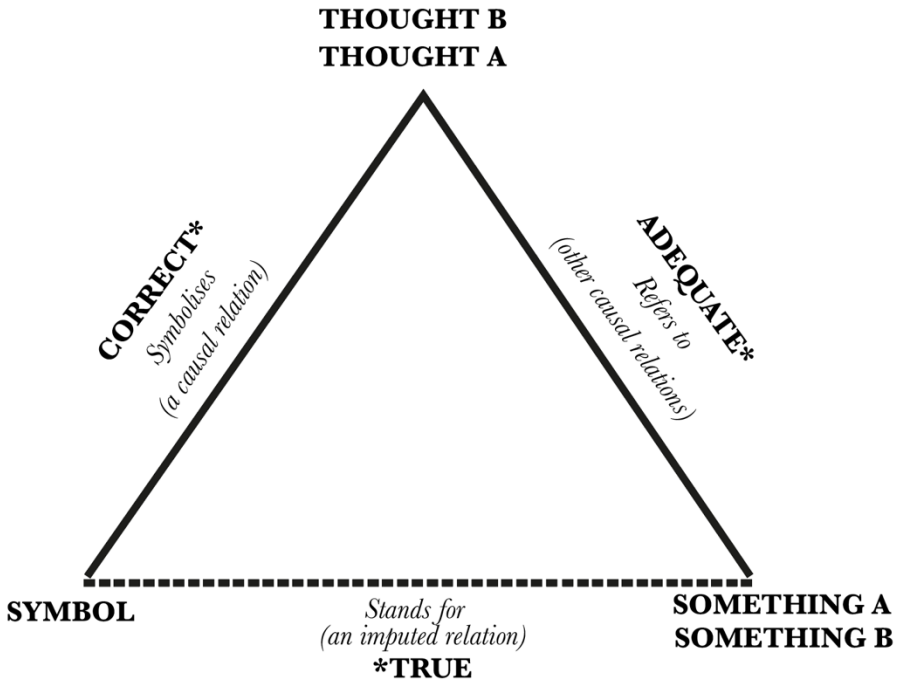
The relationship between Symbol and Referent is qualitatively different from the previous two relationships in the triangle because there is no causal mapping: "there is no relevant relation other than the indirect one, which consists in its being used by someone to stand for a referent. (Ogden & Richards, 1977: 11).

In concrete terms, the triangle can be explained as follows:

a. *Something A* makes *Person A* think *Thought A*,
b. *Person A* translates *Thought A* into a *Symbol*,
c. the *Symbol* is shared with *Person B*, who thinks *Thought B*
d. *Person B* translates *Thought B* into *Something B*

As can be seen from the sequence above, there is no direct relationship between *Symbol* and *Something*; because the relationship is merely imputed. Figure 2 shows the relationship above:

Figure 2. Updated semiotic triangle with concrete example

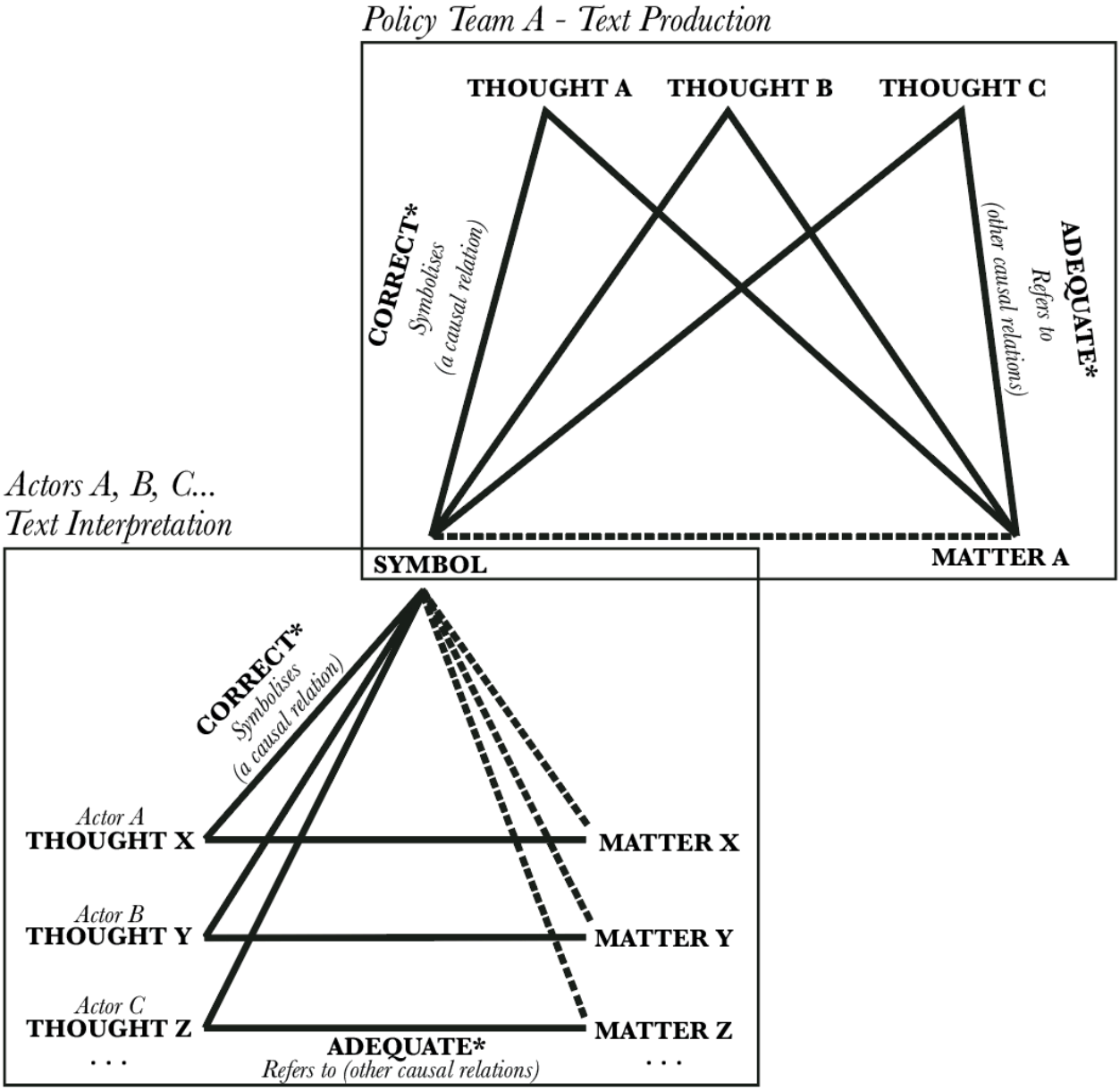


Furthermore, the Ogden/Richards semiotic triangle confines itself to the domain of simple speech actions and is particularly apposite in the case where there is one producer of speech, and one interpreter of speech. In order to marry the policy cycle and policy enactment approach with the semiotic triangle, we must complicate matters further. In policy production and interpretation, it is not the case that there is simply one 'speaker' and one 'listener'; there are potentially multiple authors, and multiple readers. This dynamic changes the nature of the semiotic triangle since one must add in these new dimensions: multiple producers of a document, multiple readers of a document, and multiple interpretations. Thus, instead of the example above the relationship could be described as follows:

a. *Policy Team A* focuses on *Matter A* and thinks *Thoughts A, B, C…*
b. *Thoughts A, B, C…* are translated by *Policy Team A* into *Symbol*
c. *Symbol* is shared with *Actors A, B, C…* who translate *Symbol* into *Thoughts X, Y, Z…*
d. *Thoughts X, Y, Z…* are translated by *Actors A, B, C…* into *Matter X, Y, Z…*

Or, in graphical form:

Figure 3. Extended semiotic triangle in the context of policy text production and interpretation



The above illustration combines aspects of the policy cycle approach with the semiotic triangle. The top half of Figure 3 represents the production of meaning in a policy-creation environment, reflecting the multiple actors that are potentially engaged with its production

together with the potential difficulties this entails: "the ensembles and the individual texts are not necessarily internally coherent or clear" (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992: 21); a *matter* may bring about multiple thoughts (represented as A, B, and C in this case) which ultimately must be synthesised into a symbol or symbols in the policy document. Though there may be multiple meanings that underpin a symbol, the symbol is often *presented* as straightforward and as naturally corresponding to a particular 'real-life' object. Indeed, this is an underlying premise of the correspondence theory of truth outlined succinctly by Bertrand Russell: "Thus a belief is true when there is a corresponding fact, and is false when there is no corresponding fact" (Russell, 1912: 129); an epistemological approach which conceives that words and beliefs correspond to *things* in-the-world and which is vigorously rejected by Rorty and others, including myself.

The bottom half of the figure concerns the interpretation of policy documents by practitioners; it continues the same logic of the semiotic triangle with relationships between *Symbol, Thought and Matter*. The *symbol*, produced by policy teams, is read by practitioners who in turn consequently translate the symbol into thoughts (interpretations); though, in an analogous way that a *Matter* can produce multiple *Thoughts*, a *Symbol* acts similarly to produce multiple *Thoughts*. These multiple interpretations of the *Symbol* by different actors within the policy ecosystem then translate into different *Matters* and ultimately different likely courses of action. Thus, there is again only an imputed relationship between the *Symbol* and the *Matters* produced – a relationship which is mediated by the resulting *Thought* produced by a *Symbol*: "Just as we say that the gardener mows the lawn when we know that it is the lawn-mower which actually does the cutting, so, though we know that the direct relation of symbols is with thought, we also say that symbols record events and communicate facts" (Ogden & Richards, 1977: 9). Indeed, the meanings of words are not

fixed and stable for each individual, they are, instead, and in a Wittgensteinian sense, "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (Wittgenstein, 2009: 66).

The use of specific forms of language and systems of meanings are particularly important in this research; it is theorised that widening participation actions and widening participation evaluation practices have their own domain specific language involving an amalgamation and extension of other discourses which may or may not have a direct relationship to contemporary widening participation activity and its evaluation. These domain specific language systems can be usefully understood through the lens of 'language games' and 'family resemblances' (Wittgenstein, 2009).

In much the same way as the concept of a 'game' is nebulous, and yet most people would readily claim to know what is meant by the term, the same may also hold true of the concept 'widening participation' and associated terms. There is not necessarily one characteristic that is shared by 'games' and yet individuals find it a more or less readily identifiable concept which leads to the previously quoted criss-crossing identified by Wittgenstein. This *familienähnlichkeit* (family resemblance) between different conceptualisations may not be experienced as problematic on a day-to-day basis, but it may be the source of significant confusion in the context of practitioner and policy decision making. This factor is compounded in widening participation work by the overlaying of increasingly complex and abstract ideas within this particular discourse, for example, terms such as social class, cultural capital, socio-economic disadvantage, ethnicity and gender. It is therefore argued that it is necessary to further examine the ways in which individual conceptualisations of

key terms within the field are understood and the implications of this for widening participation practice.

A number of key conceptual ideas form key strands that bind together a good deal of widening participation discourse; yet the meanings of concepts are often assumed to be present as tacit knowledge. It is important to understand how certain conceptual terms are utilised, for example 'widening participation', 'success', 'access and outreach', 'evaluation', 'cause'.

An individual's understanding of the world is necessarily mediated by their sense-data – sight, taste, smell etc. As such, the world in which we live and move is, in Schopenhauerian terms, *representation* (Schopenhauer, 1958). With this in mind, the world of representations can be seen as a continuum of abstraction so that the closer to our sense data an idea is, the more readily it is captured, and the more likely it is that our interpretation of this object is shared by others. We can point to more concrete phenomena, such as, for example, a rock, yet we cannot point to other less tangible items in the same way, for example 'justice' and 'virtue' as these are more abstract nouns. Thus, it can be argued that for every concept used in describing the world there are a range of interpretations and that more abstract concepts necessarily have an increased range of interpretations: 'every concept, just because it is abstracted representation, not representation of perception and therefore not a completely definite representation, has what is called a range, an extension, or a sphere, even in the case where only a single object corresponding to it exists' (Schopenhauer, 1958: 42).

It can be argued that the language of widening participation is a space characterised by the synthesis of different disciplinary discourses. Indeed, it is interesting to consider the origins of the language of widening participation particularly when thinking about critical evaluation concepts such as "What works?", "robust", "rigour", and even "dosage effect". The influence of different discourses is perhaps more prevalent in the widening participation sphere due to its interdisciplinary nature; people enter the field from a multitude of different professional and academic backgrounds which promotes diversity of thought. However, to some extent this diversity of thinking is constrained by the political nature of widening participation whereby certain ways of thinking and methods of inquiry can tend to dominate others for reasons of political expediency. Given that specific terms may be utilised in widening participation discourses, deracinated from their original context, they can be ascribed new meanings as they are used and develop over time; this aligns with the earlier discussion concerning the increased range of interpretation of concepts as they move from the concrete towards the abstract.

The above argument aligns with a conceptual tool utilised which I have termed Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus. This has its foundations in linguistics and cognitive science but, unlike in the case of the latter, it expands beyond the internal worlds of actors to aid in the understanding of discourse level shifts. Fauconnier's model of conceptual blending is the key source of inspiration here – where an emergent structure develops from two (or more) siloed concepts. Broadly speaking, conceptual blending "consists in integrating partial structures from two separate domains into a single structure with emergent properties within a third domain" (Fauconnier, 1997: 22). An example of this is explained in the book *Mappings in Thought and Language* (1997) and relates to the emergence of the notion of a computer **virus** as a term used in technology – this is a very clear case

of language transferring from one domain (medical science) to another (computing). The use of "virus" in relation to computing can be found in statements such as "Files are contaminated by infectious bytes" or "Infections can spread from computer to computer as fast as the Hong Kong flu" (Fauconnier, 1997: 18). In order for the mapping to successfully translate to a new domain there are a certain number of processes which may take place, and these can be explained as follows:

(1) *Analogy and Schema Induction* - We are able to recognise generic-level features of biological viruses that are independent of their biological nature, but follow from the way we conceptualize them and relate them to other aspects of our lives.

(2) *Categorization and New Conceptual Structure* – a second stage, analogy develops into categorization of the target domain. We can now assign certain programs to the category "virus," others to the categories of "vaccine" or "disinfectant."

(3) *Naming and Projected Structure* – with the mapping in place and vocabulary transfer operating, the target object finds itself named and structured. Expressions like *virus, protection, and disinfectant* can be viewed as applying directly to the new conceptual categories of the target domain.

(4) *Blending and Conceptual Integration* – consists in integrating partial structures from two separate domains into a single structure with emergent properties within a third domain.

(5) *Motivated Polysemy* – Instead of blending together, the two domains in correspondence may stay apart, and even become increasingly distinguished, but without losing their analogical and linguistic links. In the virus example, this happens when terms like *virus* and *disinfectant* are applied so automatically to the target domain that they are no longer felt to be analogical or metaphorical…a feeling of polysemy is produced.

(6) *Divergence and Extinction* – Real divergence between domains occurs when the vocabulary remains but the conceptual links disappear, or when a source domain changes its vocabulary while the target keeps the original vocabulary, so that the mapping is no longer linguistically transparent. (Fauconnier, 1997: 24).

Of particular relevance to this research is step (4), the notion of blending and conceptual integration. This is something that is key to Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus in understanding discourse and it can be applied usefully to the analysis of widening participation evaluation discourse. Explaining the conditions which are required for blending is succinctly captured diagrammatically.

Figure 4. Two Conceptual Spaces

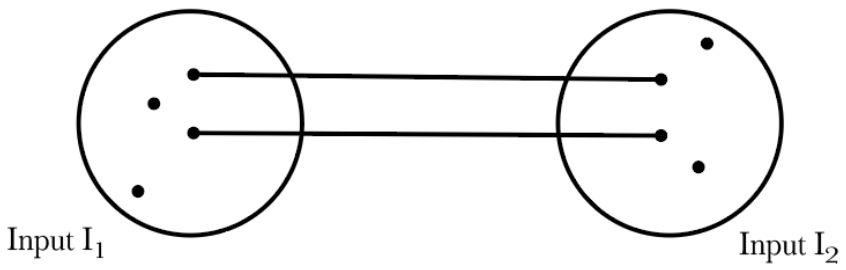


Figure 4 illustrates a partial mapping between Input I_1 and Input I_2; this partial mapping shows the similarities between two distinct domains. Figure 5 demonstrates the generic space required for the blend to occur – these are prerequisites for both Input I_1 and Input I_2, while Figure 6 shows the projected blend.

Figure 5. Two conceptual spaces with generic space

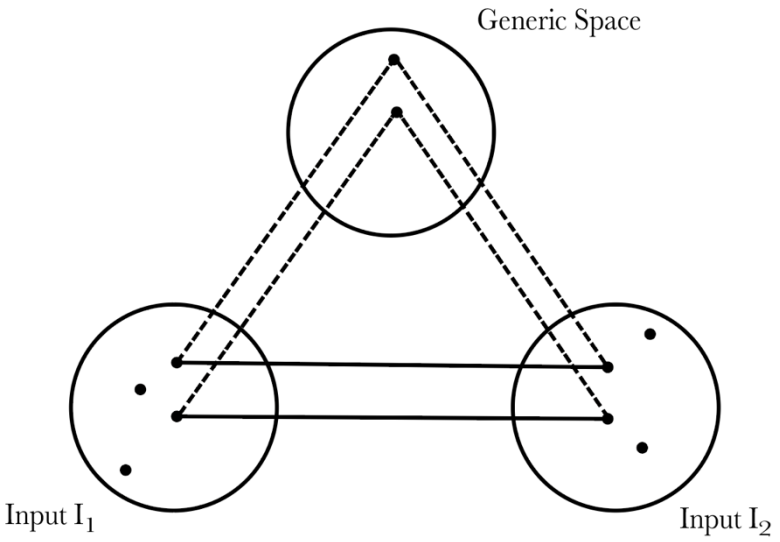


Figure 6. Two conceptual spaces with the conceptual blend

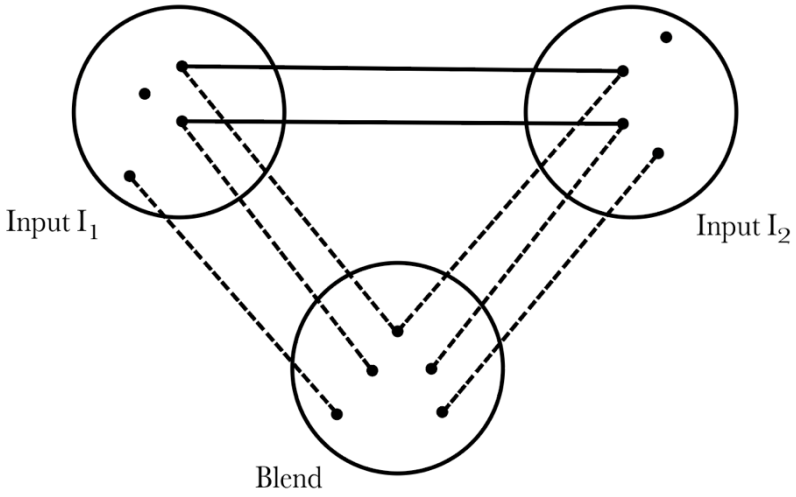
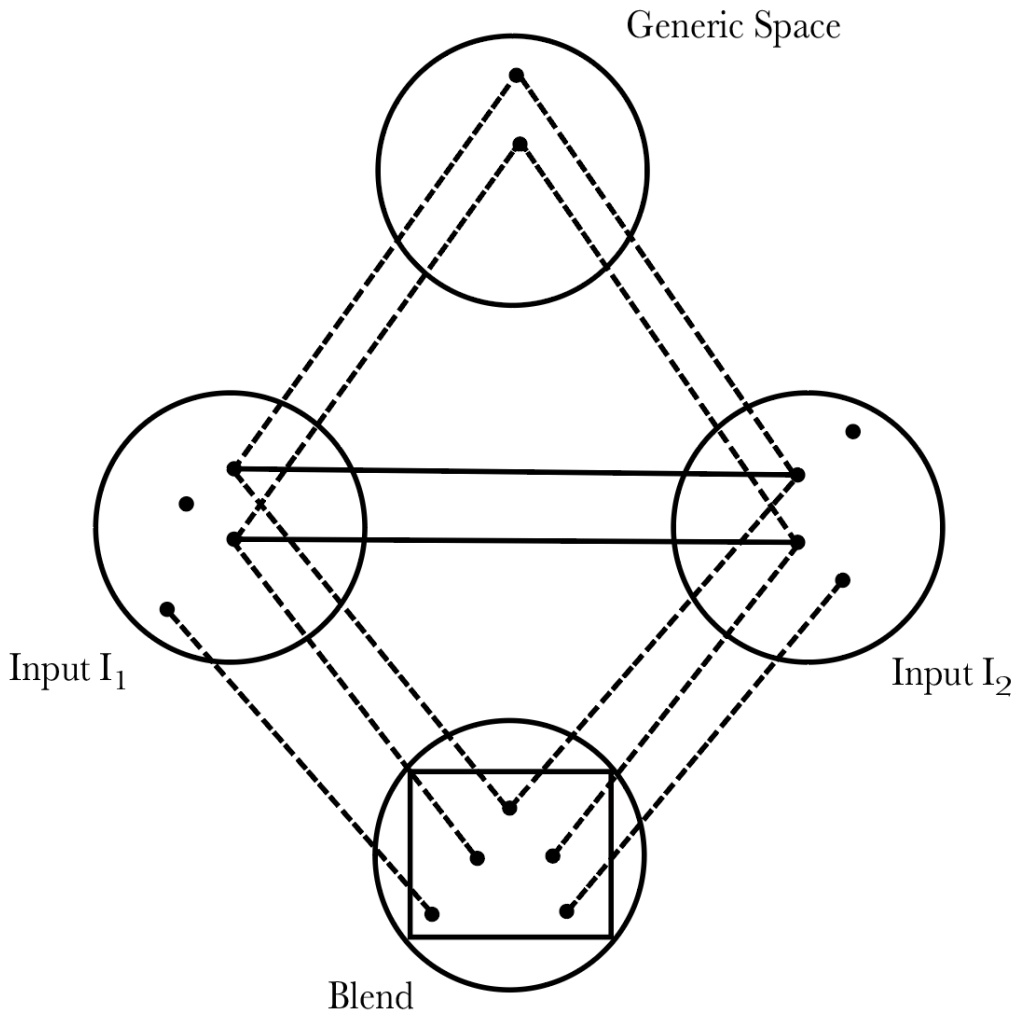


Figure 7 represents the final model of conceptual blending where the emergent thought structure contains within it not only the partial matches from Input I_1 and Input I_2 but also emergent properties:

a. Composition: taken together, the projections from the input make new relations available that did not previously exist in the separate inputs.
b. Completion: knowledge of background frames and cognitive and cultural models enables the composite structure projected into the blend from the Inputs to be viewed as part of a larger self-contained structure in the blend. The pattern in the blend triggered by the inherited structures is "completed" into the larger, emergent structure.

c. Elaboration: where the structure in the blend can then be elaborated. This is referred to as "running the blend." It consists in cognitive work performed within the blend, according to its own emergent logic. (Fauconnier, 1997: 150).

Figure 7. Conceptual blending



This conceptualisation of blending is useful in the interpretation and exploration of widening participation discourse where "meaning construction typically involves integration of a structure that gives rise to more than the sum of its parts." (Evans & Green,

2006). Blending applies in the case of widening participation evaluation discourse as multiple different and competing inputs combine to form the widening participation evaluation conceptual blend. These inputs include: notions of rigour and objectivity, the aims of widening participation and the perception and interpretation of political pressures. These competing structural and substantive organisational mechanisms contain within them partial mappings and distinct framings.

Discourse

Given that *discourse* is so central to this DPhil thesis, it is important to reflect here on what precisely is meant by the term. Indeed, it can be argued that the term is as much of a floating signifier as any lexeme examined within the entirety of the present research; its use appears amorphous and highly dependent on context – as is the case with almost all language use: "no satisfactory semantic theory…can ignore the role of the contexts in which expressions are used and interpreted." (Stalnaker, 1998: 3). Having said this, it is clear that an explicit definition is necessary (and yet not in the case of all words used in the thesis) due to the significance of the term for this research alongside its characteristic indexicality.

The way the concept *discourse* is used in this research is derived from the philosophical lineage of *The Strong Programme* (Bloor, 1976) in the sociology of scientific knowledge. Whilst it may seem somewhat unusual for a thesis focussing on the discursive construction of particular educational issues to take inspiration from a specific 1970s branch of the sociology of scientific knowledge, I argue that this approach holds with many of the tenets

of more traditional definitions of discourse, for example the famous Foucauldian definition that discourses are: "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972: 52).

Discourse is taken here to refer primarily to the social construction of meanings within society. Thus, it concerns the way in which individuals describe and act in relation to specific objects; an important aspect of this process is the way in which actors undertake actions and how this influences the status of the object in question thereby creating an element of feedback. To put this more concretely, the way the objects of 'widening participation' are conceptualised in this research relates to the ways in which actors speak about and act in relation to widening participation issues. These actions and utterances often entail, either implicitly or explicitly, a number of truth claims: this may be in relation to discussing the 'best way' to host a summer school, a comment made to a colleague about the demographics of students at a widening participation event, or a newspaper reporting on the A Level grades of disadvantaged students (note that this last example may contribute to widening participation discourses despite there being no explicit mention of widening participation).

Policy texts and other institutional output often concern themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, with truth claims which are mediated through theory: "all factual claims, whether very specific statements such as Mendel's description of the results of particular crops of peas, or relatively general propositions, such as those expressing the ratios of inherited

characteristics, are theory-laden" (Mulkay, 1979: 37) and so a clear understanding of how *truth* can be created is imperative.

The Strong Programme has specific maxims, explicated by David Bloor, in relation to its treatment of *truth* which accords with the definition of discourse utilised in this thesis:

1. "…concerned with the conditions which bring about belief or states of knowledge. Naturally there will be other types of causes apart from social ones which will cooperate in bringing about belief."
2. "It would be impartial with respect to truth and falsity, rationality or irrationality, success or failure. Both sides of these dichotomies will require explanation."
3. "It would be symmetrical in its style of explanation. The same types of cause would explain, say, true and false beliefs."
4. "It would be reflexive. In principle its patterns of explanation would have to be applicable to sociology itself. Like the requirement of symmetry this is a response to the need to seek for general explanations. It is an obvious requirement of principle because otherwise sociology would be a standing refutation of its own theories" (Bloor, 1976: 7).

This approach to truth and meaning creation is aligned with Barry Barnes's concept of *finitism* which exists in opposition in meaning to that of determinism: "…finitism rejects the idea that meanings determine use; instead it sees meanings as the continuously created product of verbal behaviour. Meanings are the continuously created outcomes of the use of words, not the determinants of that use. Since meanings are continuously made (and re-made) by language users, these meanings are never sufficiently stable and fixed for them to

be able to determine extensions." (Kusch, 2004: 68). Finitism aligns well with the broader philosophical underpinnings (outlined previously) of this research. Finitism is clearly not a stand-alone philosophical doctrine as it derives from Wittgensteinian philosophy; an inference which is uncontroversial and is suggested by Barnes himself (Hwang *et al.*, 2010). These Wittgensteinian underpinnings are common across many of the thinkers whose philosophical ideas support aspects of this thesis.

Research Design

This research takes a multiple methods approach by using natural language processing, corpus linguistics, machine learning (in the form of a topic model), and qualitative semi-structured interviews to answer questions relating to discourse level (semiotic and semantic), institution level, and practitioner level understandings of widening participation and its evaluation. Corpus linguistic techniques, natural language processing, and unsupervised machine learning are conducted on a novel, self-curated dataset called the Access Corpus; this discourse level analysis is used to identify shifts in discourse and discourse terminology over time in order to understand the changing language of widening participation discourse both historically and contemporaneously. Furthermore, 22 semi-structured interviews have been conducted at five research sites to explore the ways in which practitioners within different higher education institutions interpret, organise and enact widening participation policies. The five research sites are *cases* in the present research through which I explore significant themes and concepts at the individual, practitioner level which can provide insights and appreciation of institution level understandings within the field of widening participation policy and practice.

The Access Corpus

Methods

This research adopts a multiple-methods design comprising: discourse analysis through corpus linguistic techniques and supervised machine learning (Latent Dirichlet Allocation topic modelling); deconstruction of policy documents; semi-structured interviews at case-study sites. Multiple methods have been chosen on the basis that they provide coherence and work together synergistically to better answer the research questions that are at the centre of this study. In this sub-section I explicate the key ideas that underpin these methods, explain why they were chosen, and describe how they work together. The methods chosen are designed to enhance the overarching multiple methods design of this research through which it is intended to explore and understand the ways in which specified widening participation discourses are enacted within higher education institutions. Specifically, the methods chosen help to answer the key research questions which relate to different levels of widening participation (evaluation) discourse: discursive construction of widening participation by higher education institutions, institutional differences in widening participation discourse, practitioner abstract understanding of key elements of discourse, and the consequences of this understanding for practice.

The latter part of this research, case study interviews, enables the collection of rich data which are located within their naturally occurring social contexts (Karbo & Beasley, 1999) – this is an important feature of this research and stems from the acknowledgement that 'truths' in the world are necessarily context dependent. In any case-study research it is important to specify the unit of analysis. This is of vital importance as it determines the way

that the data collection actually happens. In this study, the unit of analysis is: *widening participation evaluation policy enactment in individual higher education institutions*. An attempt is made to explore *how* policies are enacted and to uncover the ways in which knowledge is produced and perpetuated: "To politicize [knowledge production] means not to bring politics in where there were none, but to make overt how power permeates the construction and legitimation of knowledges" (Lather, 1991: 17).

Discourse Analysis – Natural Language Processing and Topic Modelling

The first research steps involved discourse analysis, as explicated in this section, and documentary analysis conducted through a deconstructive lens, as outlined in the previous sub-section. Discourse analysis is conducted through natural language processing and LDA topic modelling – two techniques that have been somewhat neglected in higher education research. Given the emphasis placed upon policy enactment, semiotics, and Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus within the conceptual framework underpinning the research, it is important to note the centrality of discourse to each of these conceptual tools. In particular, it is clear that in the process of policy recontextualization and interpretation, the role of discourse is particularly significant – it shapes the way in which conversations not only take place, but also influences the substantive content of those conversations.

The discourse analysis approach in this research can be described as broadly Foucauldian, though this is often not straightforward to describe since: "There is no one right way to code for Foucauldian discourse analysis" (Wiggins & Riley, 2010: 144). Indeed, a procedural approach can be seen as problematic due to the iterative nature of the analysis:

"Procedural prescription is both theoretically problematic…as it is a rather intangible and idiosyncratic process" (Holt, 2011: 79). Nevertheless, it can be useful to draw upon the attempts of previous Foucauldian discourse analysts in their formation of a procedure for conducting such analysis. Outlined below are the six stages that Willig (2013) proposes for Foucauldian discourse analysis – they cover much the same ground as other guides for Foucauldian discourse analysis, for example Kendall and Wickham (1999), but provide more detail in the formulation and require less prior knowledge:

Figure 9. Outlining the steps of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis according to Willig (2013: 131-133)

1. Discursive Construction: The first stage of analysis is concerned with the ways in which discursive objects are constructed. Which discursive object we focus on depends upon our research question. For example, if we are interested in how people talk about 'love' and with what consequences, our discursive object would be 'love'.
2. Discourses: What appears to be one and the same discursive object can be constructed in very different ways. The second stage of analysis aims to locate the various discursive constructions of the object within wider discourses.
3. Action Orientation: The third stage of analysis involves a closer examination of the discursive contexts within which the different constructions of the object are being deployed: what is gained from constructing the object in this particular way at this particular point within the text? What is its function and how does it relate to other constructions produced in the surrounding text?
4. Positionings: We now take a closer look at the subject positions that they offer. A subject position within a discourse identifies 'a location for persons within the

structure of rights and duties for those who use that repertoire' (Davies & Harré, 1999: 35).

5. Practice: This stage is concerned with the relationship between discourse and practice. It requires a systematic exploration of the ways in which discursive constructions and the subject positions contained within them open up or close down opportunities for action.
6. Subjectivity: The final stage in the analysis explores the relationship between discourse and subjectivity. Discourses make available certain ways-of-seeing the world and certain ways-of-being in the world. They construct social as well as psychological realities.

These steps are not weighted equally in importance and emphasis within this research places a particular focus upon discursive construction, action orientation, practice, and subjectivity throughout. Discursive construction is the most important aspect of this method applied during the first research stage. Discourse analysis informs and shapes the later stages of the research, specifically in relation to semi-structured interviews. Key findings from the documentary and discourse analyses helpfully informed the precise questions asked of respondents during the semi-structured interviews.

The major part of discourse analysis in this research combines Natural Language Processing (NLP) *and* topic modelling to explore language use, and particularly language use over time. Before I describe the details of these methods, for example, how the corpus was selected, what the corpus consists of, through which programming language and

environment the analysis took place, and the scope of the analysis, it is first important to describe the methods of natural language processing and topic modelling, and explain their relevance to this research.

Natural language processing is used to refer to a set of computational techniques that attempt to analyse language use: "the term *natural language processing* refers to any work involving the computational processing of natural language. However, over the past few decades, NLP has taken on the strong default connotation of involving…machine learning…" (McShane & Nirenburg, 2021: 4). This computational processing of language can lead to insights that may take years for an individual researcher, or even a team of researchers, to process and analyse; as an example, the corpus curated for the purposes of this research comprises over 12 million words – this would take an exceptionally long time to analyse effectively and certain analytic tools would simply not be viable for use.

LDA Topic Modelling

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modelling is a machine learning tool which can be used to determine latent world clusters in a linguistic corpus; this type of model is Bayesian and "each item of the collection is modelled as a finite mixture over an underlying set of topics. Each topic is, in turn, modelled as an infinite mixture over an underlying set of topic probabilities" (Blei, Ng, Jordan, 2003: 993) – these word clusters, or latent semantic structures, are similar in character to what humans would more readily call 'topics'. The underlying mathematical formulae behind LDA are not explained in this thesis, but a full account can be found in Blei, Ng, & Jordan (2003). The chief benefit of this type of analysis

is that it is not only unsupervised, but also can take into account researchers' priors; this means that the analysis can compute vast quantities of data without constant input from the researcher, yet it is undertaken on the basis of *some* researcher input at the inception. Researcher input, in this context, refers to determining how many latent topics one would expect to uncover in the corpus – this is often determined by either a. creating an elbow plot where one can view the point of diminishing returns (i.e. where an extra topic in the model does not add much in terms of explanatory value) or b. coherence of topic words (this is a qualitative measure where the researcher assesses whether the topic words "make sense" based on *a priori* knowledge of the broad topic). Indeed, a combination of these two techniques informed the process by which 7 topics were chosen as part of this research.

Topic modelling is used to identify discourse change over time by tracking the ways in which topics have changed throughout a 15 year corpus; this analysis can then be further utilised to explore sub-group themes of analysis such as: "how do discourses change by Boliver Cluster universities?"; and "how do individual institutions talk about *x* and does this change over time?" A topic model can produce several useful outputs for discourse analysis, for example, identifying the most common words in each topic, and then listing words which are overrepresented in a particular topic; this information allows the researcher to understand more fully the context in which topics were discussed. In this scenario, 'overrepresented' refers to words that appear more frequently in a particular topic when compared to any of the other topics. Given the centrality of hermeneutics to this research, it was important that the results of the topic model analysis would be able to provide nuanced outputs allowing contextual issues to be identified and better understood. The topic model effectively complements particular steps within Foucauldian discourse

analysis, namely: discursive construction and discourses (steps one and two in the above stages).

Documentary analysis through a deconstructive lens

Discourse analysis is viewed in this study through the deconstructive lens. The term deconstruction was formulated by Derrida not as a method, but instead as an *approach* to reading texts. It functions to make the implicit, explicit, even in cases where the implicit is deeply embedded within opaque semiotic and discursive topologies. The context, especially the temporal context in which a specific artifact is produced, is of great importance to deconstruction; indeed, one of the key deconstructive ideas that is adopted in the analysis of policy documents is that of *différance*. This refers to the notion that meanings are always deferred in some way, and where the ipseity of an idea always contains within it the trace of something prior: "but the movement of the trace is necessarily occulted, it produces itself as self-occultation. When the other announces itself as such, it presents itself in the dissimulation of itself." (Derrida, 1997: 47).

The 'trace' can be unmasked through a careful and potentially inventive exegesis of a text; indeed, this is complementary to the discourse analysis outlined later on which can be regarded as at a more macro-level. One of the key ways in which the deconstructive lens will be applied to the task of documentary analysis is through the doubling of commentary; this is an attempt to 'get at' the meanings within a text which the author(s) may not intentionally have signalled: "the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command

of the patterns of the language that he uses" (Derrida, 1997: 158). A first reading of the text, or section of a text, is conducted taking into account what may be termed superficial readings – this is why it is of particular importance for the researcher to be especially familiar with the field of study – before a secondary reading of the text which is intended to destabilise and deconstruct. This is explained in "*To Do Justice to Freud": The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis*: "The necessity of first ascertaining a surface or manifest meaning…the necessity of gaining a good understanding…by taking into account the dominant and stable conventions…*before* submitting the first reading to a symptomatic and historical interpretation regulated by other axioms or protocols, before and in order to destabilize…the authority of canonical interpretations." (Derrida, 1994: 231).

Through employing a deconstructive lens, I intend to uncover the meanings which exist within the text that are not necessarily evident in a 'superficial reading', but are existent upon closer reading/analysis, and potentially as a suppressed trace. This stage of research again serves a dual purpose; first *qua* a method itself which can provide further and more complex theoretical analysis in order to generate insights into the meanings of policy documents within widening participation evaluation. Second, the documentary analysis will further inform the next phase of this research – semi-structured interviews.

Objects and artifacts of the documentary analysis

A good deal has been written about how to select a corpus of statements which relate to the delineation of an object of study (Carabine, 2011) and, ideally, the corpus should be as comprehensive as possible whilst allowing the researcher enough time to complete the

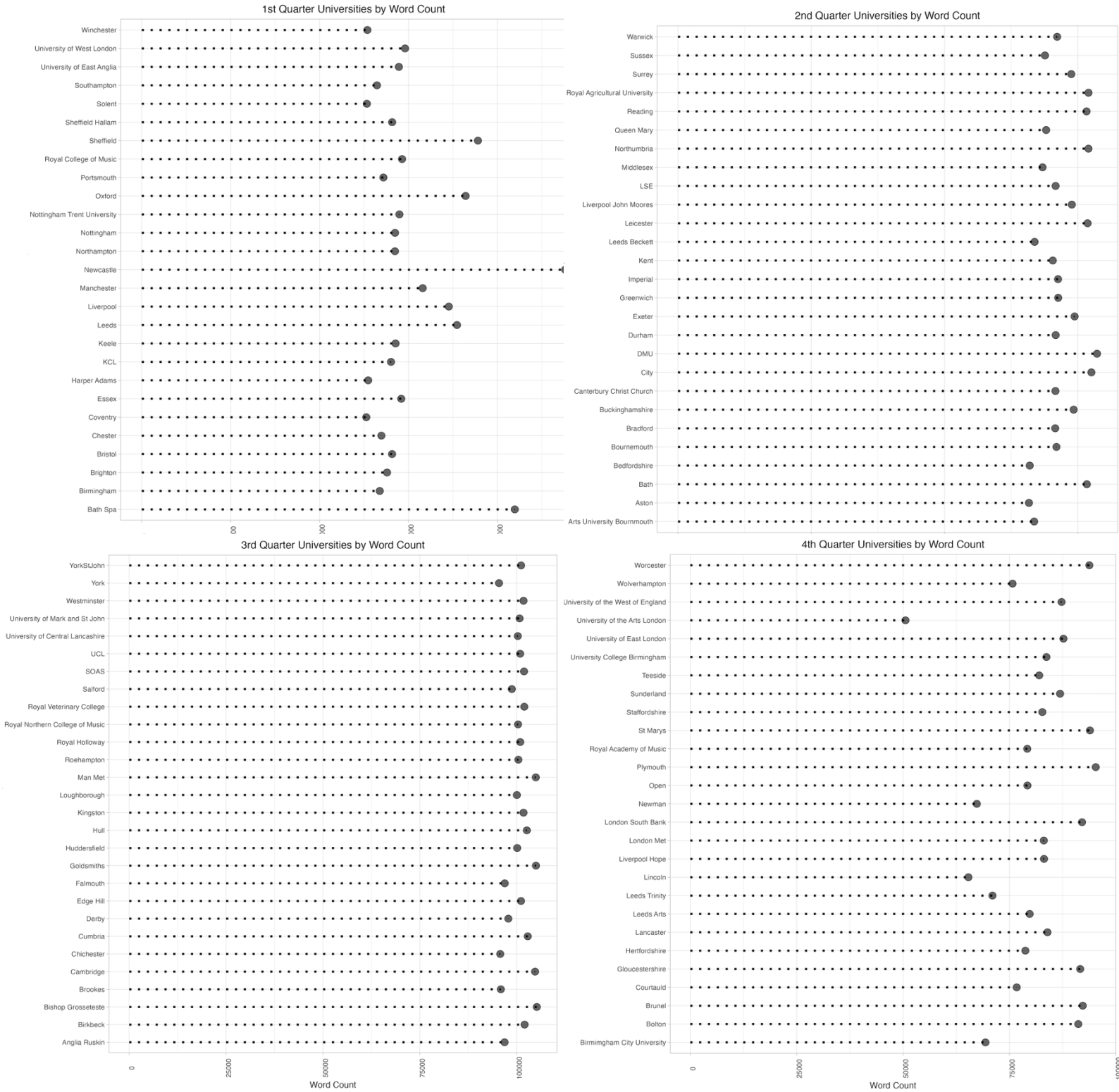
project – it is particularly important to achieve temporal variability since this can show how concepts change over time. In addition, it should be noted that a shared object is vital for a corpus (in this case widening participation evaluation): "what binds a corpus of statements together in terms of its internal validity is that each statement forms the 'conditions of possibility' for the studied phenomenon" (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008: 12).

The documents comprising the corpus of this research all concern the object *widening participation*. The documents examined as part of this research comprise institutional documents outlining individual widening participation and evaluation stances, expressed in the form of institutional Access Agreements and Access and Participation Plans.

HEIs have produced a document each year for the past 20 years which signals their intentions and goals in relation to widening access to higher education and carrying out outreach activity; these were initially called Access Agreements (2006-2019) and subsequently entitled Access and Participation Plans (2019-present). Although there are differences in the way in which these documents are structured, and the requirements for each have evolved over time as a result of changing policy priorities, the two documents are substantively comparable: the central policy purpose has remained over time that of widening participation to higher education for under-represented groups. These documents are publicly available on the Office for Students website and on the websites of each higher education provider.

Institutional widening participation plans form the 'Access Corpus' which is central to this research and the corpus on which much of the analysis takes place. It consists of institutional widening participation documents from the past 15 years from 109 English higher education institutions. In sum, the Access Corpus contains around 12 million words (n = 12, 223,799) in total. The tables overleaf provide information about the institutions in the Access Corpus and the total number of words per institution across the entire corpus.

Figure 8. Universities included in the Access Corpus with word counts for each University across the corpus



Semi-structured interviews at case study institutions

The next step of this research involved 22 semi-structured interviews which were conducted with widening participation evaluation practitioners at each of the five case study institutions. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was, primarily, to hear directly from practitioners themselves about their experiences of, and interactions with, widening participation evaluation policies; interviews allow researchers to "understand the world from the subjects' point of view to unfold meanings of their experiences" (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009: 1). Interviews are particularly relevant to this research since a conceptual framework that emphasises the individual-level influences that affect policy outcomes must reflect the views and dispositions of those very same individuals – this is crucial in understanding the context of practice (Ball, Bowe, & Gold, 1992: 19). Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow for more flexibility in the research process than would be possible through structured interviews, but they are not as fluid or as unmanageable as can be the case with non-structured interviews. Through this type of interviewing process, I was able to gain a greater insight into participants' role in the interpretation and re-contextualisation of central policy issues within their particular institutional circumstances.

The universities chosen as sites for the five case studies in this research were made "on the bases of prior knowledge by the researcher of levels of difference, and the interpretations would also be made in the context of this knowledge" (Thomas, 2021: 187). Whilst it is true that I had some knowledge of the different approaches taken by different universities across the sector due to previous research in the area, the selection was, as mentioned previously,

made on the basis of a preliminary analysis of institutional spend and positioning with respect to widening participation evaluation.

Interviews were conducted with staff members at different levels of seniority who were each involved with evaluation to some degree. Each of the individuals interviewed performed key roles in the policy cycle and often provided different perspectives in relation to their experience and understanding of widening participation evaluation policies and the processes of implementation. These differences of perspective appear to have been rooted in variables between the circumstances of participants in a number of salient areas including: socio-economic background, work status, academic experiences, political and ideological sensibilities, social group, network belonging, and differential work pressures.

The recruitment of institutions for the research was facilitated through the Head of Widening Participation (or equivalent role) at each institution; an email was sent which outlined the purposes of the research and the potential benefits that an increased understanding of the policy process may have for participating institutions and the wider sector. Emphasis was placed on preserving the anonymity of participants to ensure that they felt safe throughout the research process. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymised, and then analysed. The analysis was inductive in nature and transcripts were coded iteratively where themes emerged from a close and careful reading. The documentary stage of analysis played a role in the interpretation of interview transcripts.

The analysis of cases necessarily took place in two stages: stage one consisted of individual case analysis and stage two involved cross-case analysis. Stage one entailed predominantly coding activity, however, since there were multiple individuals within each case, it was important for the analysis to revisit different interviews multiple times (even after initial coding) since this allowed for an increased familiarity and 'closeness' to the data. For example, if a new code was created after already having processed a number of interviews, those already coded should be re-examined. Stage two of the analysis attempted to "build abstraction across cases" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015: 234).

The interview process allowed for distinct and significant aspects of the policy cycle to be described and understood in more depth than would be the case through documentary analysis alone. This stage also involved examination of the mechanisms by which policy documents are actually disseminated within institutions, together with an account of processes of policy interpretation and implementation through a focus on practice.

Case Study Research

Part of this research adopted an institutional case-study design whereby some of the methods outlined in this document (semi-structured interviews) were utilised in a small number of higher education institutions – 'the cases'. In this section an outline is provided of: i. the reasons why case-study design is relevant to the nature of this research ii. the challenges of using a case-study approach iii. details concerning the manner in which the case study design will be applied. Given this research study's conceptual focus on the policy cycle, a methodological approach that places an emphasis on depth of understanding and

rich data was required. Therefore, a case study design was highly appropriate as it facilitated a focus on several critical issues which the policy cycle involves, for example, the dimension of structure vs agency in policy development and implementation. It must be noted, however, that it would be a misnomer to identify this research as 'case study research' *per se* since a large part of the analysis conducted utilises data from universities across England and not restricted to data from the 5 selected cases

The enactment theory and policy cycle perspectives enable an understanding of widening participation to be forged that recognises and takes into account the ways in which policy is mediated by individual actors. The latter have responsibility for grappling with policy meanings and their implications and making choices within specific contexts about how best to attempt to apply policy to their particular circumstances. These choices can often be overlooked if it is assumed that a policy is simply taken 'as read' and applied in a more or less straightforward manner in accordance with the expectations of those who devised it or, as Barthes would put it, as *scriptible* (Barthes & Howard, 1977: 118). In practice, individuals have a degree of scope both in the matter of how policy is interpreted and the resultant decision-making about the steps deemed necessary to take it forward to actual implementation. The extent to which actors' contexts and perspectives align with those underpinning the processes of policy formation will help to determine how much discord or tension there may be within the policy cycle overall.

This research accords with the criteria which Yin (2003) outlines as suitable for case-studies: the questions asked are *how* and *why* (in order to explore); events will not be controlled but,

instead, I will enter the research site(s) in which the events occur with the aim of gaining a contextualised and situated knowledge of them (Creswell, 2014); and, finally, this research focusses on contemporary events (Yin, 2003: 5). Case-study research design allows for an increased depth and intensity of inquiry focussed upon a particular unit of analysis. This is reflected in much of the literature which describes the use of case studies as a means of facilitating depth of analysis [italics not in the original]: "I propose to define the case study as an *intensive* study…" (Gerring, 2004: 342). This is one of the main reasons why case-study design is well suited to the current research endeavour. Specifically, since the policy cycle is such a complex and multi-faceted process, it is important that the research methods and design take these characteristics into account, in other words the researcher should attempt to capture the inherent messiness and complexity of the policy cycle being analysed. This is a task which case-study design is capable of achieving: a case-study approach "examines, through the use of a variety of data sources, a phenomenon in its naturalistic context…" (Piekkari, Welch, & Paavilainen, 2009: 569).

The contemporary view of the importance of statistical generalisability can be argued to be over-stated in current social science discourses on the basis that it can equally be argued that the most insightful findings and meanings within the social sciences *are* context-specific rather than context-independent. Indeed, Walton notes that "case studies are likely to produce the best theory: (Walton, 1992: 129). In the effort to produce knowledge that is typically regarded to be generalisable, it can be argued that significant real-world contradictions are overlooked; although it should be noted that this particular debate is often formulated in terms of the rather simplistic binary divide – "breadth vs depth". Case studies can prove to be important and useful in theory-building and in creating data from

which further research can develop; "it is worth repeating the insight of Thomas Kuhn that a discipline without a large number of thoroughly executed case studies is a discipline without systematic production of exemplars, and that a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one. In social science more good case studies could help remedy this situation" (Flyvbjerg, 2010: 27).

For this research, I concluded that an examination of multiple cases that would be of greater heuristic value than concentrating on a single instance, following Yin's advice that: "Trying to use even a 'two-case' design is therefore a worthy objective compared to doing a single-case study" (Yin, 2003: 19). It is planned that this multiple-case research design will facilitate a wider perspective on the issues whilst providing the requisite depth of knowledge and understanding of the subject matter so as to reveal the complexities and contradictions inherent in the widening participation policy cycle.

Five institutions were selected to be part of this research as institutional case studies; these cases "serve a specific purpose within the overall scope of inquiry" (Yin, 1994: 143) since they are situated within different institutional clusters within the Boliver clustering framework; these clusters are formed on the basis of teaching quality, research activity, economic resources, academic selectivity, and socioeconomic mix (Boliver, 2015: 614). The results of this cluster analysis separated universities into four distinct groups. Broadly speaking, these can be described as follows (with the schema showing where each institution is located replicated on page 30):

Cluster 1 – Oxbridge

Cluster 2 – Russell Group and other 'old' institutions

Cluster 3 – Most post-92 institutions (with exceptions)

Cluster 4 – Remaining post-92 institutions

It was decided that one case study from each of these institutional clusters would be an effective way for this research to proceed in order to gain a more complete picture of evaluation practices across the sector; Yin emphasises the importance of regarding case studies with the same level of significance for research as an experiment; instead of the weight that comes with one survey response: "individual case studies are to be selected as a laboratory investigator selects the topic of a new experiment. Multiple cases, in this sense, should be considered like multiple experiments…under these circumstances, the method of generalization is 'analytic generalization'" (Yin, 1994: 143). Given that each cluster (excluding the Oxbridge group) comprises scores of institutions, it was important that sampling would be undertaken on the basis of a theoretically-informed schema – in this instance it was based upon the variable of institutional spend on research and evaluation in widening participation as this is an important factor that can be argued to indicate level of institutional *commitment* to widening participation evaluation. On balance, it is likely to be the case that institutions which spend more on widening participation research and evaluation have also developed more sophisticated approaches to widening participation evaluation. Current widening participation policy emphasises the significance of evaluation practice for both individual institutions and the higher education sector as a whole.

This research analyses the theme of widening participation evaluation as a key component of the widening participation policy cycle and therefore institutions that have committed higher levels of institutional resource to this endeavour are a priority for consideration as case study institutions. Preliminary analysis was conducted which ranked institutions based on both the total amount of widening participation resource expended on research and evaluation, and also the percentage of their widening participation widening participation budget represented by this expenditure – this analysis included both current spend and projected spend for the subsequent five years; the individual figures for this analysis were obtained from each institutional Access and Participation Plan.

Following on from this ranking, the top 10% of institutions for both variables (amount and percentage of widening participation expenditure) were identified and noted in order for further qualitative analysis to take place; the two resulting lists contained significant overlap. Access and Participation Plans for each of the shortlisted institutions were analysed by critically reading their "Evaluation" sections in order to pick out key themes, and identify references to key debates within the broader widening participation evaluation field. Together with reflexivity and word usage (that may mirror policy), these factors combined to indicate where above average levels of consideration and effort had been invested into widening participation evaluation.

Figure 9. Bolivar Clustering of UK Universities

Cluster 1 (2 cases)	**Cluster 3 (67 cases)**	**Cluster 3 continued**
University of Cambridge[a]	Abertay Dundee University[d]	The University of Northampton[d]
University of Oxford[a]	Aberystwyth University[c]	Nottingham Trent University[f]
	Arts University Bournemouth[e]	Northumbria University[f]
Cluster 2 (39 cases)	University of the Arts London[g]	Oxford Brookes University[f]
University of Aberdeen[c]	Aston University[c]	Plymouth University[f]
University of Bath[b]	Bangor University[c]	University of Portsmouth[f]
University of Birmingham[a]	Bath Spa University[d]	Queen Margaret University[g]
University of Bristol[a]	University of Bedfordshire[d]	Robert Gordon University[g]
Cardiff University[a]	Birmingham City University[d]	University of Roehampton[g]
University of Dundee[c]	Bournemouth University[f]	University of Salford[f]
Durham University[ab]	University of Bradford[f]	Sheffield Hallam University[f]
University of East Anglia[b]	University of Brighton[g]	Staffordshire University[d]
The University of Edinburgh[a]	Brunel University London[c]	University of Stirling[c]
University of Exeter[ab]	Canterbury Christ Church University[d]	University of Sunderland[d]
University of Glasgow[a]	Cardiff Metropolitan University[f]	Swansea University[c]
Goldsmiths, University of London[b]	University of Central Lancashire[d]	Teesside University[f]
Heriot-Watt University[c]	University of Chester[g]	Ulster University[c]
Imperial College London[a]	University of Chichester[e]	University of the West of England[f]
University of Kent[c]	City University[c]	University of West London[d]
King's College London[a]	Coventry University[f]	University of the West of Scotland[d]
Lancaster University[b]	University for the Creative Arts[e]	University of Westminster[g]
University of Leeds[a]	De Montfort University[g]	The University of Winchester[e]
University of Leicester[b]	University of Derby[g]	University of Worcester[e]
University of Liverpool[a]	Edinburgh Napier University[d]	
University College London[a]	University of Essex[b]	**Cluster 4 (19 cases)**
The London School of Economics and Political Science[ab]	Falmouth University[e]	Anglia Ruskin University[d]
	University of Glamorgan[f]	Bishop Grosseteste University[e]
Loughborough University[b]	Glasgow Caledonian University[f]	University College Birmingham[e]
The University of Manchester[a]	University of Gloucestershire[g]	University of Bolton[d]
Newcastle University[a]	University of Greenwich[f]	Buckinghamshire New University[e]
The University of Nottingham[a]	Harper Adams University[e]	University of Cumbria[d]
Queen Mary University of London[ab]	University of Hertfordshire[f]	University of East London[d]
Queen's University Belfast[a]	Univ. of the Highlands & Islands[g]	Edge Hill University[g]
University of Reading[b]	University of Huddersfield[f]	Glyndwr University[e]
Royal Holloway, University of London[b]	The University of Hull[c]	Leeds Trinity University[e]
University of St Andrews[b]	Keele University[c]	Liverpool Hope University[g]
SOAS, University of London[b]	Kingston University[f]	London Metropolitan University[d]
The University of Sheffield[a]	Leeds Beckett University[d]	University of Wales, Newport[f]
University of Southampton[a]	University of Lincoln[f]	University of St Mark and St John[g]
University of Strathclyde[c]	Liverpool John Moores University[f]	Southampton Solent University[e]
University of Surrey[b]	London South Bank University[g]	University Campus Suffolk[g]
University of Sussex[b]	Manchester Metropolitan University[f]	University of Wales Trinity Saint David[c]
The University of Warwick[ab]	Middlesex University[d]	University of Wolverhampton[d]
The University of York[ab]	Newman University, Birmingham[e]	York St John University[e]

The above ranking process led to primary selection and secondary selection institutions for clusters 2, 3 and 4 which would be contacted in the first (and the second) instance for participation in this research. Cluster 1 is slightly different insofar as it comprises only two universities, and, because these two particular universities often attract the most intense levels of scrutiny from both policy actors and the general public, it is therefore argued that

these two universities act as a 'critical case' (Stake, 2006) in this research. The University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge are also distinctive in their organisational structure as they comprise 44 and 31 colleges respectively (including permanent private halls, and graduate-only colleges). This highly decentralised organisational feature is likely to result in their widening participation environments being significantly different from other institutions which, in the main, have adopted a more standard, centralised, organisational structure. As previously described, five institutions were selected to be case studies in this research and function as the key research sites.

Ethical Considerations

Any researcher, whether in the field of education or not, must be cognisant of ethical issues at every point in the research process and this is particularly the case in research which directly involves human participants as opposed to research which is more theoretical, although this may generate other challenges. Whilst it can be useful to have a set of guidelines in mind when conducting research, it is important that this does not become an exercise in merely following procedural maxims uncritically. There is a danger of viewing guidelines as an *end* rather than a *means to an end*; simply following them does not mean that one's research is unquestionably 'ethical' given that they are clearly not able to be exhaustive and anticipatory of all research circumstances. Indeed, the British Sociological Association's "Statement of Ethical Practice" notes that "The statement does not, therefore, provide a set of recipes for resolving ethical choices or dilemmas" (British Sociological Association, 2017).

This research uses the British Educational Research Association's "Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research" (British Educational Research Association, 2018) and British Sociological Association's "Statement of Ethical Practice" (British Sociological Association, 2017) as guiding documents to support thinking in relation to the ethics of undertaking the present research.

The main ethical consideration in this research concerns participant anonymity: firstly, the anonymity of the institutions chosen as case studies, and, secondly, anonymity of staff within the institutions who participated in interviews. Anonymity of institutions is achieved by 'pseudonymising' them and excluding specific identifiable information within the thesis so that it is not possible to identify the universities described and examined. The second aspect of anonymity, concerning the participating staff within the institutions, presents more challenges because there are only a relatively small number of practitioners involved with widening participation evaluation in each higher education institution; therefore, the main ethical concern is that other members of staff within the institutions might be able to identify their colleagues. This possibility could have led to a situation whereby interviewees would have been reticent to provide any critical information about institutional practices through fear of negative repercussions. These concerns were allayed by explaining to participants that they would be pseudonymised post-interview and that personal identifiable information would not be included in the study. This accords with the BERA guidelines which state: "The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data is considered the norm for the conduct of research…This could involve employing 'fictionalising' approaches when reporting, and where using such approaches researchers

should fully explain how and why they have done so…" (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

It is likely that, in many cases, individuals at interview sites might know that some of their colleagues are, or have been, involved in an interview process – this fact may arise from discussions regarding their participation, or simply through an awareness that interviews have occurred in a particular space at their institution. The BERA guidelines acknowledge that this may happen in the research process: "if conducting fieldwork within a small, close-knit community, it may be impossible to prevent some members of that community becoming aware – either though observation or because participants discuss it with them – of some details about the research that is being conducted." (British Educational Research Association, 2018). These issues were explicitly outlined to participants who were made aware of these possibilities.

Finally, this research received ethical approval through the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC)

Chapter Four: Understanding Widening Participation Discourses Through the Access Corpus

This chapter explores the changing nature of widening participation discourse over the 15-year period from 2006 to 2021 using the Access Corpus comprising institutional output from English universities in the form of Access and Participation Plans (APPs) and Access Agreements (AAs). This researcher-curated Access Corpus of ~12 million words (n = 12, 223,799) has been used to conduct analyses which have tracked shifting emphases on particular widening participation topics over time and within different clusters of English universities. The importance of such discourse tracking to this thesis cannot be overstated. This analysis is not mere background or context for the qualitative stages of this research, but should instead be seen as vital to an understanding of the dynamic way that widening participation language and discourse both shapes, and are in turn shaped, by policy.

The first part of this chapter presents the results of the LDA topic model and K-means clustering to determine: which widening participation topics are discussed in the Access Corpus, how they change over time, and how topics cluster together. Following presentation of these initial results which frame the rest of the discussion within this chapter, discussion is centred on three distinct areas of the Access Corpus: Post-2012 Changes; Post-2018 Changes; and Student Characteristics. Post-2012 Changes refers to the discursive modification that took place after the tripling of tuition fees, and this discussion focuses on bursaries and scholarships, consumer focussed higher education, and increased marketisation in widening participation. Post-2018 Changes explores discursive shifts following the establishment of the Office for Students which marked a significant change in the operation of the higher education system; discussions in this sub-section relate to the regulatory function of the Office for Students, the adoption and use of certain concepts by institutions, and the developing emphasis on the notion of "What Works?". The final element of this chapter – Student Characteristics – outlines: a. key changes in the way in

which ethnicity is discussed across the Access Corpus, with a particular focus on "White Working Class Boy" discourses, and the terminological movement from BME to BAME in institutional output b. the changing language of 'aspiration' within widening participation output. These three sections - Post-2012 Changes, Post-2018 Changes and Student Characteristics - contain within them several different analytic techniques: collocation analysis, word frequency analysis, and Jaccard similarity.

Results

Topic Model

This section presents extracted information from the LDA topic model which was conducted on the Access Corpus. The following tables represent i. the top 10 words in each of the 7 topics throughout the entire corpus ii. the top 10 words in each of the topics that are "overrepresented" in the corpus. This "overrepresentation" is worked out by comparing the β value for a specific word in a specific topic with the average β for that word across all topics and dividing by the standard deviation of the beta across all topics; thus, each word is given a positive or negative value based on its comparison to the mean (presented as a differential beta in standard deviations).

A degree of interpretation is involved in determining the meanings represented by the topics and this is largely based upon two significant factors: coherence of topic words and researcher knowledge of the subject matter. Additionally, topic names and their meanings can be checked for validity by observing how the occurrence of each topic changes over time, and whether the frequency of topic discussion *makes sense* given the chronology of policy implementation. The topic names decided upon using these criteria are presented in the following the two tables overleaf.

Topic 1		Topic 2		Topic 3		Topic 4		Topic 5		Topic 6		Topic 7	
Term	Beta	Term	Beta	Term	Beta	Term	Beta	Term	Beta	Term	Beta	Term	Beta
Gap	0.026	University	0.030	University	0.021	School	0.025	School	0.018	University	0.025	University	0.026
Access	0.014	Fee	0.020	Access	0.014	Activity	0.017	Programme	0.013	School	0.020	Target	0.021
Datum	0.014	Bursary	0.018	Target	0.010	University	0.015	Access	0.013	College	0.014	Access	0.016
Attainment	0.013	College	0.013	Success	0.009	College	0.014	College	0.012	Target	0.012	School	0.014
Plan	0.012	Access	0.012	Progression	0.009	Outreach	0.012	Activity	0.012	Activity	0.012	Activity	0.013
Participation	0.011	Participation	0.011	Activity	0.008	Target	0.011	Target	0.009	Access	0.012	Outreach	0.013
Target	0.010	Income	0.010	Learn	0.008	Access	0.011	Education	0.008	Programme	0.011	Agreement	0.010
Continuation	0.009	Time	0.010	Provide	0.008	Participation	0.009	Participation	0.008	Outreach	0.011	Retention	0.010
BAME	0.009	Agreement	0.010	Study	0.008	Programme	0.008	Outreach	0.007	Provide	0.007	Programme	0.009
Rate	0.009	Education	0.009	Time	0.008	Fee	0.007	Study	0.007	Admission	0.007	Entrant	0.009
Gap Analysis		Funding		Progression		Widening Access		School / College Links		Admissions		Access Performance Targets	

Topic 1		Topic 2		Topic 3		Topic 4		Topic 5		Topic 6		Topic 7	
Term	DBeta	**Term**	DBeta	Term	DBeta	Term	DBeta	Term	DBeta	Term	DBeta	Term	DBeta
BAME	5.734	Scholarship	3.292	Engagement	1.903	Day	1.663	London	2.261	Admission	2.396	Retention	2.688
Gap	5.540	Tuition	2.408	Graduate	1.811	Pupil	1.058	Pre	1.220	Teacher	1.500	HESA	2.372
White	4.609	Bursary	2.163	Success	1.609	Event	0.987	Session	1.038	Participant	1.449	Column	2.191
Continuation	3.780	Fee	1.956	Learn	1.521	WP	0.953	Project	0.809	Summer	1.233	Benchmark	1.986
Reduce	3.636	Income	1.665	Team	1.504	Session	0.941	Teacher	0.704	UK	1.070	Entrant	1.767
Black	3.587	Cost	1.621	Employment	1.454	School	0.928	Background	0.644	Cohort	1.005	Table	1.635
Compare	3.292	Additional	1.457	Practice	1.425	Advice	0.909	OFFA	0.596	Entry	0.996	Description	1.546
POLAR	3.287	Fund	1.119	Enhance	1.421	Aspiration	0.906	Scheme	0.593	Fair	0.991	Indicator	1.477
Attainment	2.953	Receive	1.093	Equality	1.363	London	0.884	Lead	0.577	Potential	0.866	Milestone	1.369
Investment	2.474	Scheme	1.066	Approach	1.322	Potential	0.770	Pupil	0.553	Subject	0.863	Collaborative	1.271

Table 1. Most common words and overrepresented words by LDA topics. Highlights added for emphasis.

Beta = Probability of a term occurring in a particular topic (word Betas sum up to 1 within each topic.)

DBeta (Differential Beta) = (beta − average beta) / average beta

Gap Analysis

Most Common	Overrepresented
Gap	**BAME**
Access	Gap
Datum	**White**
Attainment	**Continuation**
Plan	**Reduce**
Participation	**Black**
Target	Compare
Continuation	**POLAR**
BAME	**Attainment**
Rate	

Topic 1 refers to analyses that universities conduct in relation to 'gaps'; this could be defined as gaps in institutional performance in relation to student access, continuation, or progression. Of particular note are the words "Datum", "POLAR", "BAME", "Black", "White", "Continuation" and "Reduce". These words indicate that this topic is particularly concerned with investigating and analysing gaps in performance between students from different socio-demographic backgrounds. Both "Access", "Attainment", and "Continuation" are terms mentioned which signify the pervading nature of these "gaps" across the defined student lifecycle. The terms "Datum", "Plan", and "Rate" are likely to feature in the strategies that universities have devised to address these student performance gaps.

Funding

Most Common	Overrepresented
University	**Scholarship**
Fee	**Tuition**
Bursary	**Bursary**
College	**Fee**
Access	Income
Participation	Cost
Income	Additional
Time	Fund
Agreement	Receive
Education	

Topic 2 represents discussions with respect to funding and the provision of money for students attending university; this can be inferred from use of the terms "Bursary", "Tuition", "Scholarship", and "Fee". The issue of student fees and funding arrangements have been much debated in widening participation circles and many HE leaders previously believed that providing direct monetary support to students wishing to enrol in higher education would be an effective method of "doing access". Thus, it might reasonably be expected that this topic will appear more frequently at the beginning of the corpus, and gradually decline over the period analysed as views about the benefits of providing direct financial support to students changed – this pattern would be observed from subsequent analyses.

Most Common	Overrepresented
University	Engagement
Access	**Graduate**
Target	Success
Success	Learn
Progression	Team
Activity	**Employment**
Learn	Practice
Provide	Enhance
Study	**Equality**
Time	

This topic relates to 'progression' both as defined by the OfS, in terms of moving on to *either* postgraduate study *or* employment, and also as generally understood *within* the higher education sector as student success in moving through successive years of study and successfully completing a course.

Widening Access Day-to-Day Activities

Most Common	Overrepresented
School	**Day**
Activity	**Pupil**
University	**Event**
College	**WP**
Outreach	**Session**
Target	**School**
Access	**Advice**
Participation	**Aspiration**
Programme	London
Fee	

Topic 4 broadly represents "widening participation" strategies and, in particular, the specific events and forms of pupil engagement that universities facilitate for schools: "School", "Activity", "University", "College", "Outreach", "Access", "Programme". There is also a specification concerning the *type* of event format, beneficiary or purpose: "Day", "Pupil", "Event", "Session", "Advice", "Aspiration" (where aspiration is understood to involve fairly standard "aspiration raising" sessions for school pupils).

Schools & College Links

Most Common	Overrepresented
School	**London**
Programme	Pre
Access	**Session**
College	Project
Activity	**Teacher**
Target	Background
Education	OFFA
Participation	Scheme
Outreach	Lead
Study	

These words refer to the links that universities have with school and colleges. Terms suggesting this include: "School", "College", "Target", "Outreach", "Session", "Teacher"; there is even a geographic location in the "over-represented" word list, namely "London", which further suggests that this topic relates to the kinds of links that universities have with school and colleges.

Admissions

Most Common	Overrepresented
University	**Admission**
School	Teacher
College	Participant
Target	Summer
Activity	UK
Access	**Cohort**
Programme	**Entry**
Outreach	**Fair**
Provide	**Potential**
Admission	

Topic 6 refers to admissions processes; this is signified by the words: "University, "Admission", "Cohort", "Entry", "Fair", "Potential". These words mirror those that are employed by institutions in relation to their admissions policies, for example, references to "fair access" or considering students' "Potential" given appropriate contextual information about their backgrounds.

Access Performance Targets

Most Common	Overrepresented
University	**Retention**
Target	HESA
Access	Column
School	**Benchmark**
Activity	Entrant
Outreach	**Table**
Agreement	Description
Retention	**Indicator**
Programme	**Milestone**
Entrant	

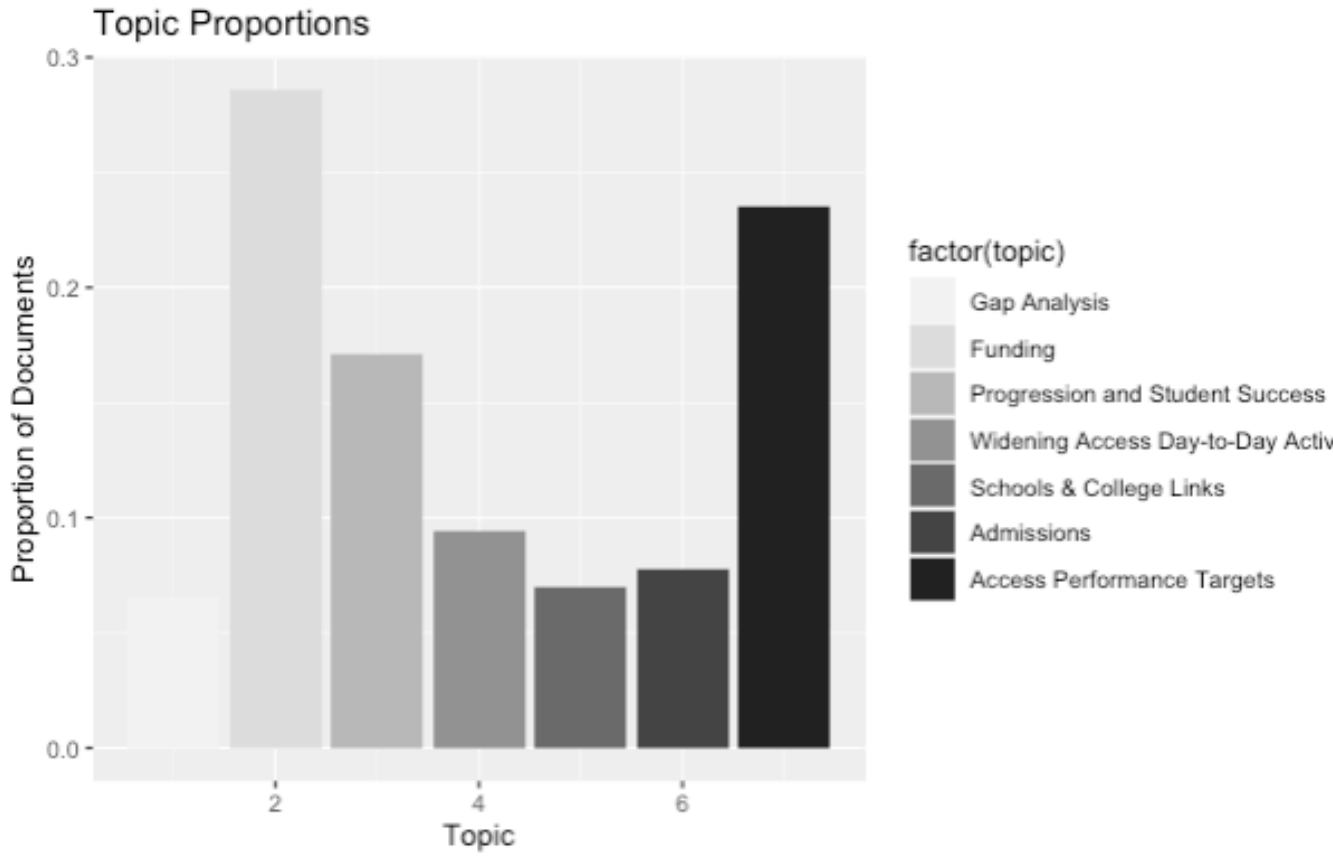
The most common and overrepresented words in topic 7 reflect an emphasis on access performance targets. This is exemplified by the words: "Target", "Access", "Retention", "Benchmark", "Indicator", "Milestone", and even "Table" which may reflect how targets are reported.

Clustering of Documents

The next step in the analysis of the Access Corpus is to explore if, and how, individual Access and Participation Plans cluster together – based on the number of instances of the 7 LDA topic model topics within each document. This analysis is conducted by creating *radar charts* where each of the corners of the radar chart represents a topic and thus the

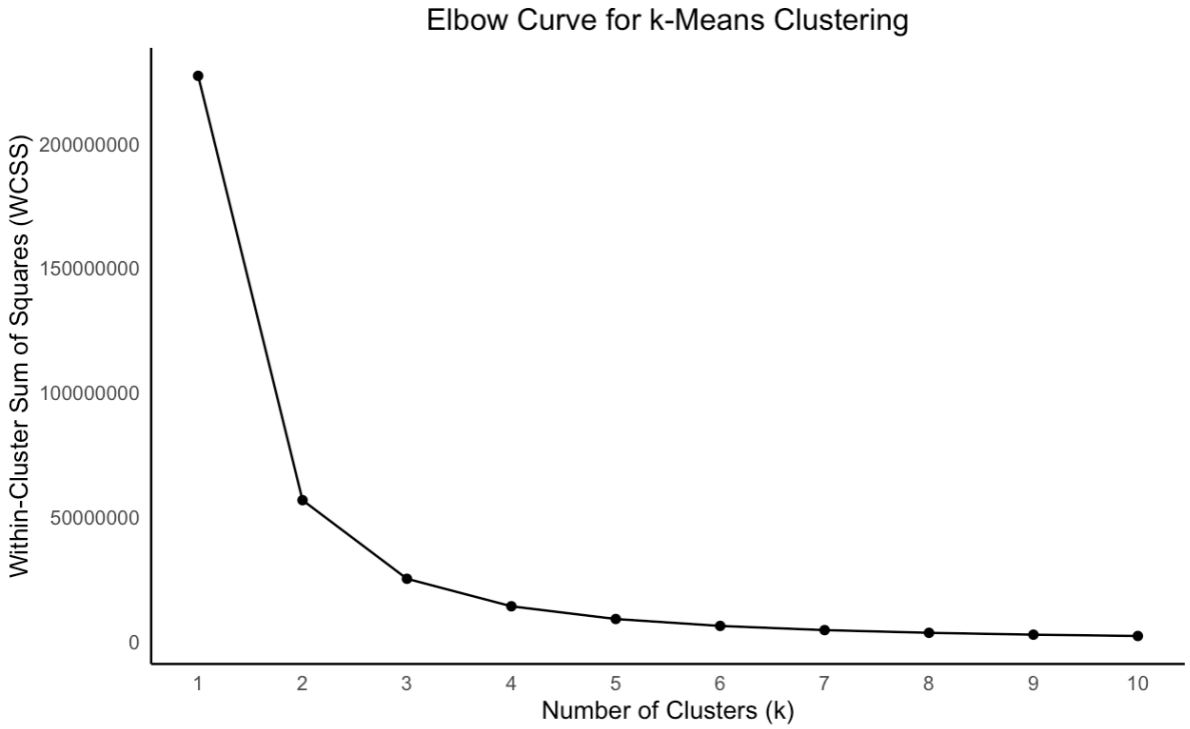
closer a document's line is to that of a topic corner, the greater the representation of that topic can be found in that particular document. One way to understand this method is to imagine that each document has a unique "fingerprint" comprising different configurations of different LDA topics. To take an example: the Access and Participation Plan from University of Example in the year 2006 might discuss LDA Topic 1 (Gap Analysis) a good deal, whereas the same institution's 2020 Access and Participation Plan may discuss Topic 1 (Gap Analysis) relatively little – in this example, a radar chart for 2006 will show the line close to the edge of the radar chart near the corner representing Topic 1 (Gap Analysis), whereas the 2020 chart will show it further towards the middle of the graph. The bar chart below displays the distribution of topics across the Access Corpus.

Figure 10. Proportions of each topic in the Access Corpus



As mentioned previously, each document has a unique configuration of correspondence to each of the 7 topics which can usefully be thought of as a unique fingerprint for each document. Thus, one of the key early explanatory analyses to be conducted ought to be an identification of topics which have similar configurations, or, fingerprint patterns. K-means clustering (Hartigan & Wong, 1979) is conducted to produce 5 clusters (K = 5) which appear similar to one another. 5 clusters were chosen as an *a priori* value for the analysis, based on an exploration of the within-cluster sum of squares for differing K values; an elbow plot of this initial analysis indicates that 5 clusters would be suitable:

Figure 11. Elbow curve for K-means clustering



The maths behind K-means clustering can be described as follows (Jain, 2010):

> Let X = $\{x_i\}$, i = 1,…, n be the set of the n d-dimensional points to be clustered into a set of K clusters, $C = \{c_k, K = 1, \ldots, K\}$. K-means algorithm finds a partition such

that the squared error between the empirical means of a cluster and the points in the cluster is minimized. Let μk be the mean of cluster ck. The squared error between μk and ck is defined as

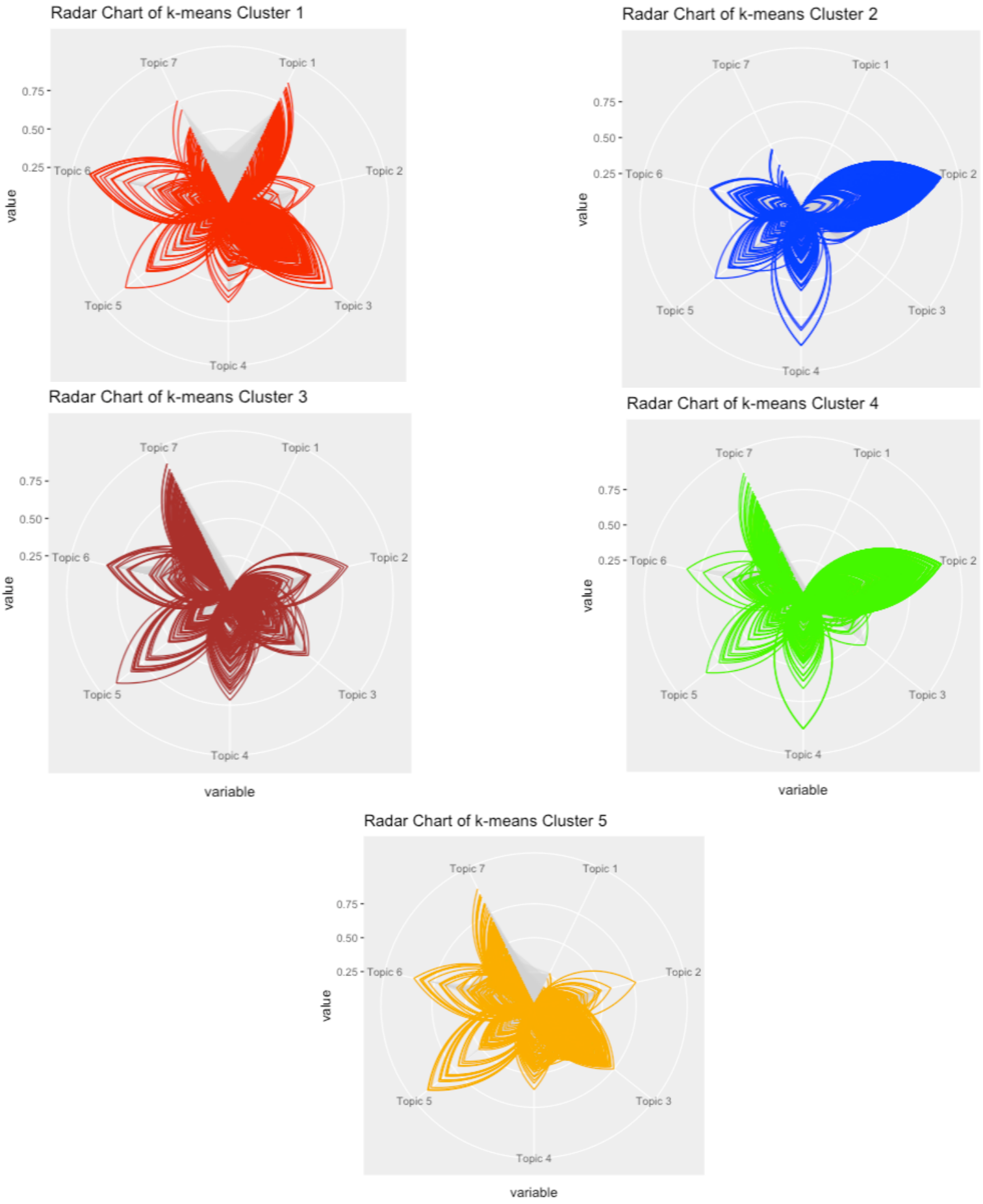
$$J(c_k) = \sum_{\{x_i \in \epsilon_{\{c_k\}}\}} ||x_i - \mu_k||^2$$

The goal of K-means is to minimize the sum of the squared error over all K clusters.

$$J(c) = \sum_{\{k=1\}}^{k} \sum_{\{x_i \in \epsilon_{\{c_k\}}\}} ||x_i - \mu_k||^2$$

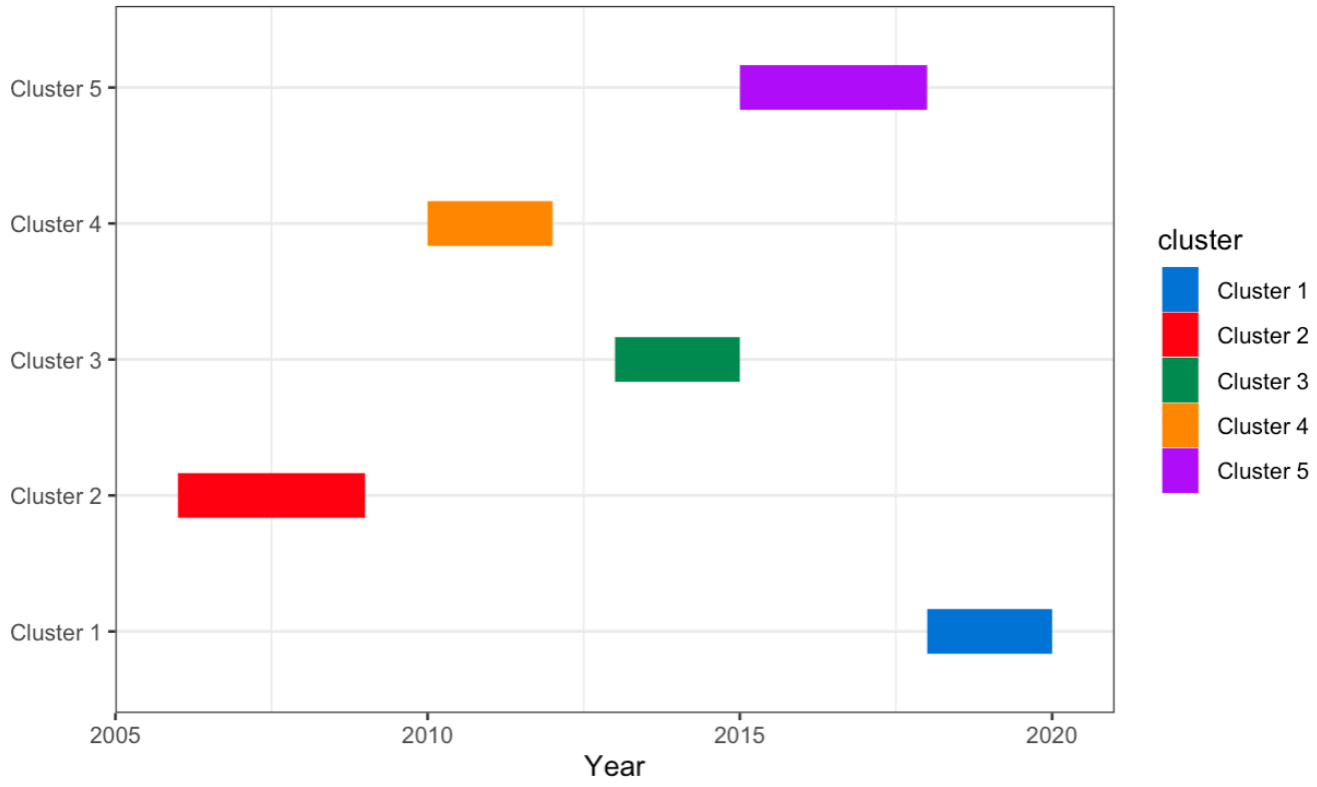
The radar charts for each of the 5 K-means clusters are (overleaf):

Figure 12. Radar Charts for the five K-means clusters



From this, we can see that clusters differ greatly in their emphasis of one or another topic; as may have been expected from the Topic Proportions graph, there is more of an emphasis on topic 2 and topic 7. Simple univariate analyses can be conducted on each of the five clusters produced by k-means clustering to determine if there are similarities in-year of document produced. The timeline below displays how each cluster fits into different timepoints over the corpus (note: there is no one year that is not covered by any of the clusters).

Figure 13. K-means clusters mapped onto the Access Corpus timeline



It can be seen from the above that documents similar to one another in terms of configuration of topics appear to have been produced or released around the same periods of time. Given the strength of this pattern, it may be inferred that a likely explanation of

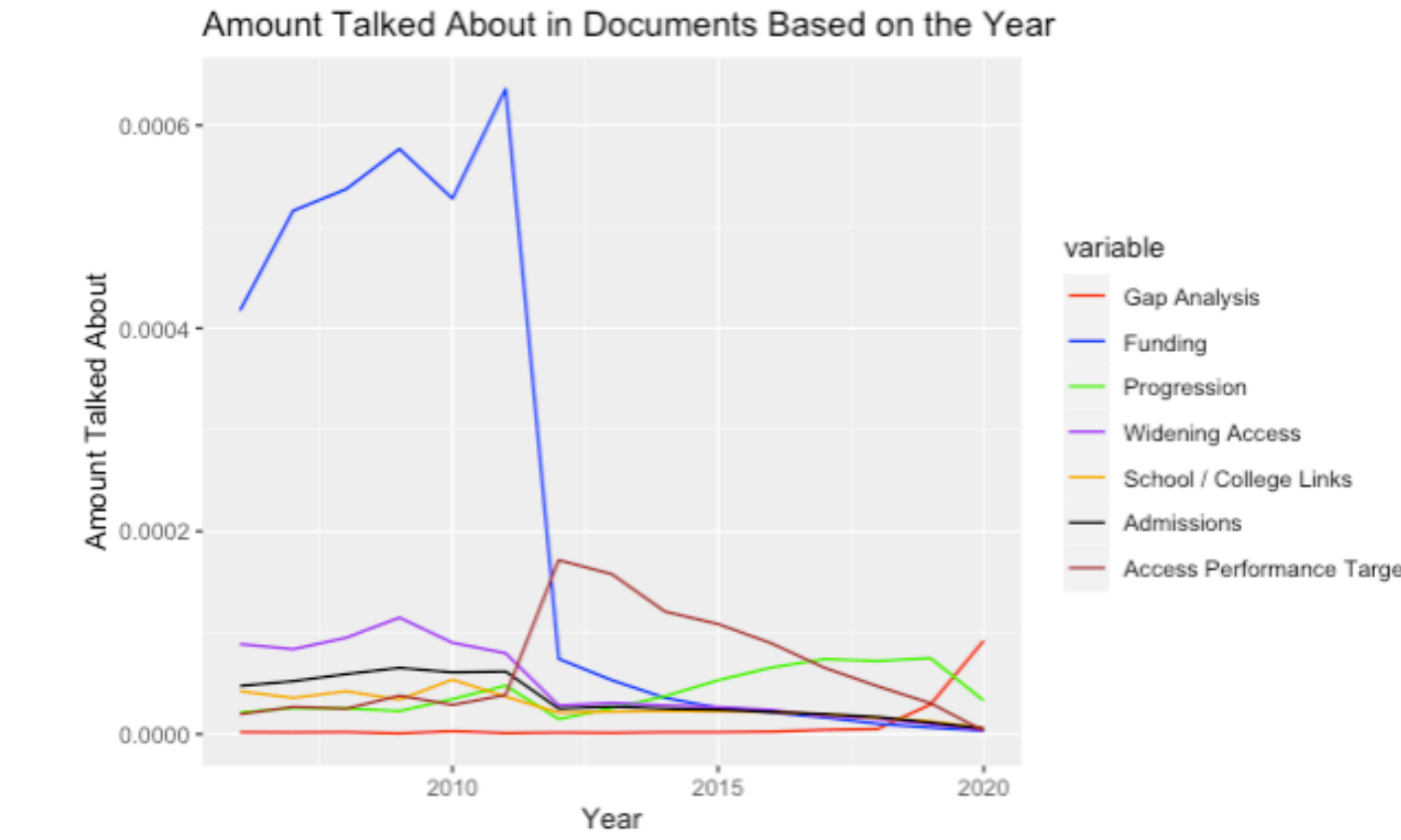
similarity between documents across the Access Corpus is the time of their publication or production; it is therefore important to investigate this change over time.

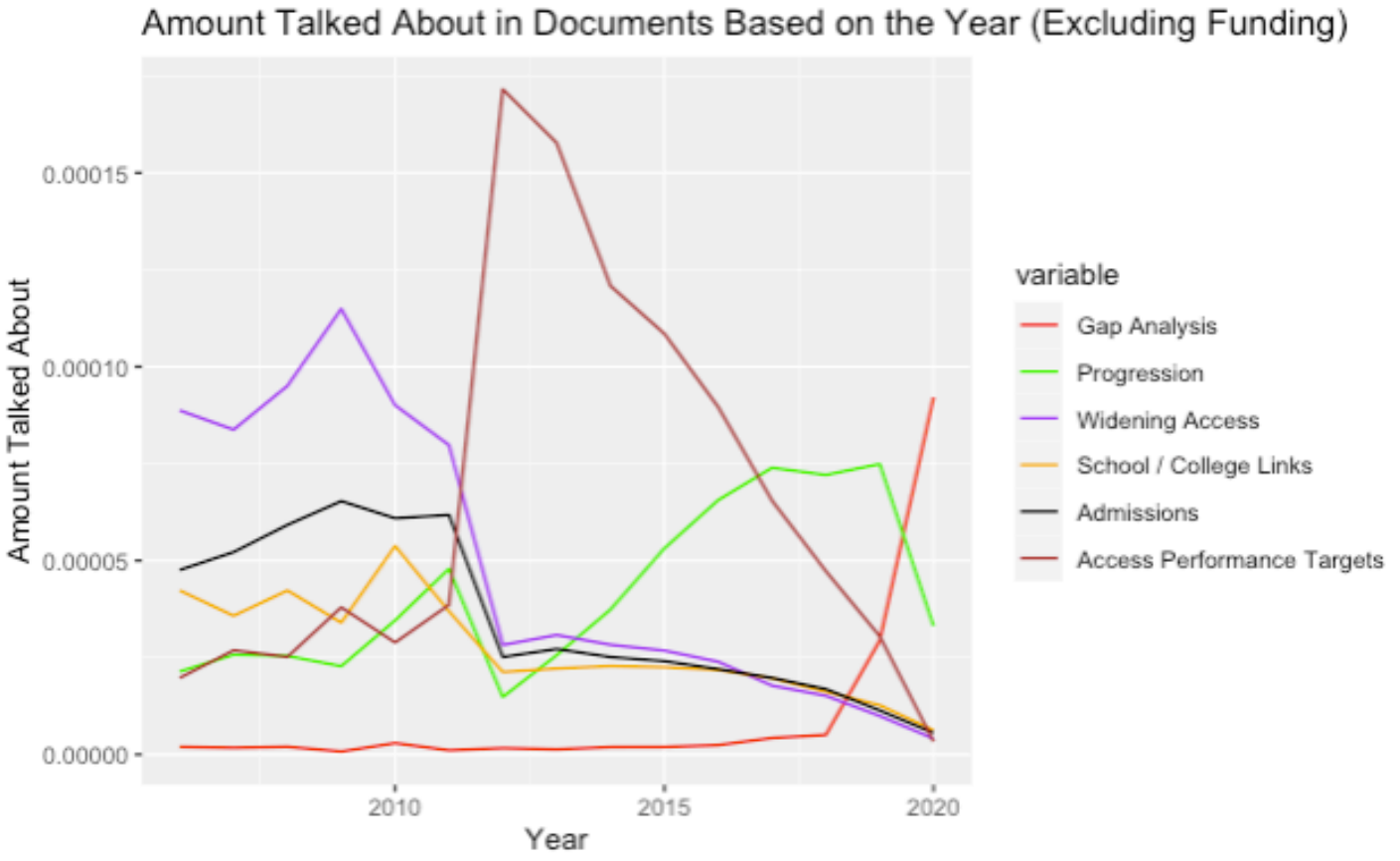
Change Over Time

Leaving K-means clustering behind, this subsection outlines the frequency with which institutions mention each of the seven topics over the entire corpus; this is particularly important for understanding how discourses morph and shift over an extended period. Alongside a broader exploration of these changes, more fine-grained analysis is conducted for each Boliver cluster since it is important to understand the differential featuring of widening participation topics in university output over time.

The table overleaf is an amalgamation of seven individual line graphs illustrating changes over time for each of the seven topics latent in the large corpus. As we can see, there are significant changes in discourse over the 15 years represented in the corpus; these changes will be explored by individual topic below.

Figure 14. Changing frequency of discourses over time (with and without the topic "Funding")

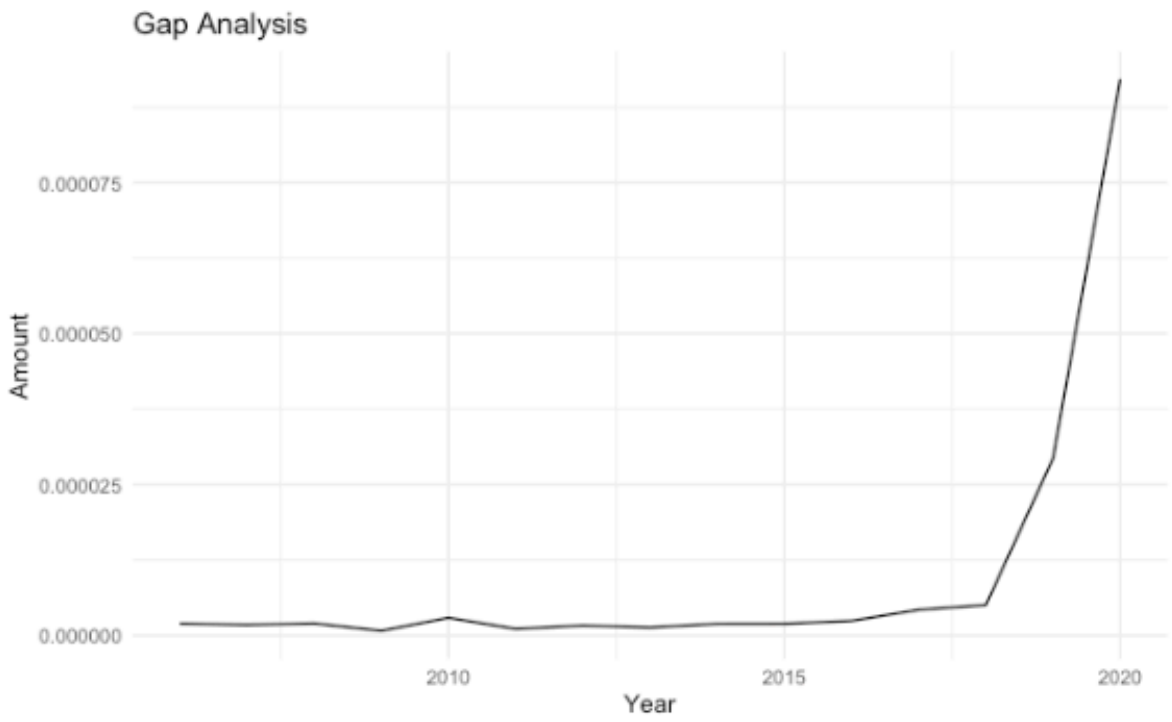




Gap Analysis

Topic 1 relates to "Gap Analysis" and appears to be fairly stable over the corpus until 2018 when it rises dramatically up until the present day. This matches a pattern from the k means clustering analysis in which documents that fall into k means cluster 1 are predominantly produced in the years 2018, 2019, and 2020. There are specific policy changes that occurred in 2018 which could explain why analysing performance 'gaps' by institutions may have increased from this point of time onwards.

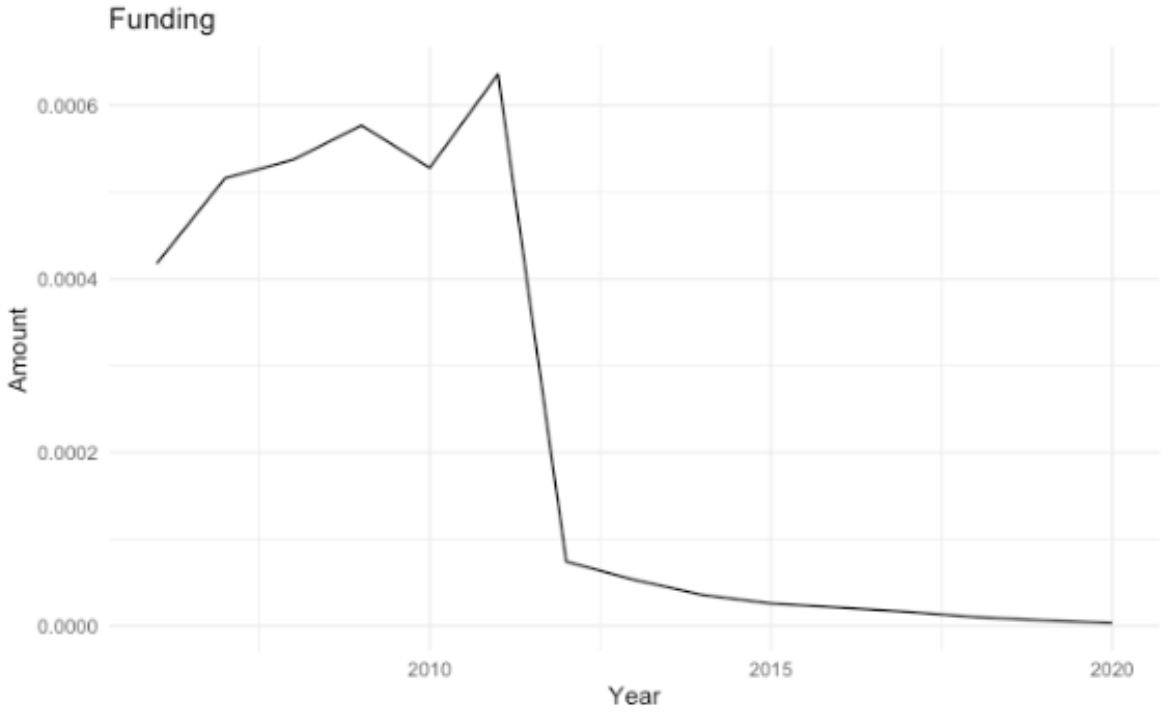
Figure 15. Gap analysis across the Access Corpus



Topic 2 – Funding

Topic 2 relates to funding arrangements, and in particular the way in which universities might offer financial incentives to students to enter a specific university. This appears to be a popular topic within university output from the start of the corpus up to 2012 when there is a significant decrease and then a plateau which remains the case to the end of the corpus – this suggests that these types of student funding arrangements were a popular strategy for universities to employ early on in the corpus until, potentially, some aspect of policy changed and affected institutional strategies.

Figure 16. Funding across the Access Corpus

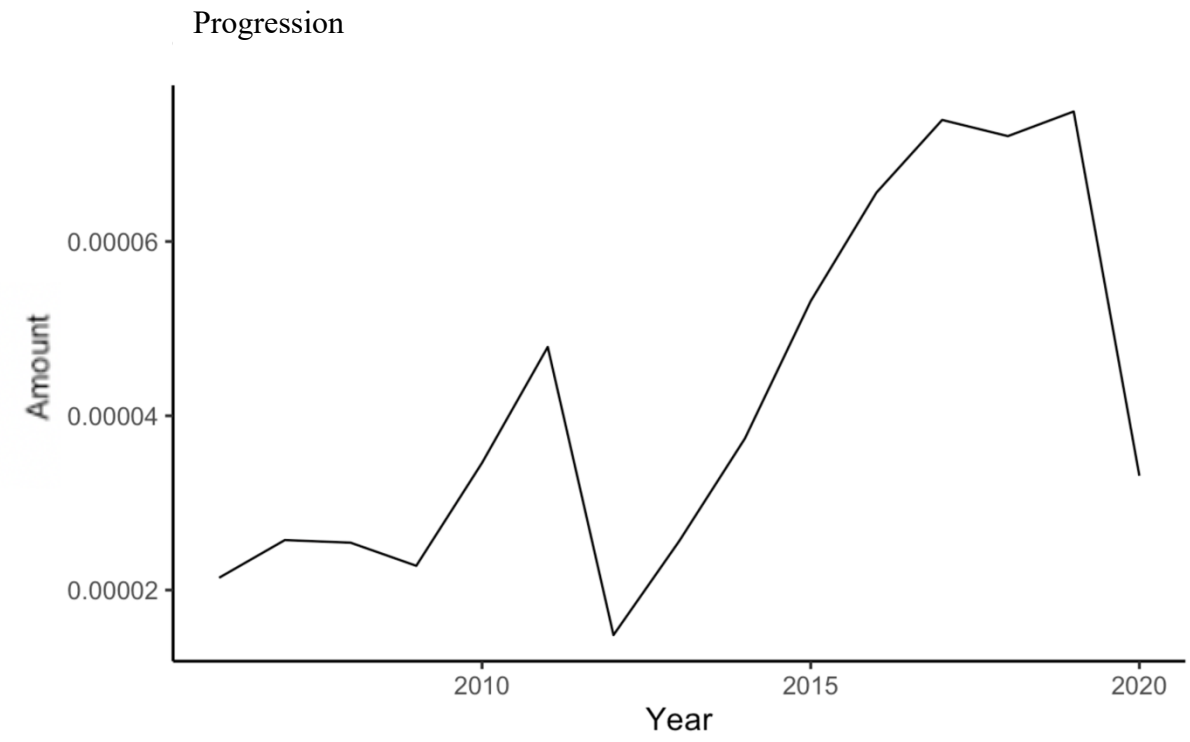


Topic 3 – Progression

This topic refers to discussions relating to "progression" in Access Agreements and Access and Participation Plans. We can see from the graph that there is some fluctuation in the extent to which universities discuss this topic, however, the overall trend is a positive one. Topic 3 increases in frequency up until 2012 when it declines significantly, followed by a

steady rise to 2019, and then a sharp decrease in 2020. It is important to note that whilst the changes in the below graph appear large, it is advisable to view these changes within the context of the amalgamated graphs this will enable us to consider how these changes can be compared with other topic changes. From examining the amalgamated graph, we can see that "Progression" begins as one of the least discussed topics, but ends as the second highest (after "Gap Analysis").

Figure 17. Progression across the Access Corpus

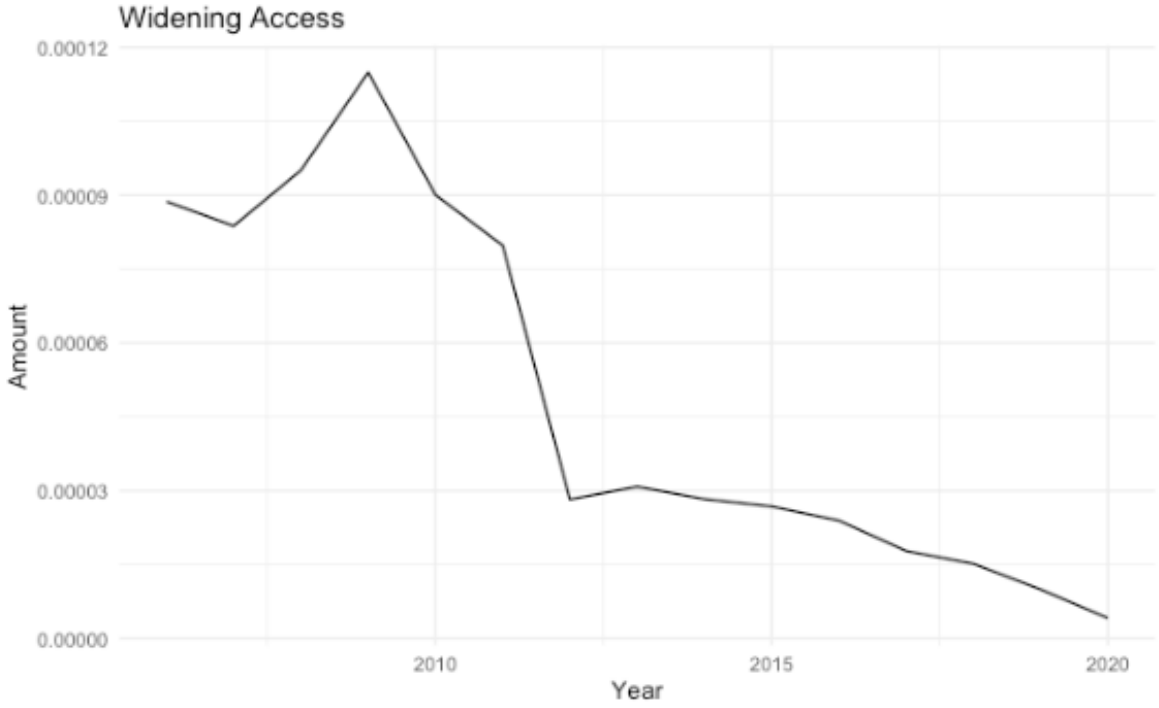


Topic 4 – Widening Access Strategies

Topic 4 represents widening access strategies undertaken by universities, and specifically events that occur in schools and colleges and are related to raising pupils' aspirations and providing information, advice, and guidance. We can see from the line graph below that the overall trend for this topic is that of decline, with 2020 marking the year when this topic

is discussed least. Indeed, there is a sharp decrease in institutional discussion of this topic from 2012 to 2013.

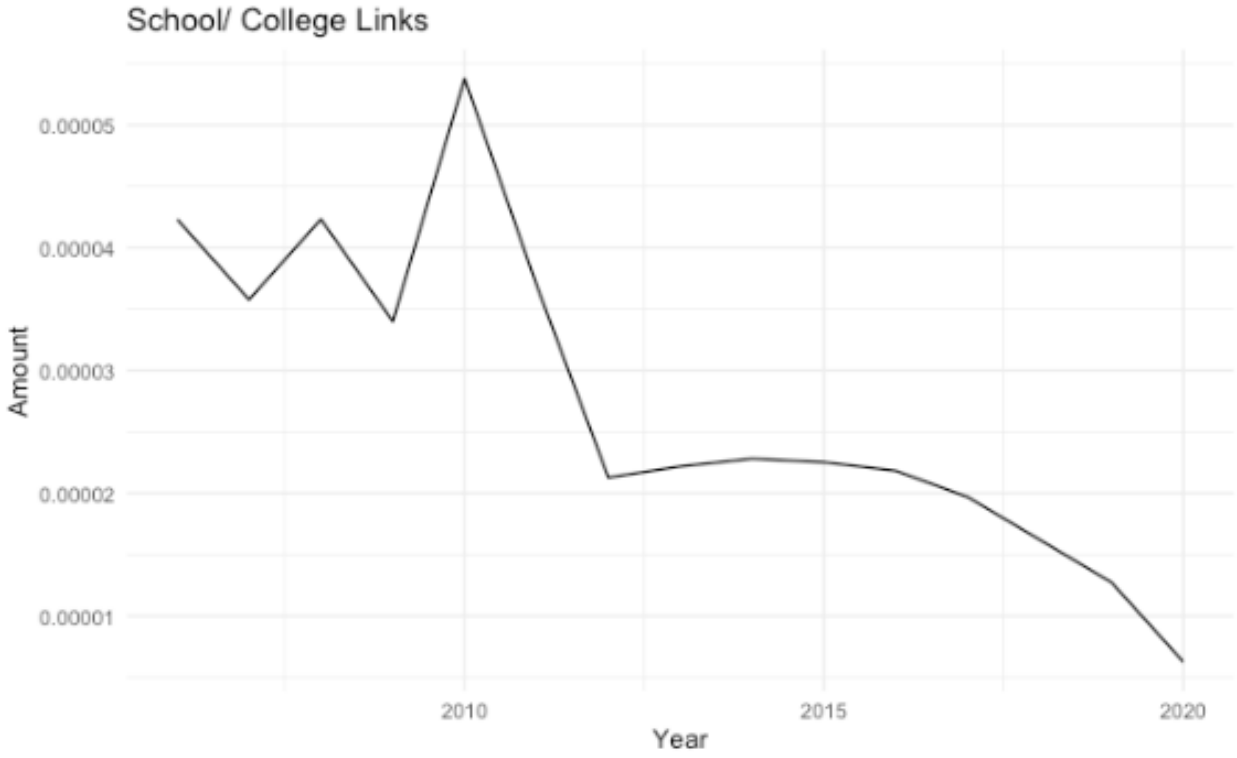
Figure 18. Widening Access across the Access Corpus



Topic 5 – School / College Links

Topic 5 (school & college links) follows a similar pattern to topic 4, following a generally downward trajectory from 2006 through to 2020. Again, it must be noted that the margin of change is rather small from highest point to lowest point and a similar trajectory is followed as with topic 6.

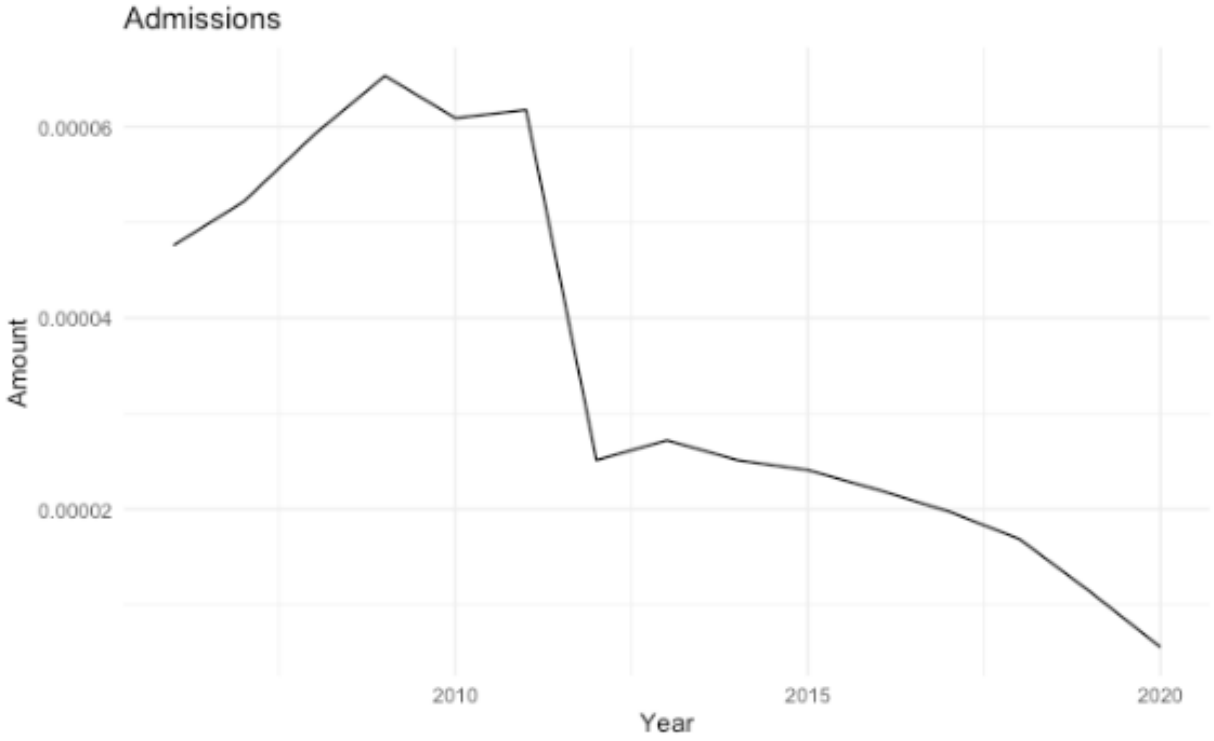
Figure 19. School / college links across the Access Corpus



Topic 6 – Admissions

The trajectory of the admissions topic in the corpus follows the same broad downward trajectory as topic 5 (schools and colleges links), with a similarly large drop around 2012-2013 evident in both, followed by a steady decline from 2013 to 2020.

Figure 20. Admissions across the Access Corpus



Topic 7 – Access Performance Targets across the Access Corpus

The final topic, access performance targets, has a different trajectory compared to each of the other topics since it is relatively stable from 2006 to 2012, and then rises rapidly (in opposition to most other topics) to its highest point in 2013, followed by a slow decline to 2020 where the topic is less frequently discussed compared to 2006.

Figure 21. Access performance targets across the Access Corpus



Discussion

This section discusses key findings from the analysis presented in the results sub-section above, and supplements them with extra data in the form of collocation and key-word frequency analysis in specific cases. The tripling of tuition fees in 2012 marked a significant transformation of arrangements for funding the higher education system in the UK and a change in the emphases which universities placed on different areas of their activities; this

is discussed in the first substantive part of this sub-section. Following this, more recent trends from 2018 are identified since this point marks the introduction into the HE sector of the Office for Students (OfS) regulator and the requirement for the sector to produce Access and Participation Plans (rather than Access Agreements). This can be considered a key juncture for UK higher education generally, but specifically in relation to matters of widening participation and widening participation evaluation. In addition, issues relating to student characteristics will be explored, particularly in relation to how ethnicity is discussed throughout the corpus given that ethnicity issues are particularly prevalent throughout.

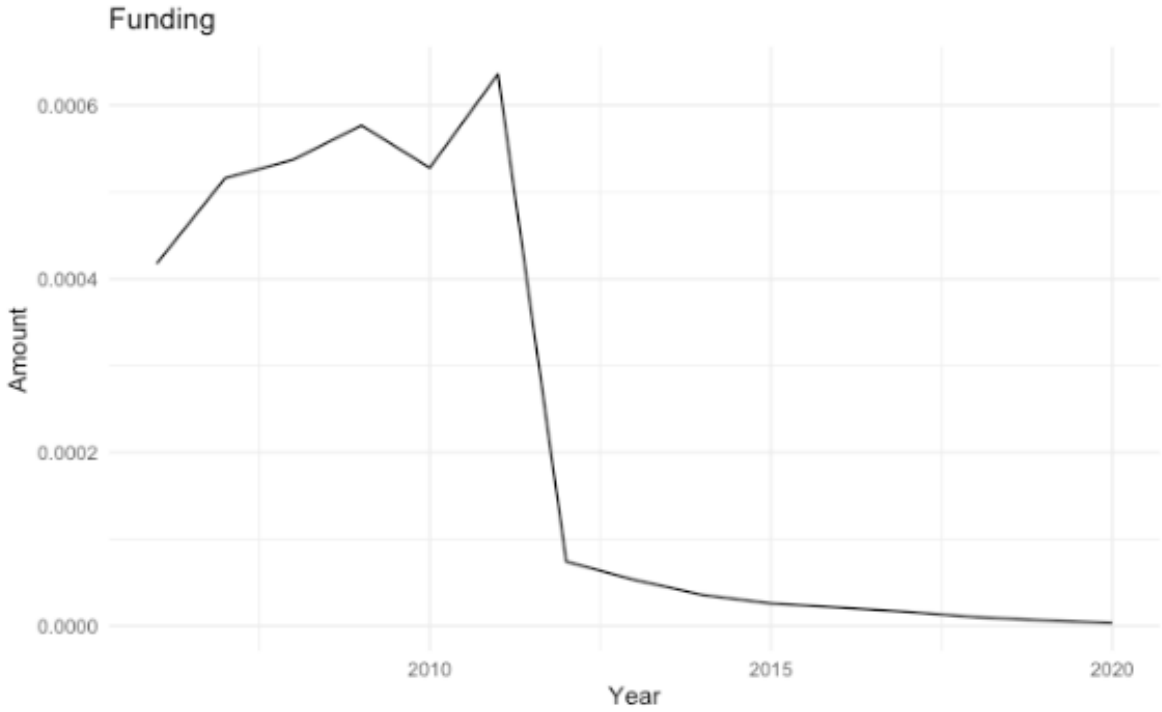
Post 2012 Changes – Tripling of University Tuition Fees

In September 2012, the decision was taken by the coalition government (Conservative and Liberal Democrat) that annual tuition fees for undergraduate degrees in England should be increased to £9000; this was a tripling of the previous cost of university tuition (putting to one side the small rise due to inflation that occurred in 2009). As may be expected, this had a huge impact on the higher education system and on prospective students which was felt keenly both in admissions to high prestige courses such as medicine and dentistry (Gallagher *et al.*, 2017), and also across the sector where "there was a significant drop in the number of people starting full-time undergraduate courses – 47, 000 fewer students compared with 2011-12" (HEFCE, 2013: 3) – though it should be noted that the number of applicants rose in subsequent years after this initial decline. The effects of the 2012 reforms can be considered important for the interpretation of the change-over-time results of the topic model presented earlier in the chapter. It can be observed that there are major changes in 6 of the 7 topics at the point when fees were tripled: Funding, Progression, Widening Access, School/College Links, Admissions, Access Performance Targets. Thus, it can be reasonably inferred that the emphasis which universities placed on the different

topics noticeably altered in response to the 2012 changes in student funding arrangements, and, perhaps more significantly, that these changes become embedded over the longer-term. This can be observed by noting that the changes which occurred in topic frequency do not recover to the same levels as pre-2012, but instead often continue on a new trajectory up to the present day: the shift in topic frequencies being dramatic in many cases.

One of the most significant changes post-2012 was the reduction in instances of universities mentioning the topic *Funding* in their Access Agreements. There are, of course, other contextual factors that may have contributed to the reduction in frequency that universities referenced the constituent components of the topic *Funding* (such as "Bursary", "Tuition", "Scholarship", and "Fee"). Two such contextual factors may be proposed: i. increased questioning by HEIs of the effectiveness of targeted bursaries for eligible widening participation prospective students and ii. introduction of the National Scholarship Programme (NSP). However, given that the National Scholarship Programme ended in 2015 and that there was not an increase in universities mentioning it in their Access Agreements/ Access and Participation Plans, it can be assumed that the introduction of the National Scholarship Programme was not one of the drivers for the decrease in the topic *Funding* being referenced in the corpus; in all likelihood this supports an interpretation that the increased questioning by HEIs (and others) of the efficacy of bursaries and other support funding targeted at widening participation students could perhaps be a more relevant explanatory factor. This is illustrated in the *Funding* change over time graph overleaf.

Figure 22. Funding across the Access Corpus



A systematic review of the use of bursaries in higher education institutions noted that "The provision of financial support through bursaries has formed a key pillar of institutional strategies for WP as a means of removing the financial barrier to participating in higher education for students from less-well-off backgrounds" (Kaye, 2021: 779). This conclusion appears to be consistent with the frequency with which the topic is mentioned in university output, which is shown to be prevalent in the early years of the corpus – from 2006 to 2011. There are a few key academic papers relating to the use of bursaries by higher education institutions - as an attempt to widen participation by removing financial barriers – which were published in 2005, 2010, 2012, and 2013 (excluding those that were published *after* the point at which universities ceased mentioning it in AAs and *after* the national scholarship programme).

2005 – "Opportunity knocks? The impact of bursary schemes on students from low-income backgrounds" (Hatt *et al.*, 2005)

2010 – "Bursaries and institutional aid in higher education in England: do they safeguard and promote fair access?" (Callender, 2010)

2012 – "Expensive and failing? The role of student bursaries in widening participation and fair access in England" (Harrison & Hatt, 2012)

2013 – "Student perceptions of the impact of bursaries and institutional aid on their higher education choices and the implications for the national scholarship programme in England" (Callender & Wilkinson, 2013)

From these papers we can see that academic arguments supporting the effectiveness of bursaries declines from a point where they are considered to enhance widening participation opportunity: "bursary students were more likely to continue with their studies one year after entry than students from low-income backgrounds who were not in receipt of financial assistance" (Hatt *et* al., 2005: 373) in 2005, to a position whereby the increasingly prevailing view of bursaries regards them as: "Expensive and failing? The role of student bursaries in widening participation and fair access in England" (Harrison & Hatt, 2012). It is particularly interesting to note that the authors of the latter paper, questioning bursary effectiveness, are the same authors of the paper from 7 years previously which lauded their positive contribution to the enterprise of widening participation to HE.

The view that providing potential students with a monetary award for attending a particular higher education institution might be regarded as one that is broadly aligned with the 'student-as-consumer' ideological approach to higher education participation;

towards the beginning of the corpus there was not much evidence to suggest that providing bursaries to students would be effective at widening participation and yet university managers appear to have implicitly assumed that this approach would be able to close significant access to HE gaps. Indeed, one university wrote in their 2009 Access Agreement: "As one of Britain's most customer-focused universities, we are committed to providing our students with the top rated courses, high quality facilities and support they deserve to enable them to get the most of their time at university". It is interesting to analyse this statement in more detail, for example to ask questions such as: "how can any single institution compare itself to all others on an apparently polysemous phrase – 'consumer-focused'?", and "does a university have to adopt a '*customer*-focused ideology in order to allow students to succeed at their institution?". It is also important to observe at a meta-level how language changes over time as the higher education system became increasingly marketised over the period in question.

It may be suggested that an important reason for universities' introduction of bursaries and scholarships for widening participation eligible students (and also for non-widening participation eligible students) is possibly more ideological in character as opposed to an endeavour based on robust and clear evidence. The decline in discourse relating to funding may therefore in significant part be explained by the emergence of an evidence base contradicting the ideological position which holds that students would be more motivated to attend higher education institutions if they were simply given money to attend i.e. if HEIs reduced the financial burden that students would incur through their participation.

This latter observation is perhaps not uncommon in policy-making more generally whereby policies can be produced as idealisations of a "real-world" which is inherently

tempered by ideological positions: "The expression of policy is fraught with the possibility of misunderstanding, texts are generalized, written in relation to idealizations of the 'real world'" (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992: 21). This matter is further complicated by the practical realities of working in higher education management and particularly in those departments which are under political pressure to demonstrate the impact of their work – as is often the case in the domain of widening participation. In a later chapter, interview data is presented which may further elucidate a number of key questions relating to the practical realities of policy enactment from the position of university administrators. However, for now it may be noted that providing financial support to students from widening participation eligible backgrounds is a potentially expedient answer to the question "so what has your department been doing to widen participation?" and thus may have been an attractive option for widening participation teams, given that the *evidence* did not suggest that it was a negative intervention (or, for that matter, a positive one either).

One of the key transformations more broadly in the higher education sector during the time period covered by the corpus is an increasing sense of marketisation permeating the system; this is succinctly explored by drawing from the work of Fromm (1978): "we express concerns that the marketisation of British higher education that has accompanied its expansion has resulted in some sections becoming pedagogically limited... [We] argue that the current higher education (HE) market discourse promotes a mode of existence, where students seek to '*have* a degree' rather than '*be* learners'" (Molesworth *et al.*, 2009: 277).

Widening participation was similarly not immune from a movement towards an increasingly marketised perspective - the increasingly prevalent view that universities are increasingly a business concern together with a tendency to regard HE students as

consumers. Over the years, it became increasingly common to discern university access teams located within university marketing departments where the boundary between student *outreach* and student *recruitment* activities could become blurred, and for universities to talk of processes of student "conversion" – interventions and techniques for encouraging students to join a particular HEI – when regarding the circumstances of prospective applicants to the HE sector. Whilst this increased marketisation is widely acknowledged and explored in the relevant academic literature (Bendixen & Jacobsen, 2017; Teixeira & Dill, 2011; Brown & Carasso, 2013), this section adds to it by examining the effects of higher education marketisation on universities' widening participation strategies through examined university output.

From the topic model, we can see that topic 7 – Access Performance Targets – is one of the only topics to increase significantly in the aftermath of the 2012 tuition fee increase (as can be seen from the graph below). This topic refers to targets that universities set for themselves in relation to their access performance. Many of the *most frequently used*, and *most overrepresented words* in this topic perhaps reflect an increase in marketisation, where "indicator" and "benchmark" can be seen as lexemes typical of marketisation discourse, explained as: "remodelling of university governing bodies on corporate lines, and the development of sector-wide performance indicators" (Brown, 2015).

Figure 23. Access performance targets across the Access Corpus



Bigram Analysis

In order to explore this topic more thoroughly, we can observe common words that appear with, for example, the term "indicator" and how the frequency of specific collocations occur over time. The line graphs below further indicate how different collocations change in frequency over the corpus; as we can see, there is a sharp jump in the usage of many "indicator" bigrams in 2012, when fees were tripled. It can be suggested that the tripling of university fees intensified the pre-existing marketisation process of English higher education, and it is particularly striking that widening participation outputs are significantly affected by this process.

Given that there is a sharp increase in the "indicator" bigrams: i. Performance indicator, ii. Participation indicator, iii. Employment indicator, iv. Basket [of] indicator[s], v. Key indicator, vi. Benchmark indicator, and "business" / "market" bigrams: i. Business innovation, ii. Market research, iii. Baseline datum, iv. Competitor average, v. Compare *,

vi. Compete* *, it is suggested that the increasing marketisation and competition within the higher education system (and including the area of widening participation) is caused, in part at least, by a form of conceptual blending which occurred after the tripling of tuition fees; this consists of "integrating partial structures from two separate domains into a single structure with emergent properties within a third domain" (Fauconnier, 1997: 18). The organisational structure of business is increasingly mapped onto the widening participation space, creating an emergent space with some of the organisational structure and language of business and markets – this can be seen in words such as: "indicator", "benchmark", "competition", "comparison", "market", "baseline", "business". This can be illustrated using a conceptual integration

Figure 24. Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus

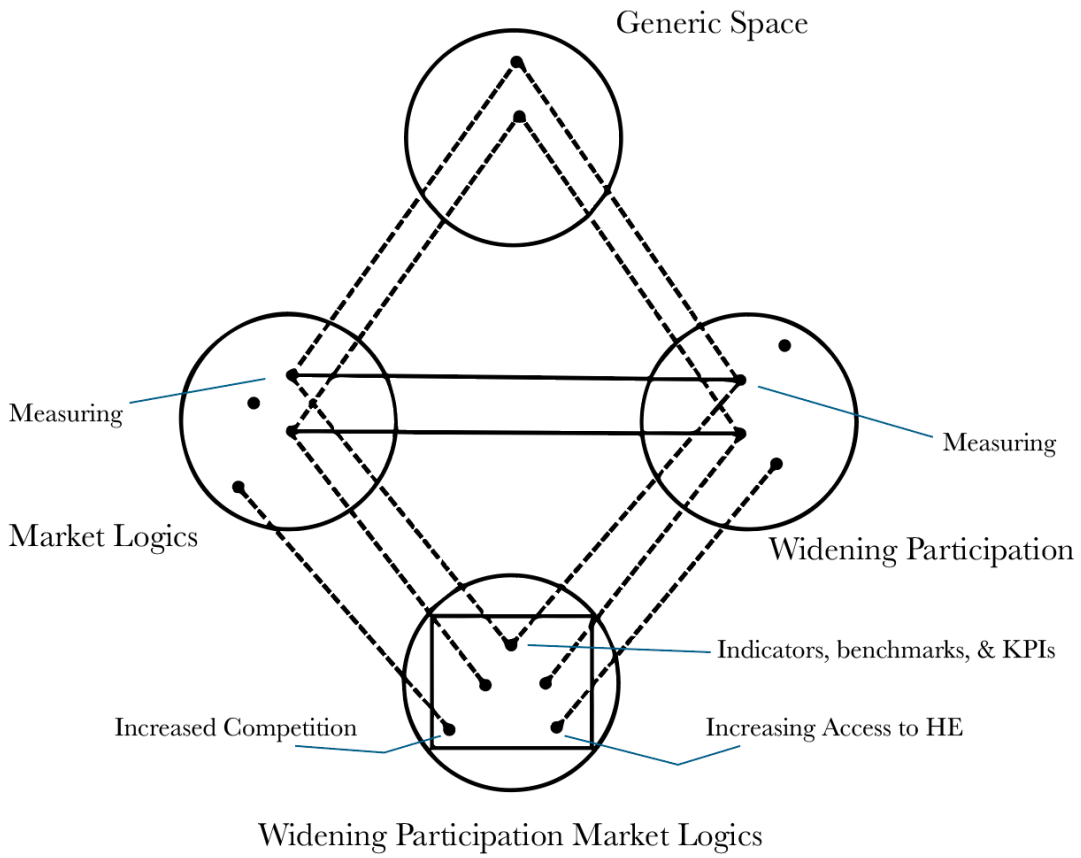


Figure 25. Bigram "Competitor Average"

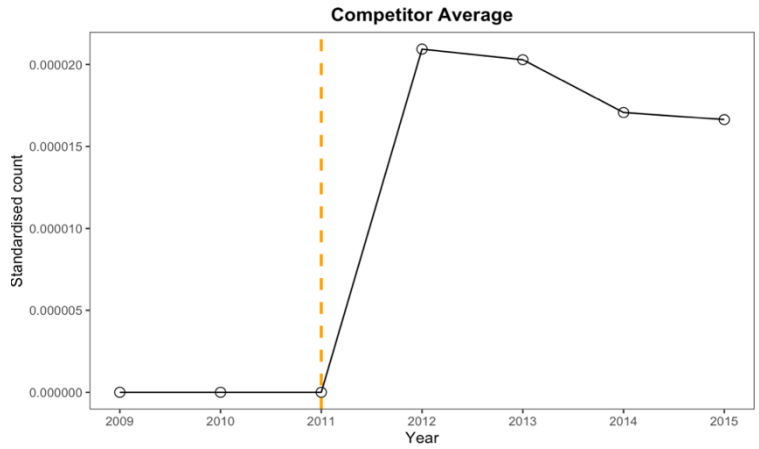


Figure 26. Bigram "Market Research"

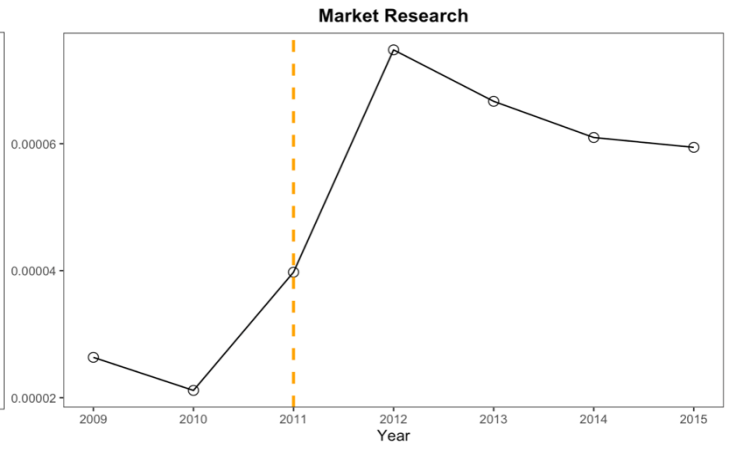


Figure 27. Bigram "Baseline Datum"

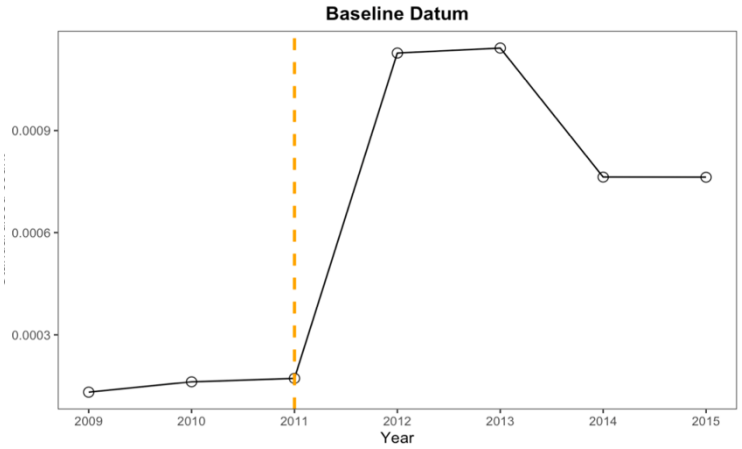


Figure 28. Bigram "Access Measure"

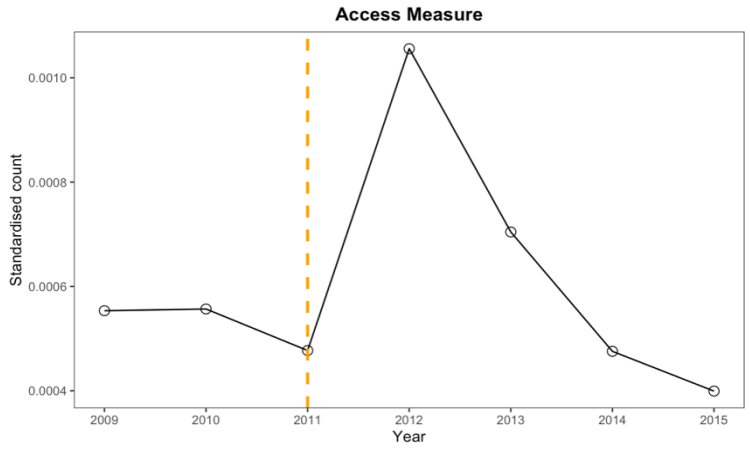


Figure 29. Bigram "Retention Measure"

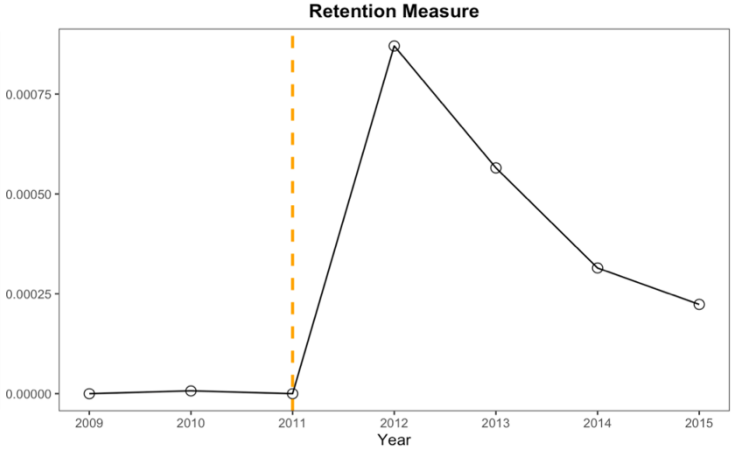


Figure 30. Bigram "Graduate Employment"

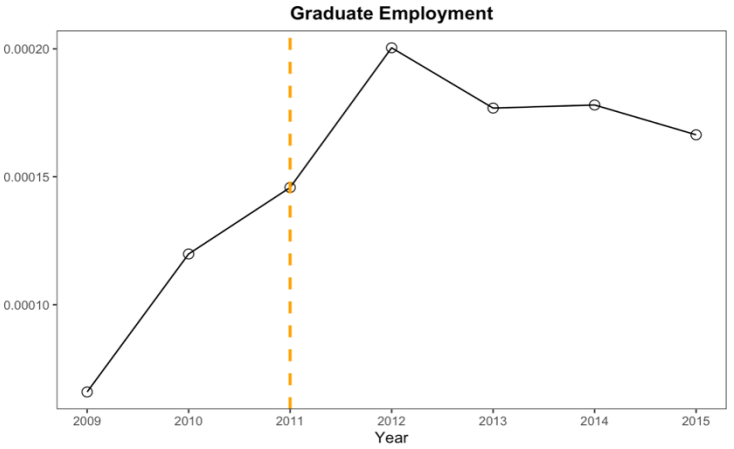


Figure 31. Bigram "Sector Average"

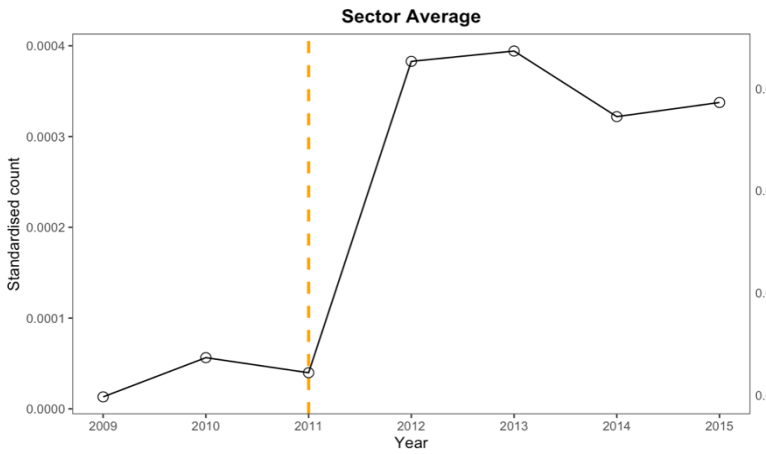


Figure 32. Bigram "Target Baseline"

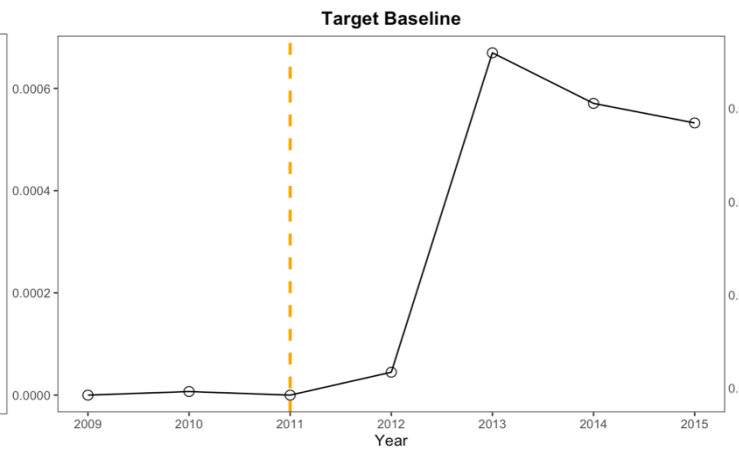


Figure 33. Bigram "Adjust Benchmark"

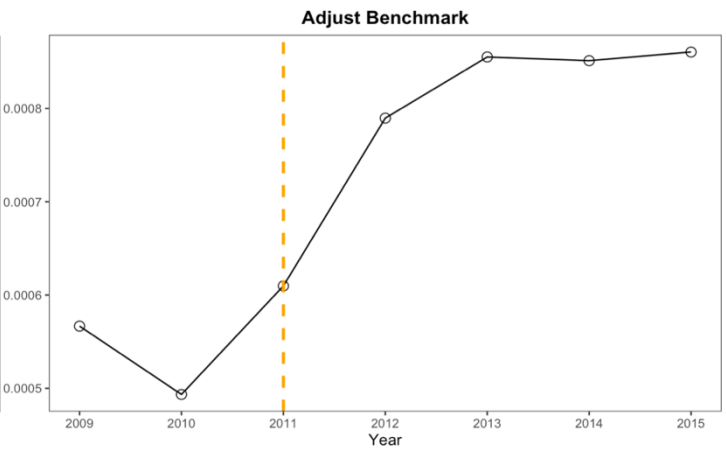


Figure 34. Bigram "Compet *"*

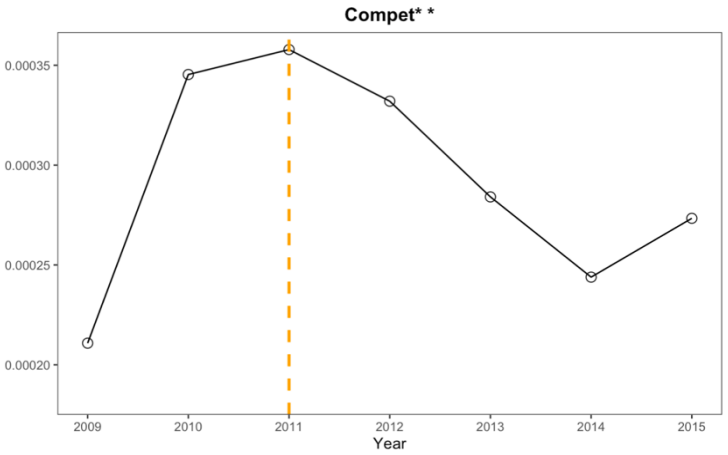
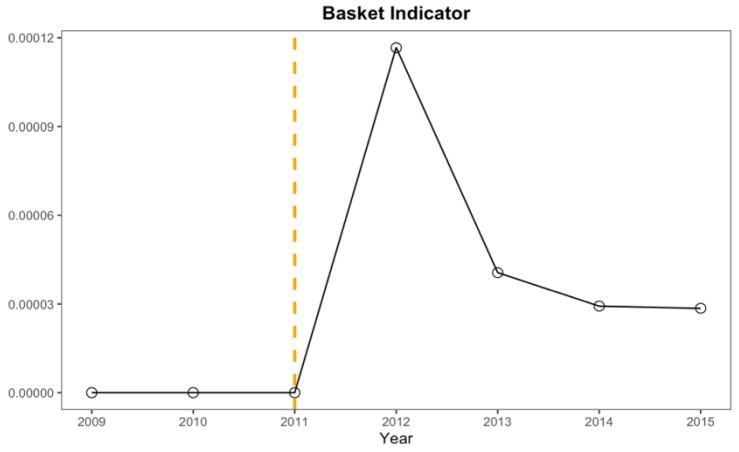


Figure 35. Bigram "Basket Indicator"



Post 2018 Changes – Office for Students

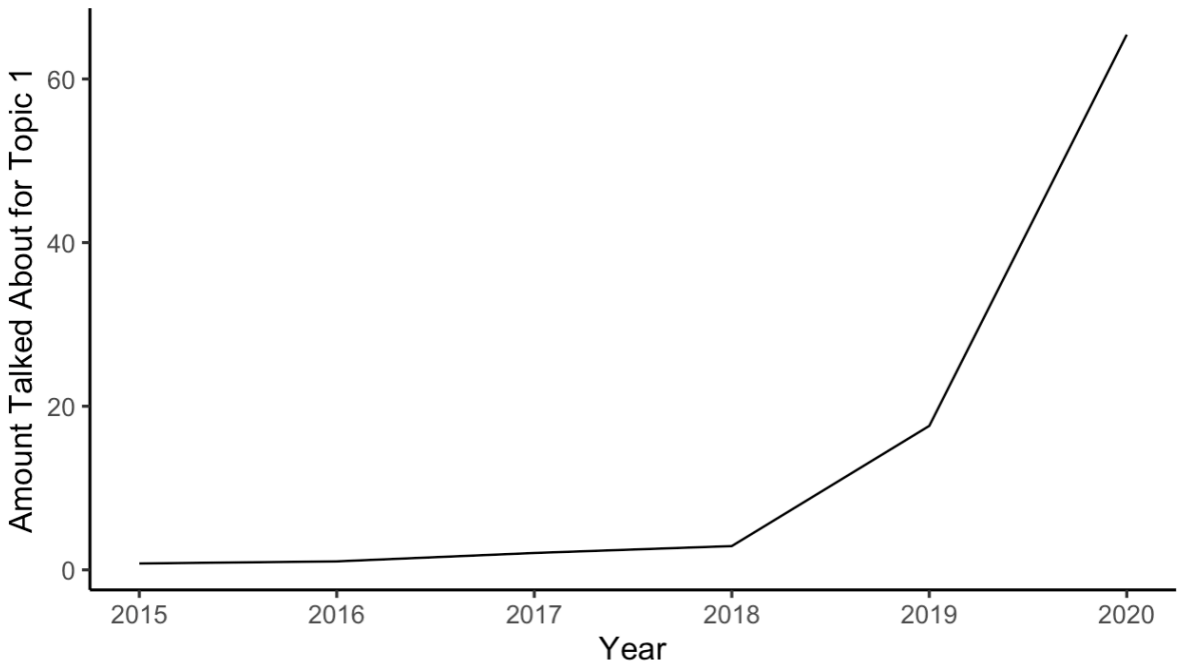
2018 marked another significant change in the organisational structure of regulation in the English higher education system. It was the year in which the Office for Students was introduced as the successor of both the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and thus was created as a body with significant power over higher education institutions. One of the more prominent roles within the organisation of the Office for Students, and one that is arguably most important for widening participation to HE across the sector, is that of the Director for Fair Access : Chris Millward was the post-holder at the OfS's inception in 2018, followed by John Blake from January 2022 to the present.

The introduction of the new (OfS) regulatory body led to many changes in the *approach* taken to widening participation across the entire sector – this change is perhaps due to the fact that the OfS had powers to restrict institutional funding and use of the university title of institutions. In this circumstance it would perhaps be unwise for HEIs not to carefully follow their guidance and approach to access issues. One of the many changes that has occurred in the sector-wide approach to the task of widening access since the inception of the OfS is an increased focus by HEIs on the *evaluation* of this work and, specifically, on the increasing use of *data,* construed in terms of numbers and statistics, in evaluating access work. This will be explored in greater detail in the sub-section of the findings chapter. In addition, the increased emphasis placed by the OfS on "What Works?", both in terms of discursive construction and in the creation of "What Works?" centres, will be explored. This discussion will focus to a large extent on the work of Transforming Access and Student

Outcomes (TASO) - a What Works centre focussing on the evaluation of widening participation activity.

One of the major changes which is evident from the topic model analysis is a sharp increase in prominence of the topic Gap Analysis. This topic increases significantly in the corpus from 2018 onwards (establishment of the OfS) and refers to the analyses that institutions conduct in relation to student access gaps which are frequently related to issues of deprivation, ethnicity, and progression. Each of these issues are discussed further, particularly in the context of institutional use of data and the use of quantitative measures of success. As we can see from the earlier topic model plot which is repeated below (with the years 2006-2014 missing), the topic rises dramatically in 2018 and continues to increase in the latest iteration of Access and Participation Plans.

Figure 36. Gap Analysis change over time



Regulatory Function

Given that the Office for Students has an increased remit for regulation and sanctioning of individual higher education institutions (compared to its precursors HEFCE and OFFA), it is important to explore the extent to which the language of regulation has permeated university Access and Participation Plans. If there is found to be a significant change in language use that signifies response to increases in regulatory pressure, this may be indicative of an increase in propensity for the national regulator to be prepared (or perceived to be prepared) to use its powers in a coercive manner.

Discussions relating to the OfS's use of power have been increasing over the past year and commentary relating to the politicisation of the Office for Students has been in evidence in both academic and non-academic circles; indeed, Susan Lapworth, the Chief Executive of the OfS, noted in an official OfS blog that: "Diana Beech and David Green argued university autonomy was being eroded by government and regulatory inference with strong support from many in the audience" which was followed by a short description of the five ways in which ministers can legitimately influence the OfS and then the conclusion that "ministers are not 'politicising' the work of the OfS when they make use of these lawful mechanisms to express their priorities and expectations. Rather, they are making proper use of the powers Parliament gave to them and that feels entirely democratic to me" (Lapworth, 2022). Missing from this rudimentary analysis of the working practices of the Office for Students and central government is *context*, specifically in relation to the ways in which these ministerial powers were used previously; they were not used to a great extent previously, and thus the increasing use of these powers now *is* significant.

The increasingly prescriptive nature of regulation by the OfS signals for some an inflexibility in their understanding of the unique operating environment of individual higher education institutions and, very recently, might be viewed as a consequence of newly appointed significant personnel at the regulatory body having limited experience of regulating the higher education system: "At the same time as its role as regulator has become bloated, the OfS has lost significant expertise with the departure of key leaders with deep knowledge of the sector and their replacement with those with far less engagement with higher education…those with less working knowledge of a particular area tend to make much 'braver' commitments to ministers about what it is possible to achieve" (Ashwin & Clarke, 2022). The graphs in this thesis illustrate some of the significant changes in language used by higher education institutions in their APPs; such changes can be reasonably regarded as a response to wider OfS policy making. There are significantly higher frequencies of words which signify a prescriptive regulatory atmosphere in the corpus from 2018 to 2021, these include bigrams with words such as: regulatory, governance, report, require, accountability, and condition. It may be reasonably suggested that this less flexible system of regulation ensures universities behave in certain ways, and, more than this, that all universities are increasingly obliged to act in particular ways because of the threat of OfS sanctions, for example withholding permission for institutions to charge higher rates of tuition fees to students.

Indeed, we can see from a closer examination of APPs that there is a clear indication that institutions started to couch the language used to describe their activities in very particular ways as a response to OfS policies and guidance: "As per OfS requirements…" (Falmouth, 2019); "This plan has been prepared in accordance with the guidance from the Office for Students" (Cambridge, 2019); "In accordance with legislative and regulatory requirements,

we monitor our access activities from an equalities perspective…" (Anglia Ruskin, 2018), indeed, in Royal Holloway's 2021 APP, the phrase "In accordance with OfS guidance, we…" is used on three separate occasions.

Ball (2003) raises concerns about the balance of work to performative monitoring in educational settings; though writing explicitly about teachers, many of the same underlying points can be made in relation to the current widening participation to higher education policy space: "This contradiction arises between intensification – as an increase in the volume of first order activities (direct engagement with students, research, curriculum development) required by the demands of performativity – and the 'costs' in terms of time and energy of second order activities that is the work of performance monitoring and management. The increases in effort and time spent on core tasks are off-set by increases in effort and time devoted to accounting for task work or erecting monitoring systems, collecting performative data and attending to the management of institutional 'impressions'" (Ball, 2003: 221).

Figure 37. Bigram "Report"

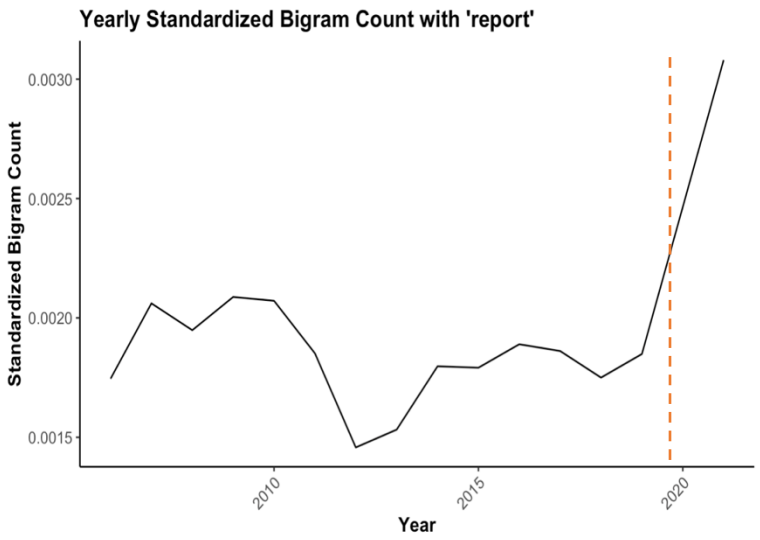


Figure 38. Bigram "Require"

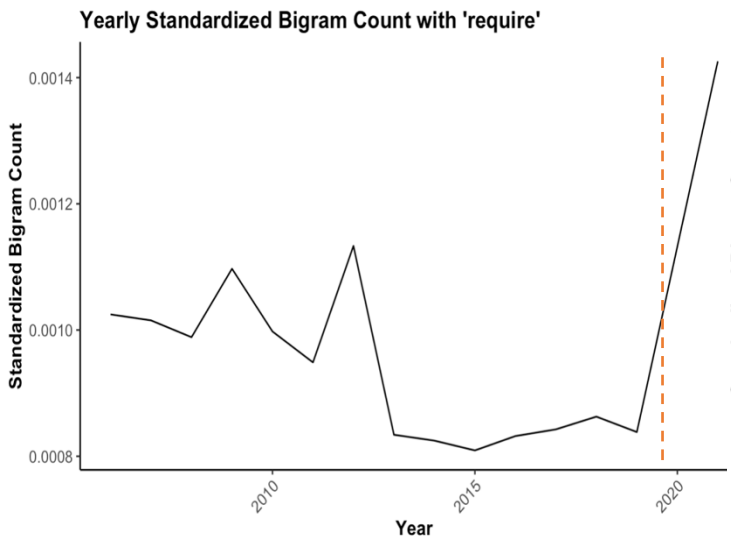


Figure 39. Bigram "Accountability"

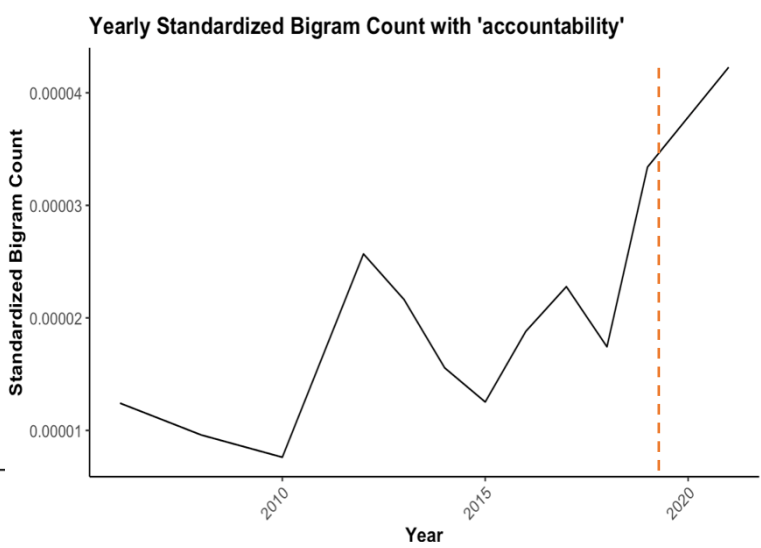


Figure 40. Bigram "Condition"

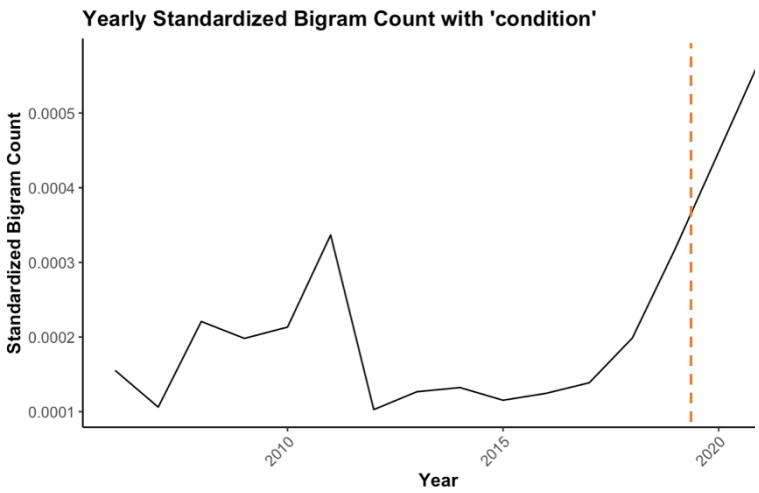


Figure 41. Bigram "Declare"

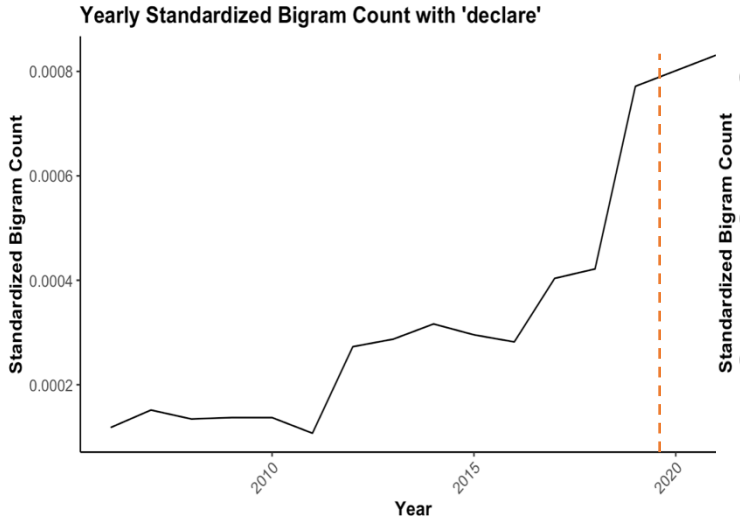
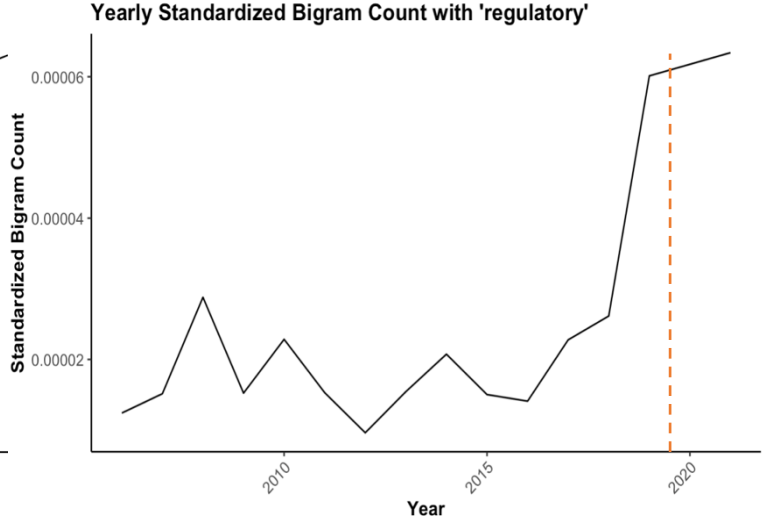


Figure 42. Bigram "Regulatory"



When translated to the widening participation context, first order activities may refer to widening participation activities and evaluations themselves whereas second order activities refer to the monitoring and reporting that is required by the OfS. There has certainly been an intensification of monitoring culture from the higher education regulator which, it could be argued, stifles institutional actors in attending to their first order activities. Indeed, the very nature of monitoring higher education institutions based on relatively inflexible criteria is a practice which is based on the idea of system control whereby the regulatory body has the power and is increasingly willing to enforce system change through regulatory guidance. Lyotard notes that this can lead to an undermining contradiction: "the idea (or ideology) of perfect control over a system, which is supported to improve its performance, is inconsistent with respect to the law of contradiction: it in fact lowers the performance level it claims to raise" (Lyotard, 1984: 55). Ball argues that this contradiction leads to a "value schizophrenia" where "commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance" (Ball, 2003: 221). This potential contradiction will be explored further in a later chapter when interview data is presented and discussed.

Adoption and use of Concepts

One of the key changes post-2018 is an increasing focus by the OfS both on the use of 'data' in widening participation evaluation, and on evaluating in particular ways. Figure 44 illustrates this approach to evaluation by suggesting a hierarchy of evidence; where "Establishing Causality" is viewed as the ultimate objective and creating "Narrative Evaluation" functions as the minimal standard that is required. Indeed, the evidence table is formatted differently in other OfS policy documents where "Narrative Evaluation",

"Empirical Enquiry", and "Establishing Causality" are labelled "Type 1", "Type 2", and "Type 3" respectively. It is interesting to see how the use of these terms by institutions has changed over the period of the corpus and in response to major policy shifts, such as the introduction of the OfS in 2018.

Figure 43. OfS standards of evidence

	Narrative Evaluation A coherent explanation of why the activity is expected to work and why	**Empirical Enquiry** Collects data to show those receiving an intervention have better outcomes	**Establishing Causality** Provides evidence of a causal effect
Multi-activity intervention programmes (e.g. transition support programmes)	◆ Important for all activities to inform programme choice and delivery	◆ Important for all activities to justify use of resources	✪ Commended for resource intensive programmes for which an evidence base needs to be established and where there is access to reliable outcomes data and appropriate comparison groups
Intensive interventions (e.g. residential programmes)	◆ Important for all activities to inform programme choice and delivery	◆ Important for all activities to justify use of resources	✪ Commended for resource intensive programmes for which an evidence base needs to be established and where there is access to reliable outcomes data and appropriate comparison groups
Long term interventions (e.g. mentoring programmes)	◆ Important for all activities to inform programme choice and delivery	◆ Important for all activities to justify use of resources	✪ Commended for resource intensive programmes for which an evidence base needs to be established and where there is access to reliable outcomes data and appropriate comparison groups
One-off interventions (e.g. campus visits, subject taster sessions)	◆ Important for all activities to inform programme choice and delivery	★ Important for innovative projects for which an evidence base needs to be established	⃠ Not usually feasible unless part of a multi-intervention package
'Light-touch' intervention (e.g. information dissemination projects)	◆ Important for all activities to inform programme choice and delivery	★ Important for innovative projects for which an evidence base needs to be established	✪ Commended in situations where it is possible to capture appropriate outcomes data and the effect of the intervention can be isolated

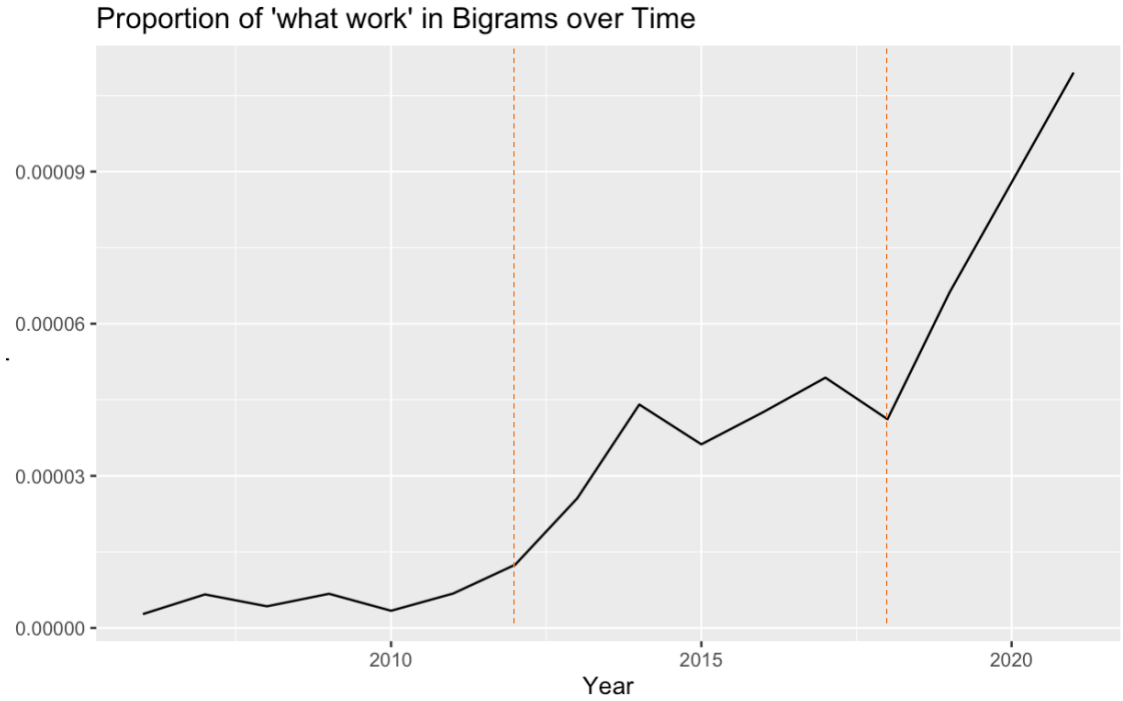
◆ Expected for all types of activities; ★Commended for resource intensive and pilot interventions; ✪Highly commended if conditions allow and conducted appropriately; ⃠ May not be feasible unless special conditions apply.

This hierarchical structure of evaluation broadly aligns with the "What Works?" agenda which came into prominence over the 15 years encompassed by the corpus. However, it should be noted that this focus is not only prominent in the field of higher education or within the field of education more generally. "What Works?" refers to a broad approach to understanding complex phenomena through the use of often experimentally designed

research. Biesta describes it as follows: "…attempts to centrally set the agenda for educational research, both with respect to its contents and its methodology. Regarding the latter, there is a strong push for experimental research that, according to proponents of evidence-based education, is the only method capable of providing secure evidence about "what works." (Biesta, 2007: 3).

The table below illustrates the adoption of "What Works?" in the Access and Participation Corpus; this shows a significant increase in usage of the term from 2018 onwards i.e. from the inception of the Office for Students. However, it should be noted that there is clearly evidence of the phrase ("what works") prior to the OfS and, indeed, it appears to gain some traction around the year 2012.

Figure 44. "What Works" bigrams over the Access Corpus



The significance of the increased use of this term, and the underlying ideological position, is perhaps best exemplified through an example. The two quotations below are from a single institution, Royal Holloway, from: 2014, and 2021.

"The term 'estimating impact' is used for two reasons. Firstly, this is because evaluation or research into widening participation activity cannot be a rigorous social science experiment as widening participation is a nation-wide agenda. As such, it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify a group of young people with similar characteristics who had not received any input from associated agendas. Secondly, the widening participation agenda is inherently embedded within the social and cultural practices of the wider environment. Young people receive information on education, higher education and specific universities as well as value judgements on the benefits of learning from a variety of formal and informal sources (television, friends, schools, parents/carers, mentors to name only a few influencers). Therefore, determining an explicit causal relationship between a particular activity (or an institutional programme of activity) and a specific outcome would be very difficult." (Royal Holloway, 2014)

"Our access and participation programmes are underpinned by an understanding of what works in context and of the processes involved in achieving our overarching strategic vision. We evaluate and amend them on an ongoing basis as relevant following previous evaluations and research literature on the effectiveness of such programmes. This means that our programmes are underpinned in all cases by narrative evaluation, and in most cases by empirical evaluation. It is often not possible to undertake causal evaluation due to ethical considerations in selecting only some students to be able to take part in a

programme. However, we continue to consider how we might gather such evidence in future" (Royal Holloway, 2021)

The two quotations above illustrate a softening of the position held in 2014 which suggests that establishing a causal relationship in the area of widening participation to higher education is "very difficult" and, it could be argued, implies that the task is in effect impossible due to the social situatedness of knowledge and the very fact that the origins of particular areas of knowledge can be impossible to ascertain. By contrast, the 2021 quotation states that causal evaluations are *often* not possible due to ethical concerns and yet causal evaluations are being explored for future practice. The softening of this position is indicative of the views of the sector more generally in relation to how universities should evaluate, as identified in the Access Corpus. Another example of the adoption of 'what works?' can be seen in the following quotation: "Embedding a robust evaluation strategy across the institution is a key priority, so we understand what works in improving success for our students" Manchester, 2021 – this quotation in particular provides an example of the increasingly conceptually linked terms – 'what works' and 'robustness'. The shift towards a more causal approach to evaluation can also be observed in an analysis of the use of the terms "rigour" and "robust" – both of which, in specific contexts, can be indicative of a growing tendency to embrace positivist ideological approaches to evaluation. Indeed, the terms appear to be polysemic signifiers in the Access Corpus with strong implicature, in later years of the corpus, of underlying normative ideological assumptions in relation to how widening participation evaluation *should* happen.

One clear example of this trend can be observed in a 2021 Access and Participation Plan "… the embedded nature of many of our activities has tended to make establishing

causality challenging. We are aware, therefore, that we have more to do to develop robust evaluation of all of our activities" Wolverhampton, 2021. In this quotation "robust" appears to be conflated with "causal", the implication being that 'robustness' is functionally equivalent to 'causality'; whilst it may be true that some causal data analysis methods are robust, it certainly does not follow that all robust analysis is causal in nature. In other instances, the word robust appears to be used to indicate that evaluation is especially strong – in this case, the word robust appears to have no other meaning than to act as a bolster for the next (evaluation). Some examples of this are:

"At DMU, we ensure that robust evaluation of our performance, strategic aims, objectives and initiatives is a fundamental part of our approach to performance management and programme impact" DMU, 2021

"We are committed to ensuring that our access and participation provision is underpinned by a robust evaluation strategy. As an absolute minimum, we endeavour to ensure that all of our interventions meet the OfS access and participation 'Type 1' standards of evidence" NTU, 2021

"The University's commitment to undertaking robust evaluations of its activities and initiatives to support our students to succeed and progress remains and has further developed following increased investment over the last two years" Brighton, 2021

"We aim to have a robust evaluation strategy in place for each activity that we do…This helps us to understand not only what works, but how and why." Exeter, 2021

Whilst the increasing adoption of more causal language in discussions of widening participation evaluation is evident in the positive above, there is also evidence in the negative – namely, through specific absences. Given that an absence is also a presence, an *absent presence*: "the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience" (Spivak, 1997: xvii) it is interesting to note that a number of institutions that described causal evaluations as being difficult to complete decided *not* to mention these epistemological reservations in more recent years, for example:

> "establishing a direct causal link between activity and outcomes would be difficult."
> Bath Spa, 2012

> "establishing a direct causal link between activity and outcomes would be difficult."
> Bath Spa, 2013

> "establishing a direct causal link between activity and outcomes would be difficult."
> Bath Spa, 2014

> "establishing a direct causal link between activity and outcomes would be difficult."
> Bath Spa, 2015

> "establishing a direct causal link between activity and outcomes would be difficult."
> Bath Spa, 2016

> "Understandably, schools are reluctant to share pupil data and we have not been able to obtain the relevant pupil data that we first thought we might from schools in the programme to assess the impact of the GCSE Tutoring programme on GCSE attainment, however it is also arguable whether it is even possible to infer a direct causal relationship between the intervention and GCSE attainment."
>
> Bath Spa, 2018

This absent present perhaps signifies the increasing pressures placed upon institutions to evaluate is particular ways which align with the Office for Students' perspective on effective evaluative techniques. It could be argued that there is some level of coercion acting upon institutions from the regulatory body that constrains through policy and creates these absent presents, and that this potentially undermines the independence of higher education widening participation workers. Below is another example of an absent present in the Access Corpus:

> "…yet the difficulty of demonstrating causality can hamper demonstration…"
>
> Westminster, 2013

> "…yet the difficulty of demonstrating causality can hamper demonstration…"
>
> Westminster, 2014

> "…yet the difficulty of demonstrating causality can hamper demonstration…"
>
> Westminster, 2015

"…yet the difficulty of demonstrating causality can hamper demonstration…" Westminster, 2016

"…yet the difficulty of demonstrating causality can hamper demonstration…" Westminster, 2017

"…yet the difficulty of demonstrating causality can hamper demonstration…" Westminster, 2018

This is not to say that the coercive control acts equally on each institution, but that it can potentially be evident in some; the quotes from the University of Westminster in the Access Corpus are suggestive of an approach which is sustained until 2018 and is similar to that of Bath Spa mentioned previously. Indeed, these are just two examples among of a number of instances of a notable absent present.

The increasing use of language that signifies a move towards the "scientific", "measurable", and "evidence-led" forms of widening participation evaluation can also be seen in the occurrences of the word "rigour" within the Access Corpus. Indeed, the points made in relation to "robust" can perhaps be made even more strongly in the case of "rigour" since it is found adjacent to other signifying lexemes such as "objective" in the Corpus. An example of this can be seen in the Access and Participation Plan of the University of Bournemouth (2021) where they state: "the Access and Participation Standards of Evidence reinforces our whole institution approach, strengthening the importance of relevant, rigorous and objective evaluation, facilitating monitoring to ensure improvement and providing robust mechanisms by which to share expertise" (Bournemouth, 2021). The

use of "objective" in conjunction with "rigour" and "robust" is indicative of a particular understanding of the nature of evaluation, the characteristics of the research endeavour and, more generally, the nature of science. It is striking to observe that the same institution 5 years prior to prescribing "objective evaluation" embraces the use of phenomenology as a method in their practice: "…and it utilises a phenomenological qualitative approach to enrich knowledge of the role of resilience in the prediction and facilitation of academic success, including the pedagogic understanding of 'success'" (Bournemouth, 2016). In more recent years there has been a clear and decisive transformation in thinking about evaluation from that of phenomenology to rigorous, robust and objective methods (in fewer than 5 years). Durham also uses the term 'objective' in their 2021 Access and Participation plan: "We will explore opportunities to make best use of internal expertise…to ensure the evidence produced by Durham's activities is objective and rigorous. We will identify further opportunities to share lessons learned, to contribute to a shared understanding of what works and what does not in the sector" (Durham, 2021).

Student Characteristics

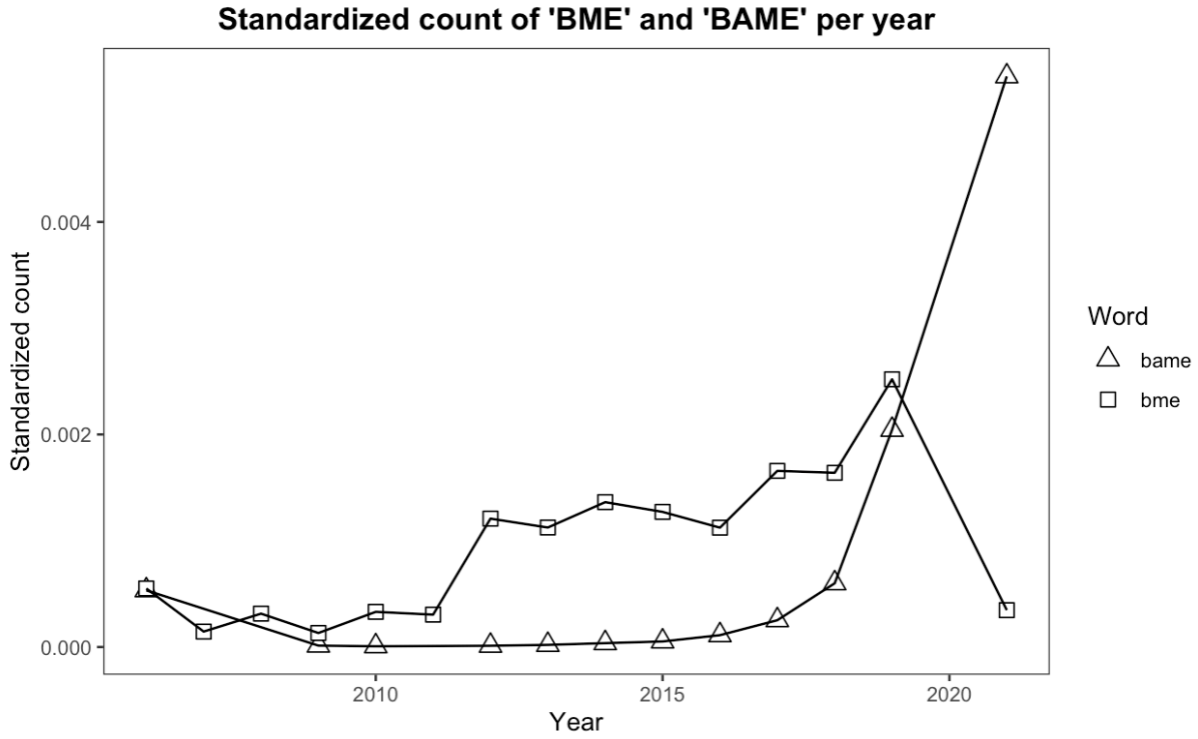
Another salient aspect of the Access Corpus is the changing way in which universities refer to their current student body, potential student body, and contribute to wider access and widening participation discourses. This sub section focusses on the ways in which universities have contributed to discourses relating to ethnicity in their access work, and the aspiration / expectation debate which has been particularly prevalent in widening participation discourses.

Ethnicity

The past 10 years have seen significant changes in discussions concerning students' ethnicity and specifically in relation to ethnicity targeting within widening participation work. Some of these changes may be familiar to the lay person interested in current news events since they have been in a number of headlines in the UK for sustained periods; a good example of this is the discourse surrounding "White Working Class Boys". Other changes are perhaps less obvious, for example, the point at which universities adopted the acronym BAME instead of BME, and the specific collocates of both of these terms.

BME stands for Black and Minority Ethnic, whereas BAME stands for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic; the two terms are relatively common in diversity and inclusion lexicon and can be found across higher education institutional documents throughout England. Indeed, a report into the usage of BAME and BME in newspapers found, using corpus techniques, that "BAME has become the preferred dominant term by which to refer to Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups and this has especially been the case since 2020." (Malik & Ryder *et al.*: 2022); the authors suggest that the expansion of conversations surrounding ethnicity have led to an increased awareness of the nuances of the language used, and they make reference specifically to Black Lives Matter and ethnicity-related COVID-19 inequalities. The line graph below illustrates the changes that have occurred over the period of time covered by the Access Corpus, and, importantly, demonstrates that the move away from BME and adoption of BAME broadly maps onto the same timeline as suggested by the authors of the BAME language report.

Figure 45. Use of "BME" and "BAME" over the Access Corpus



The conclusions drawn from the 2022 report (Malik & Ryder *et al.*: 2022) may also hold true for the language surrounding ethnicity in English higher education institutions; that there is an increasing awareness of the linguistic nuances surrounding the lexicon of ethnicity in the wake of key socio-political issues. From the line graph above we can see that the BAME starts to gain real traction around 2017, but is still far less used than BME at this point; the time when BAME overtakes BME in its frequency of usage is 2021.

In the year 2021, within the Access Corpus the term BAME is used far more frequently than BME had been used previously, but also it features more prominently in more contemporary APPs than BME and BAME were – even when taken in combination up to this date. This is likely to be as a consequence of developments in the wider political climate, for example Black Lives Matter, where there is currently an increased focus on issues pertaining to ethnicity. This has also been the case in widening participation work. The

graph below illustrates the increasing use of language relating to specific ethnicity groups across the corpus and, more specifically, it shows: i) the consistently lower frequency of writing about the Asian ethnicity group when compared to their Black and White counterparts ii) the upsurge of writing about White students from 2016 onwards – significantly overtaking the amount written about Black students iii) the overall trend towards an increase in discussions of ethnicity more generally.

Figure 46. Use of the words "Asian", "Black", "White" over the Access Corpus

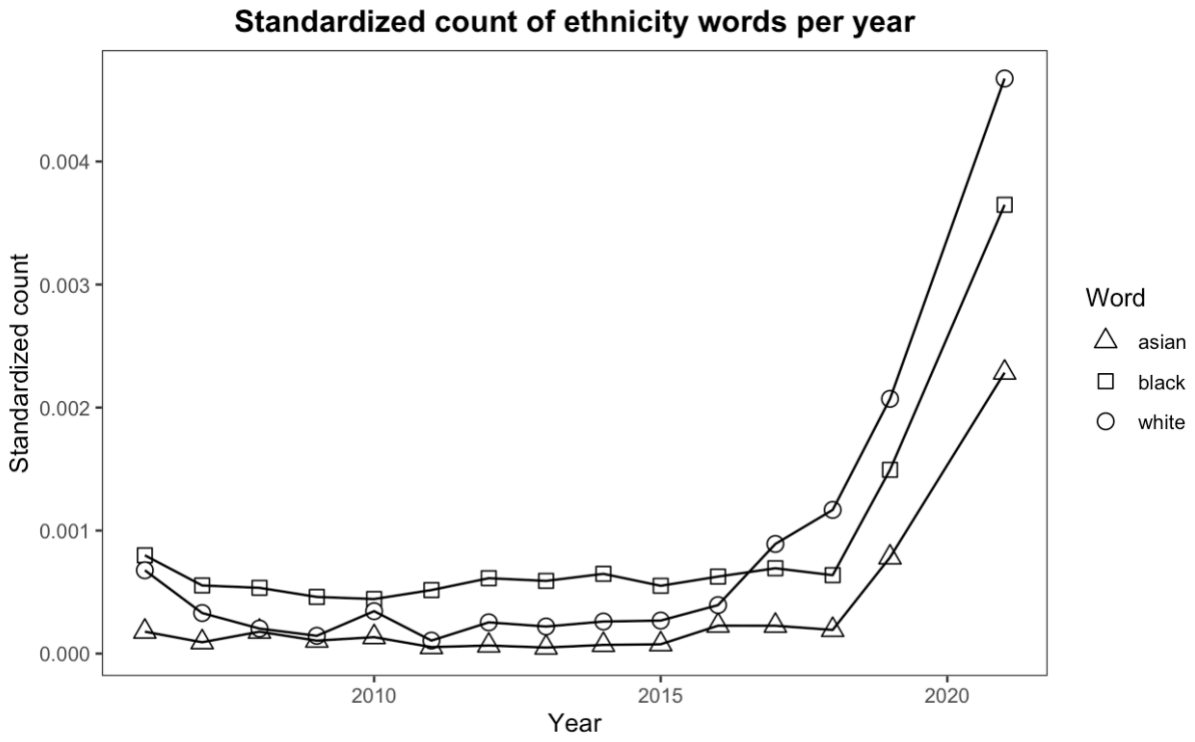
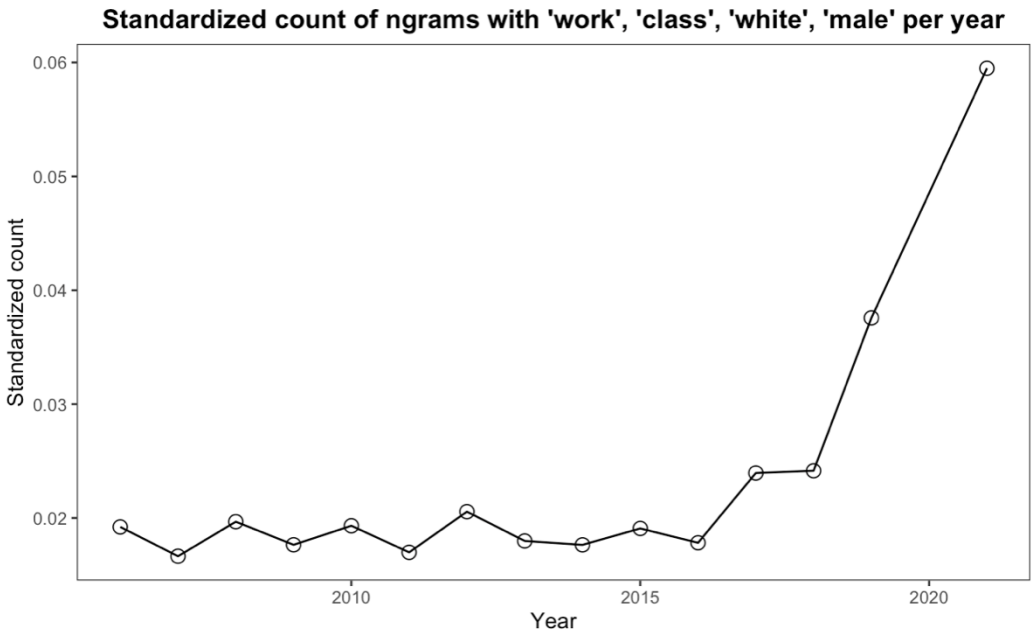


Figure 47. Use of the words "Work", "Class", "White" "Male" (cumulative) over the Access Corpus



One of the key reasons for the somewhat sudden focus on "white" since 2017 may be explained by the relatively recent emergence of a discourse concerning the educational journeys of white working class pupils, and particularly white working class male students or, as it is often termed, "white working class boys". Indeed, it is perhaps easier to capture the zeitgeist and depth of feeling surrounding this issue by considering the title of a UK parliamentary education committee report on the issue: "The forgotten: how White working-class pupils have been let down, and how to change it" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021). Interestingly, the argument that white working class boys are being let down by the education system in the UK is often one that relies on data that does not relate to "working-class" students at all. With the exception of Strand (2022), much of the data relied upon by universities for this argument pertains to the education of students who are in receipt of free school meals and, whilst this measure is often used as a proxy for disadvantage, it says little of substance about the issue of social classness 23.8% of students are eligible for free school meals (Education Statistics Service, 2023), 48% of the population self-identify as working class (Social Mobility Commission, 2021), and, according to the

Great British Class Survey, 14% of the population are "Traditional Working Class" (Savage *et al.*, 2013). There are clear differences in the perception of working classness amongst the population and in understandings of the technical (and contested) definitions of working class, and the effectiveness of using free school meals entitlement as a means of measuring working classness. Whilst self-identification as working class may not appear to be a relevant concern to this research, it can be argued that individuals hold stronger beliefs about matters that they perceive to directly relate to them. Thus, if a large number of individuals self-identify as working class when their *technical* class membership is not clear, it may be the case that there is a particular strength of feeling about particular issues as a consequence.

White students who are in receipt of free school meals represent around 10% of the broader ethnicity category (white) – thus Crawford refers to this group as the "the one-in-ten" (Crawford, 2019). Whilst it must be noted that White British pupils comprise a significant majority of the school population (at 70%), the percentage of this group in receipt of free school meals is relatively small when compared to the *percentage* of free school meals in other ethnicity groups: Pakistani – 30.4%; Bangladeshi – 44.6%; Black African – 35.1%; Black Caribbean – 23.5% (Crawford, 2019: 429).

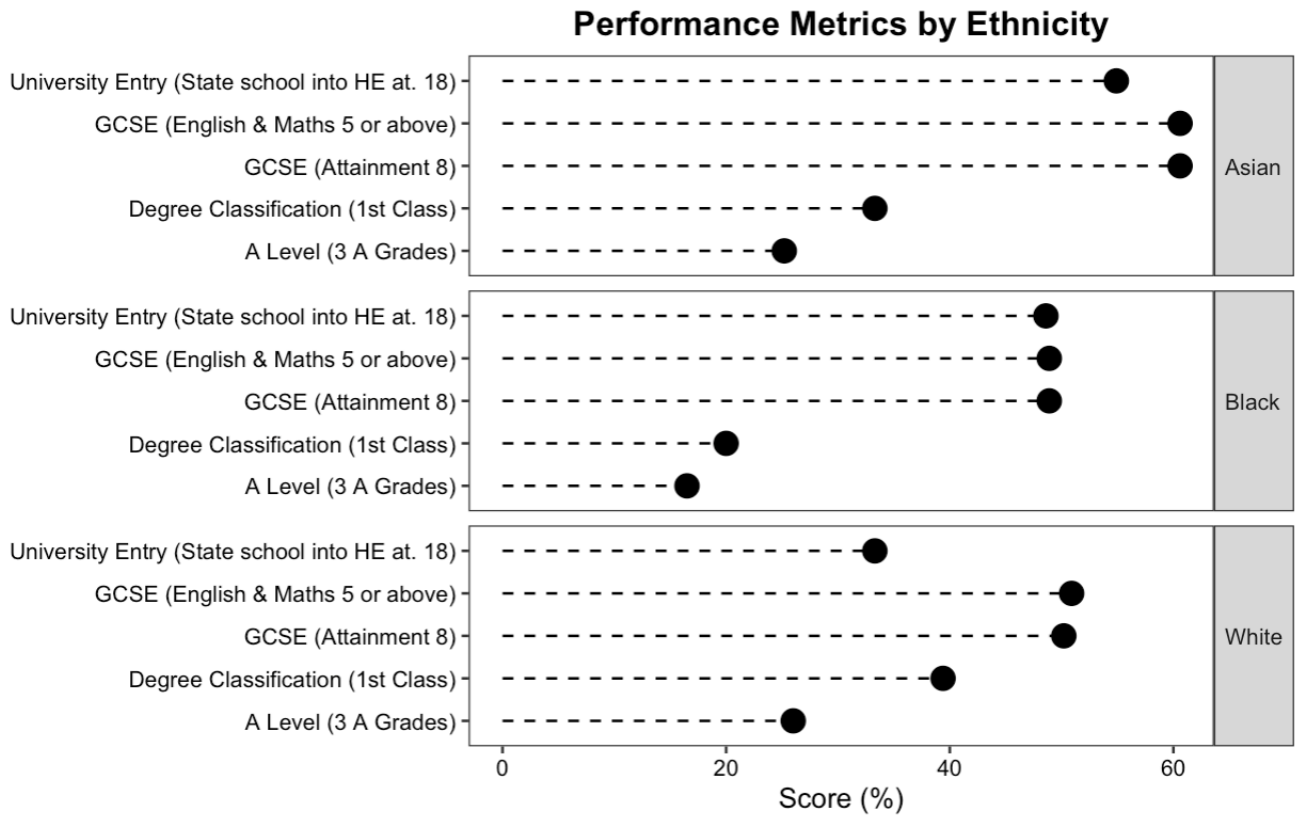
Although the percentage of white British students receiving free school meals is significantly smaller than the percentages that apply for a number of other ethnic groups, the total number of students affected will be much larger because of the size of the white cohort school population overall. However, the fact of such larger percentages of free school meals entitlement amongst certain other ethnic groups indicates that significant proportions of pupils in these groups are likely to live in disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances

which will act as a potential constraint on their academic progress and levels of achievement. It could be argued that, from a utilitarian perspective, it would make sense to focus a higher level of widening participation resource on the (white) group where the circumstances of the largest number of students could be improved. On the other hand, from an equity and social inclusion perspective, it could also be argued that those groups with the highest proportions of disadvantaged pupils should be targeted for increased widening participation interventions. However, given that students from minority ethnic groups also face (because of various forms of racism) an additional range of barriers to their academic levels of achievement and progression to higher education, this could add a further (intersectional) variable supporting at least an equal focus on minority ethnic pupils receiving free school meals as on their white peers. The nuances of this kind of debate are not reflected within documents submitted to OfS as perhaps there is an institutional tendency to attempt alignment with policy on certain issues, particularly those which attract wider public interest including the attention of the media.

The charts overleaf display performance at different education levels by ethnicity[1], for context:

[1] Data from: Department for Education, 2022a; Department for Education, 2022b; Department for Education, 2022c; HESA, 2022; UCAS, 2022

Figure 48. Educational performance metrics by ethnicity



The issue of operationalising the term "White Working Class" is a relatively difficult task particularly given the technical difficulties associated with understanding the concept of "class" which has long remained a contested matter among academics and members of the public. It might therefore have been expected that universities would acknowledge these difficulties and instead of using the contested phrase "White Working Class", employ a more precise form of language – this is found *not* to be the case in the Access Corpus. In their Access and Participation Plans, institutions appear to use diverse techniques by which to define 'working class'. Many institutions do not provide an explanation of what the term working class means or explicate appropriate means by which to determine its presence within student cohorts. The quotes below demonstrate some of these issues:

"The OfS APP data highlights the declining number of 'white, working class boys' for us and contrasts with the increases in 'white working class girls', using POLAR4 Q1-2 to define 'working class'" Harper Adams, 2021 [measured using POLAR]

"Percentage difference in first and upper second class Honours degree rates between white, working class (using IMD Q1-2) males and other male students is reduced to not more than 3% points" Harper Adams, 2021 [measured using IMD]

"our own 2016 intake constituted 23% white, working class males (as determined by parental occupation, i.e. those in socio-economic classification groups 4-7)" Harper Adams, 2019 [measured using parental occupation]

The three quotations above typify the demarcation problem with the term working class in the context of the Access Corpus – the same institution, Harper Adams, defines working class in three different ways in only two of their Access and Participation Plans. First, defining it in terms of POLAR, then in terms of IMD, and, finally, and perhaps more traditionally, in terms of parental occupation. Other measures are used throughout the Access Corpus by different institutions, for example the Royal Agricultural University use both POLAR data and free school meal eligibility:

"A combination of postcodes to identify POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 male students and entitlement to free school meals (FSM) will be used to identify/target white working-class boys" Royal Agricultural University, 2019

In addition to this, imprecise language can be found in much of the discussions relating to white working class boys, as illustrated in the following two quotations:

"We also target our efforts within those wards in Plymouth where socio-economic background and ethnicity intersect to multiply disadvantage for target groups of students (e.g. white working class boys and students of black Caribbean and mixed-ethnicity)" St Mark & St John, 2021

"In 2018, young women in the least advantaged areas are 66% more likely to apply to higher education than younger men, leaving a significant participation gap both nationally and at the University of Bradford for white working class boys." Bradford, 2019

The first quotation appears to display a simple misunderstanding of the concept of intersectionality by following on from outlining the disadvantage of the white and working-class intersection by noting the "intersection" of "students of black Caribbean and mixed-ethnicity" – which is patently not an intersection. Bradford, on the other hand, notes that women in the most deprived areas are more likely to apply than male students in the same areas, and point to this as the reason for a participation gap for "white working-class boys", though clearly there is no mention specifically of whiteness before the phrase "white working class boys".

The hyperbole of media outrage on the matter of white working-class boys being 'left behind' has the potential hallmarks of a moral panic - where a problematic issue (which undoubtedly exists) is magnified dramatically by discursive actors: "When the official reaction to Person, groups of persons or series of events is *out of all proportion* to the actual

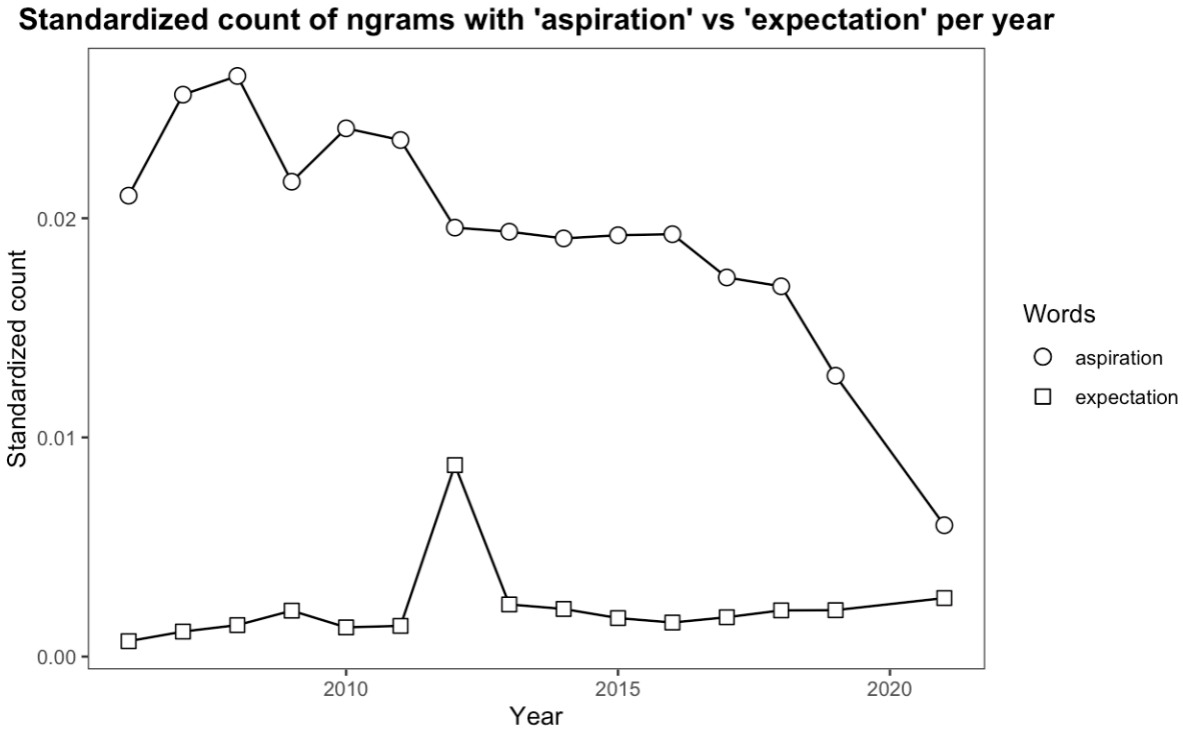
threat offered…when the media representations universally stress 'sudden and dramatic' increases…beyond that which a sober, realistic appraisal could sustain, then we believe it is appropriate to speak of the beginnings of a *moral panic*." (Hall, 1978: 16). In the case of the achievement and progression of white working-class boys, relative to the circumstances of pupils belonging to other ethnic groups, we can see that the emotive nature of media reporting and public responses to their perception of the issues involved has the hallmarks of a 'concern out of proportion' to a more thoughtful delineation of the facts. An inference that started to take shape following the national reporting of the issue was that a form of reverse discrimination was taking place in which white pupils were being discriminated against and, by implication, that pupils belonging to other ethnic groups were being treated preferentially in unspecified ways.

Aspirations or Expectations?

Over recent years there has also been a good deal of debate about deficit ideologies in widening participation and access work within higher education institutions. One of the key sites of conflict involves the use of the word 'aspiration' or, more specifically, concerns about "raising aspirations." This can be regarded as one of the key markers of a deficit ideology in action; it is often noted that there are "discursive constructions of aspiration as something positive, and working-class students as having an aspiration deficit" (Bowers-Brown, Ingram, & Burke, 2019: 207). As an alternative to focussing on the task of raising the aspirations of individuals, it has more recently been proposed that the term 'expectations' should be used instead: "too much policy emphasis has been placed on the aspirations of young people, rather than either their academic attainment or their expectations…" (Harrison & Waller, 2018: 914). We can see from the line graph below

which illustrates the change in frequency of the use of lexemes "aspiration" and "expectation" that use of "aspiration" decreases significantly over the Access Corpus, and dramatically so from 2018 to 2021.

Figure 49. Use of the words "Aspiration" and "Expectation" over the Access Corpus



Given that the decrease is so significant from 2018 onwards, it is interesting to note that even after the final year of the Access Corpus, articles were written criticising the use of "aspiration" and the associated underlying deficit ideologies. Of course, advocates for the promotion and raising of 'expectation' instead of 'aspiration' are not expected to cease their advocacy of 'aspiration', but the sheer number of articles which repeat the same key points is notable. Indeed, from a cursory search of the internet, it is easy to find two articles with exactly the same title published merely 8 months apart (both after the final Access Corpus APP had been submitted): "Why are we still talking about raising aspirations?" (Breakwell, 2021) and "Why are we still talking about raising aspirations?" (Blower, 2022). It could

perhaps be inferred that there may be an element of grandstanding on this matter within the widening participation space, particularly through blogs and social media (notably twitter). It might also be suggested that some individuals may have attempted to optimise the focus on this particular widening participation issue by projecting and promoting their own personal take on this change in terminology.

The table below displays information about the top 15 collocates of both "aspiration" and "expectation" in the Access Corpus; with those words that are in the top 15 common collocates of both highlighted in grey. Though there are two non-highlighted collocates for both aspiration and expectation, college is 18th and education is 21st on the collocate list for "expectation" and degree is 25th and progression is 19th on the collocate list for "aspiration".

Aspiration Collocates	Expectation Collocates
university	university
target	target
access	access
school	activity
activity	school
programme	programme
participation	participation
outreach	include
include	outreach
college	provide
provide	datum
time	time
education	study
study	degree
datum	progression

When we calculate the Jaccard similarity of *all* of the collocates of "aspiration" and "expectation" (n = 18, 429; n = 12, 660) we compute a value of 0.65, signalling that the two lists share 65.2% of words. This is indicative of a situation where the two words are used rather interchangeably; a perhaps unwelcome finding for those promoting the use of the term expectation over that of aspiration – whilst the signifier has lexically shifted, the signified remains the same. The argument that aspiration and expectation are used in semantically similar ways is strengthened when we look in more detail at the collocate "raise" with both aspiration and expectation; this collocate makes up 0.2% of all "aspiration" collocates, and 0.2% of all "expectation" collocates, indicating again that the two terms are used in similar ways.

Conclusion

This chapter focussed on the research question: how is 'widening participation' discursively constructed by higher education institutions in England? It answered this question by referencing analysis conducted on the Access Corpus – a new corpus composed of institutional output related to widening participation. Unsupervised machine learning and corpus linguistic techniques were used to create novel insights into widening participation discourses over the past 15 years and key discussions focus around Post-2012 Changes, Post-2018 Changes, and Student Characteristics.

Post-2012 Changes concerns a key juncture in English higher education when tuition fees for home students were tripled from £3,000 per year, to £9,000 per annum; analysis presented in this chapter presents three main findings relating to this period of time. First, discussion in the Access Corpus relating to 'funding' decreased significantly from 2012 onwards. Though other contextual factors are explored, such as the introduction of the National Scholarship Programme, it is concluded that institutions started to increasingly question the impact of scholarships on widening participation impact. Second, it was shown that the tripling of fees intensified the movement of the culture of English higher education towards a more "customer-focussed" ideology. This coincided with the increasingly intensified adoption by English higher education of an ideology of marketisation. Although an element of marketisation was evident before this point, illustrated by one institution noting that they considered themselves "one of Britain's most customer-focused universities", the intensification of this approach is evident in the increasing use of words such as "indicator", "benchmark", and "competitor". This supports Brown's observation

that there was a "remodelling of university governing bodies on corporate lines, and the development of sector-wide performance indicators" (Brown, 2015).

Post-2018 Changes explored discursive changes following the establishment of the Office for Students. This was another key period in the historical development of English higher education and key findings can be summarised in three ways: 1. The powers held by the Office for Students meant that institutions felt more pressure to comply with stipulated policies; after 2018 institutions began using phrases such as "As per OfS requirements…" or "This plan has been prepared in accordance with the guidance from the Office for Students" this, coupled with significantly higher frequencies of words which signify an increasingly prescriptive regulatory atmosphere (regulatory, governance, report, require, condition, to name but a few) suggests an increasing level of obligation, on the part of institutions, to act in accordance with the OfS or potentially face sanctions. 2. Institutions more readily adopt concepts favoured by the Office for Students, even if they had previously disagreed, in some cases vehemently disagreed, with these concepts. One example given in this chapter related the idea of uncovering *cause* in the context of widening participation evaluations – it was shown that some institutions which, at one point, stated that uncovering a cause in this field would be extremely difficult and thus cast doubt on its possibility, but later discussed attempting to uncover causal relations within widening participation interventions and referred to this endeavour positively. 3. The developing emphasis on "What Works?" in widening participation was demonstrated through key word analysis.

Discussions of student characteristics focussed firstly on ethnicity, and secondly on the debate surrounding the use of the terms 'aspiration' and 'expectation' in relation to widening participation. The ethnicity section describes the increasing focus on white working-class boys over recent years within the Access Corpus – noting the many flaws with this discourse: the erroneous use of "working-class" in the Access Corpus in one example, where there is simply no measure of classness but instead a measure of deprivation – two very different concepts – yet institutions insist on using the term "class". It is suggested that the sudden and dramatic increase in discussions concerning the plight of white working-class boys, "the one-in-ten", has some of the hallmarks of a moral panic. The Student Characteristic section also explores the language which institutions used to discuss other ethnicity groups; the move from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) to Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) is tracked using key-word analysis and it is proposed that increasing use of BAME instead of BME is due to higher education institutions holding an increasingly nuanced view of ethnicity related issues. Finally, it is suggested that, despite best efforts from a particular group of widening participation advocates, higher education institutions use the terms "aspiration" and "expectation" in very similar ways – the Jaccard similarity between collocates of these two terms is 65.2%.

Chapter Five: Institutional Differences in the Access Corpus

Introduction

This chapter uses data from the Access Corpus to explore institutional differences in widening participation discourses; this builds upon the results of the previous chapter by investigating the 'topics' of the Access Corpus in more detail, namely: Gap Analysis, Funding, Progression, Widening Access, School/ College Links, Admissions, Access Performance. A focus is specifically placed on how different institutional types (measured by Boliver cluster) differ in the way they discursively construct the widening participation landscape and how they react to key policy junctures over the past 15 years; for example, the tripling of tuition fees in 2012 and the introduction of the Office for Students in 2018. In this chapter, the results of the Topic Frequency analysis by Boliver Cluster are first presented and this is followed by substantive discussion of the issues raised and an interpretation of the results.

Research question two is directly addressed throughout this chapter: how do institutional differences influence institutional level widening participation discourses? This chapter is structured so as to address this research question and can be split into two main components: first, how does the 'amount talked about' for each topic vary by Boliver cluster, this includes how different institution 'types' react to specific policy junctures (i.e. the tripling of tuition fees in 2012, and the introduction of the Office for Students in 2018); second, how is specific language adopted differently between Boliver Cluster institutions; the examples from Chapter 4 are carried through to this Chapter and so there is a focus on the language of 'business and markets' and on 'scientific' approaches to evaluation. This section includes both qualitative and quantitative analysis by examining word frequencies across time as well as a more in-depth exploration of word use *in context*, and collocation analysis.

Whilst a discussion relating to Boliver Clusters can be found in Chapter 4, it is perhaps prudent to further clarify further aspects of this approach here, given that much of the analysis contained in this chapter rests upon this organising framework. A paper by Vikki Boliver clusters higher education institutions according to several different variables sourced from publicly available data; specifically, the clustering of universities is based on: research activity, teaching quality, economic resources, academic selectivity, and socioeconomic student mix of university; this found that "Old (pre-1992) universities [were] characterised by higher levels of research activity, greater wealth, more academically successful and socioeconomically advantaged student intakes, but similar levels of teaching quality, compared to New (post-1992) institutions." (Boliver, 2015: 608). On the basis of these variables, Oxford and Cambridge emerged as a separate tier resulting in Boliver Cluster 1 comprising only these two institutions whilst, on the other hand, the remainder of Russell Group institutions were categorised similarly to other Old (pre-1992) universities. Finally, there is also a split in New (post-1992) universities where some appear to cluster into a separate group.

Boliver Clusters have been used and referenced extensively in educational research over recent years as a more nuanced way of classifying English higher education institutions as opposed to using more familiar pre-existing metrics such as: 'traditional' universities vs ex-polytechnics; different mission groups; age of institution; international rankings (Dilnot, 2018; Edmond, 2019; Papatsiba & Cohen, 2020). Thus, its primacy as a measure of institutional 'type' in the present chapter continues this intellectual current.

Results

Topic Frequency by Boliver Cluster

This section presents the frequency of each topic by Boliver Cluster, allowing for an understanding of the importance of each topic within different clusters of higher education institutions. In order for a comprehensive picture to be presented, the topic model output is reproduced overleaf. These 7 topics are used extensively in the present chapter and so it is important that they are stated clearly at the outset. They are: Gap Analysis, Funding, Progression, Widening Access, School / College Links, Admissions, Access Performance Targets.

When seeking to understand the distribution of topics across different Boliver clusters, we must produce weighted values so that the numbers calculated reflect the length of documents within the corpus. This analysis was conducted by multiplying the topic probability values of each Access Agreement / Access and Participation Plan by the word count in each respective document, followed by dividing this value by the total word count of documents in the cluster. The table below displays the results of this analysis:

Table 2. Weighted Topic Probabilities by Boliver Cluster

Boliver Cluster	Gap Analysis	Funding	Progression	Widening Access	School/ College Links	Admissions	Access Performance Targets
1	0.07	0.06	0.04	0.00	0.00	0.80	0.03
2	0.11	0.10	0.18	0.07	0.15	0.15	0.24
3	0.12	0.16	0.28	0.08	0.02	0.04	0.30
4	0.16	0.22	0.26	0.08	0.01	0.02	0.25

Topic 1		Topic 2		Topic 3		Topic 4		Topic 5		Topic 6		Topic 7	
Term	Beta	Term	Beta	Term	Beta	Term	Beta	Term	Beta	Term	Beta	Term	Beta
Gap	0.026	University	0.030	University	0.021	School	0.025	School	0.018	University	0.025	University	0.026
Access	0.014	Fee	0.020	Access	0.014	Activity	0.017	Programme	0.013	School	0.020	Target	0.021
Datum	0.014	Bursary	0.018	Target	0.010	University	0.015	Access	0.013	College	0.014	Access	0.016
Attainment	0.013	College	0.013	Success	0.009	College	0.014	College	0.012	Target	0.012	School	0.014
Plan	0.012	Access	0.012	Progression	0.009	Outreach	0.012	Activity	0.012	Activity	0.012	Activity	0.013
Participation	0.011	Participation	0.011	Activity	0.008	Target	0.011	Target	0.009	Access	0.012	Outreach	0.013
Target	0.010	Income	0.010	Learn	0.008	Access	0.011	Education	0.008	Programme	0.011	Agreement	0.010
Continuation	0.009	Time	0.010	Provide	0.008	Participation	0.009	Participation	0.008	Outreach	0.011	Retention	0.010
BAME	0.009	Agreement	0.010	Study	0.008	Programme	0.008	Outreach	0.007	Provide	0.007	Programme	0.009
Rate	0.009	Education	0.009	Time	0.008	Fee	0.007	Study	0.007	Admission	0.007	Entrant	0.009
Gap Analysis		Funding		Progression		Widening Access		School / College Links		Admissions		Access Performance Targe	

Topic 1		Topic 2		Topic 3		Topic 4		Topic 5		Topic 6		Topic 7	
Term	DBeta	**Term**	DBeta	Term	DBeta	Term	DBeta	Term	DBeta	Term	DBeta	Term	DBeta
BAME	5.734	Scholarship	3.292	Engagement	1.903	Day	1.663	London	2.261	Admission	2.396	Retention	2.688
Gap	5.540	Tuition	2.408	Graduate	1.811	Pupil	1.058	Pre	1.220	Teacher	1.500	HESA	2.372
White	4.609	Bursary	2.163	Success	1.609	Event	0.987	Session	1.038	Participant	1.449	Column	2.191
Continuation	3.780	Fee	1.956	Learn	1.521	WP	0.953	Project	0.809	Summer	1.233	Benchmark	1.986
Reduce	3.636	Income	1.665	Team	1.504	Session	0.941	Teacher	0.704	UK	1.070	Entrant	1.767
Black	3.587	Cost	1.621	Employment	1.454	School	0.928	Background	0.644	Cohort	1.005	Table	1.635
Compare	3.292	Additional	1.457	Practice	1.425	Advice	0.909	OFFA	0.596	Entry	0.996	Description	1.546
POLAR	3.287	Fund	1.119	Enhance	1.421	Aspiration	0.906	Scheme	0.593	Fair	0.991	Indicator	1.477
Attainment	2.953	Receive	1.093	Equality	1.363	London	0.884	Lead	0.577	Potential	0.866	Milestone	1.369
Investment	2.474	Scheme	1.066	Approach	1.322	Potential	0.770	Pupil	0.553	Subject	0.863	Collaborative	1.271

Table 3. Reproduced: Most common words and overrepresented words by LDA topics

Beta = Probability of a term occurring in a particular topic (word Betas sum up to 1 within each topic.)

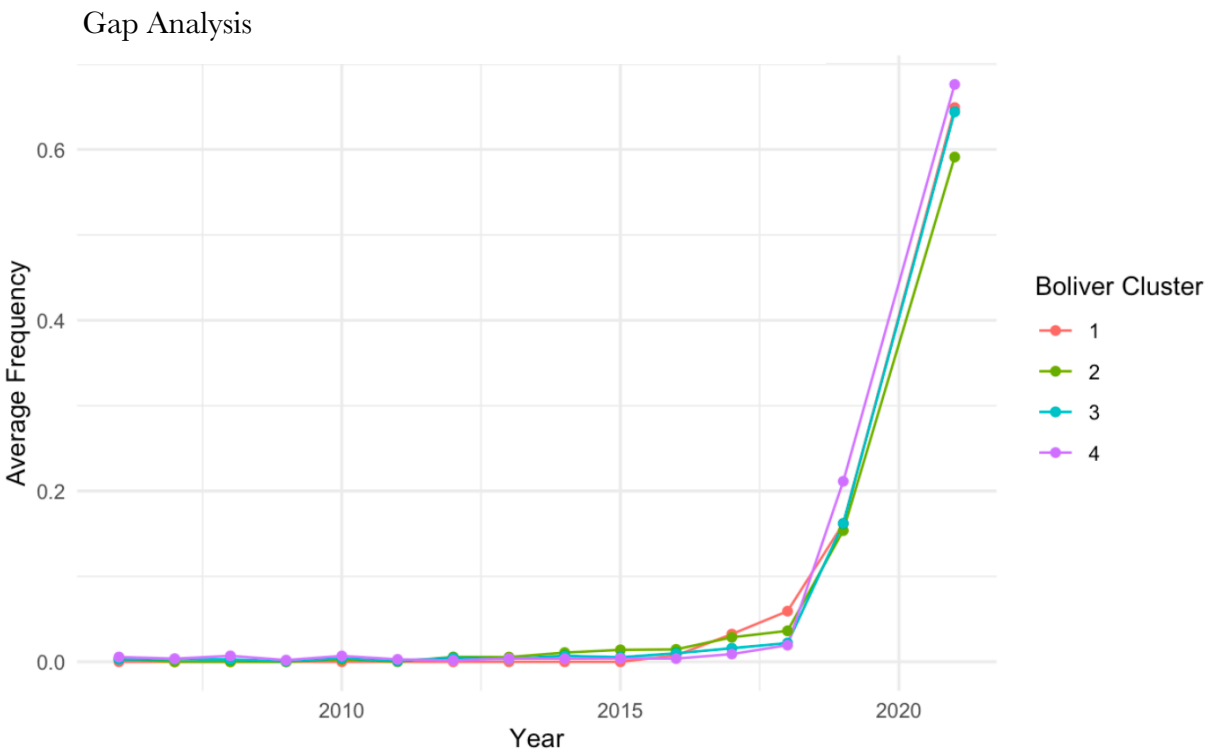
DBeta (Differential Beta) = (beta − average beta) / average beta

Topic Change Over Time by Boliver Cluster

The previous chapter (chapter 4) focused on how topic frequencies change over the entire corpus, demonstrating significant differences in the zeniths and nadirs of each of the seven topics. In order to further this analysis, we can capture topic frequency change over time in sub-samples of the Access Corpus; more specifically, we can observe how topic frequencies change over time by Boliver Cluster. This is a particularly interesting part of the analysis since we are then able to more fully understand the impact that institutional 'type' (measured in this case by Boliver Cluster) has on particular institutional output; we may, for example, find that particular types of institution are affected differently by policy drives or we may find that there is no difference in the ways in which different Boliver Cluster institutions interact with policy.

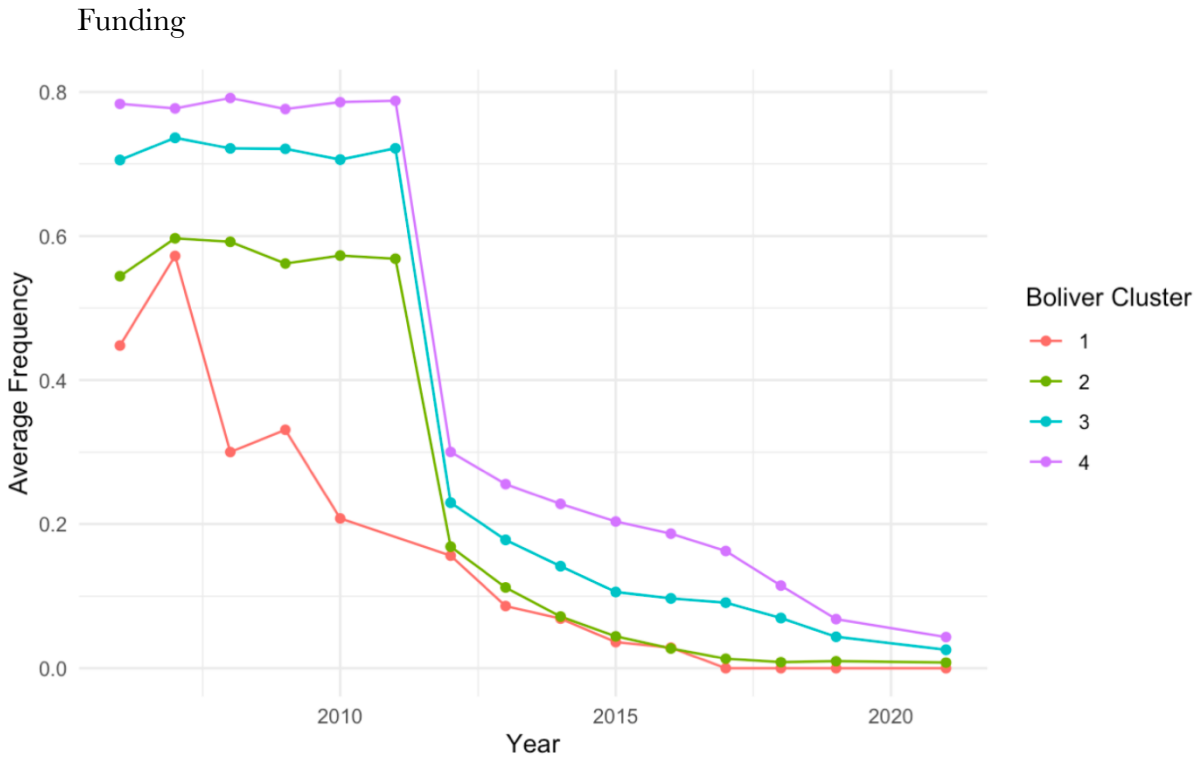
The seven line graphs below illustrate the way in which different Boliver Cluster institutions discuss each of the seven topics from the LDA topic model: Gap Analysis, Funding, Progression, Widening Access, School / College Links, Admissions, Access Performance Targets.

Figure 50. Topic 1 – Gap Analysis



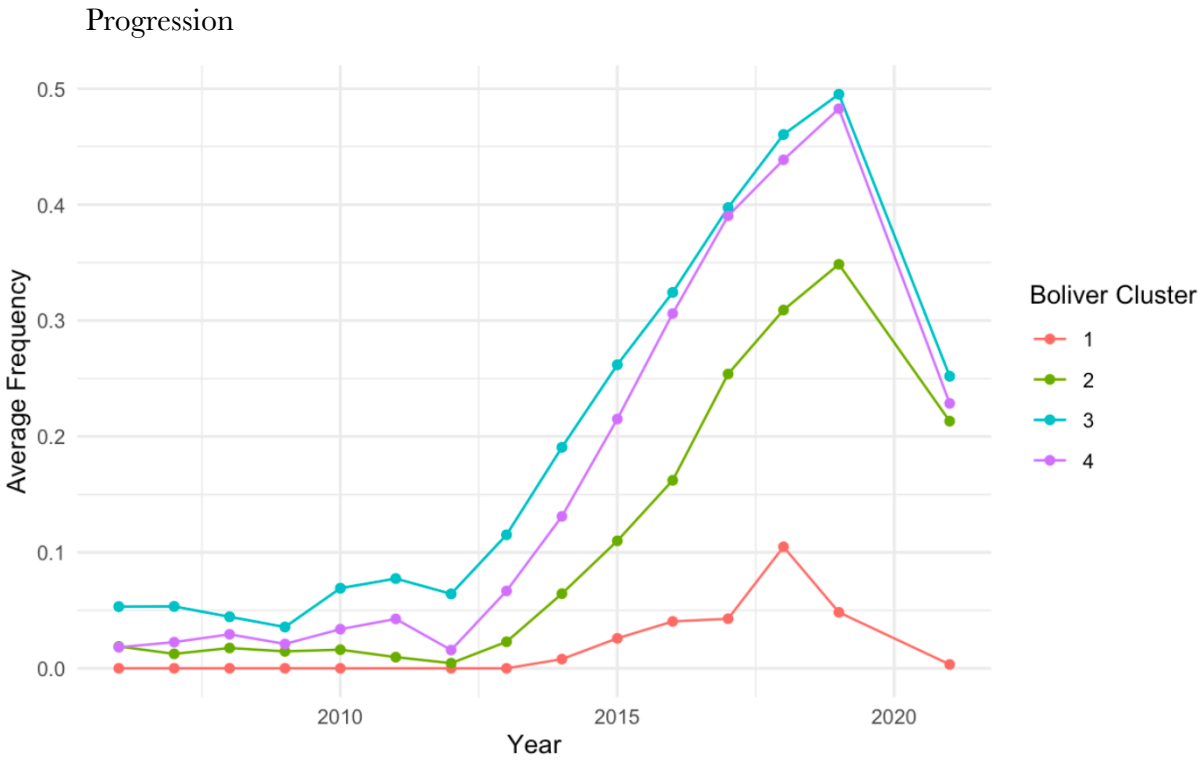
The "Gap Analysis" line graph illustrates that institutions respond in broadly similar ways when addressing this topic; starting with small amounts of frequency, and then proceeding to rise sharply from 2018 onwards (notably at the same time as the establishment of the Office for Students). At the end of the corpus, Boliver Cluster 4 institutions refer most to the topic Gap Analysis, and Boliver Cluster 2 the least.

Figure 51. Topic 2 – Funding



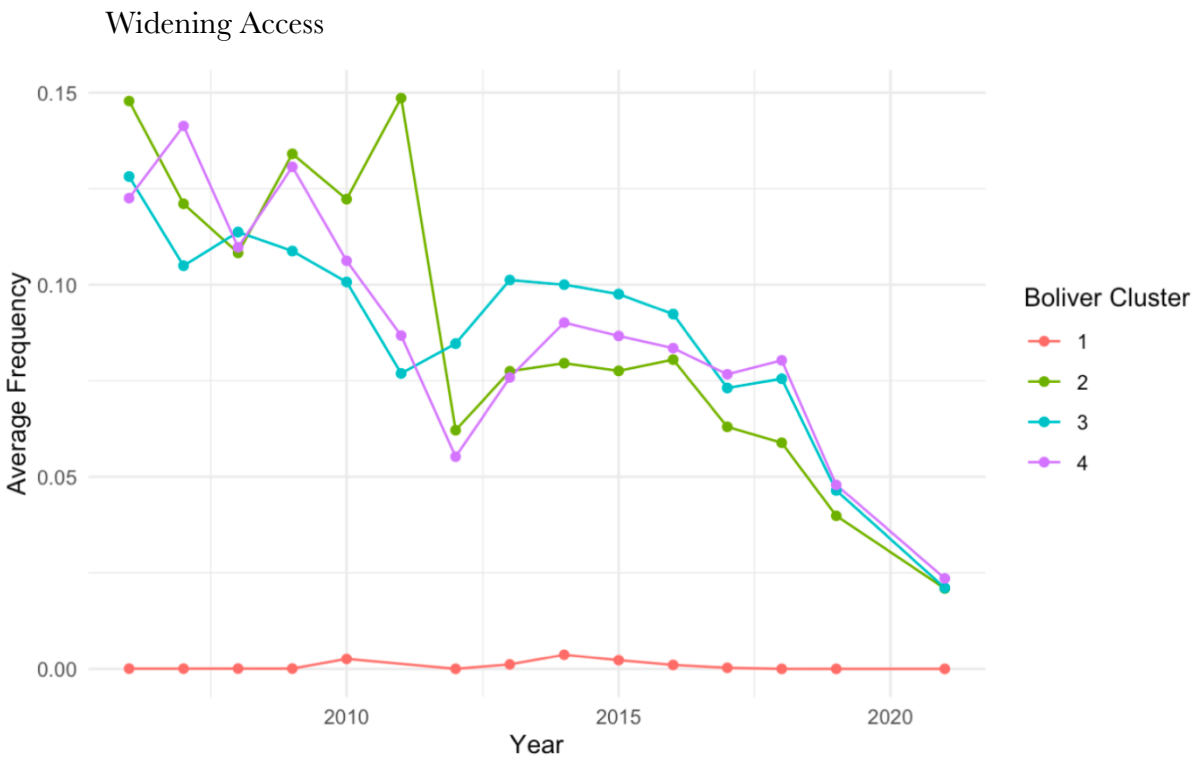
The Funding topic in this research follows a similar trajectory for each Boliver Cluster throughout the entire corpus; each Boliver Cluster remains in its relative place across each year, with Cluster 4 institutions discussing funding more frequently, followed by Cluster 3, then Cluster 2, and finally Cluster 1. This is an interesting finding as it indicates that lower prestige institutions address funding issues more frequently compared with higher prestige institutions.

Figure 52. Topic 3 – Progression



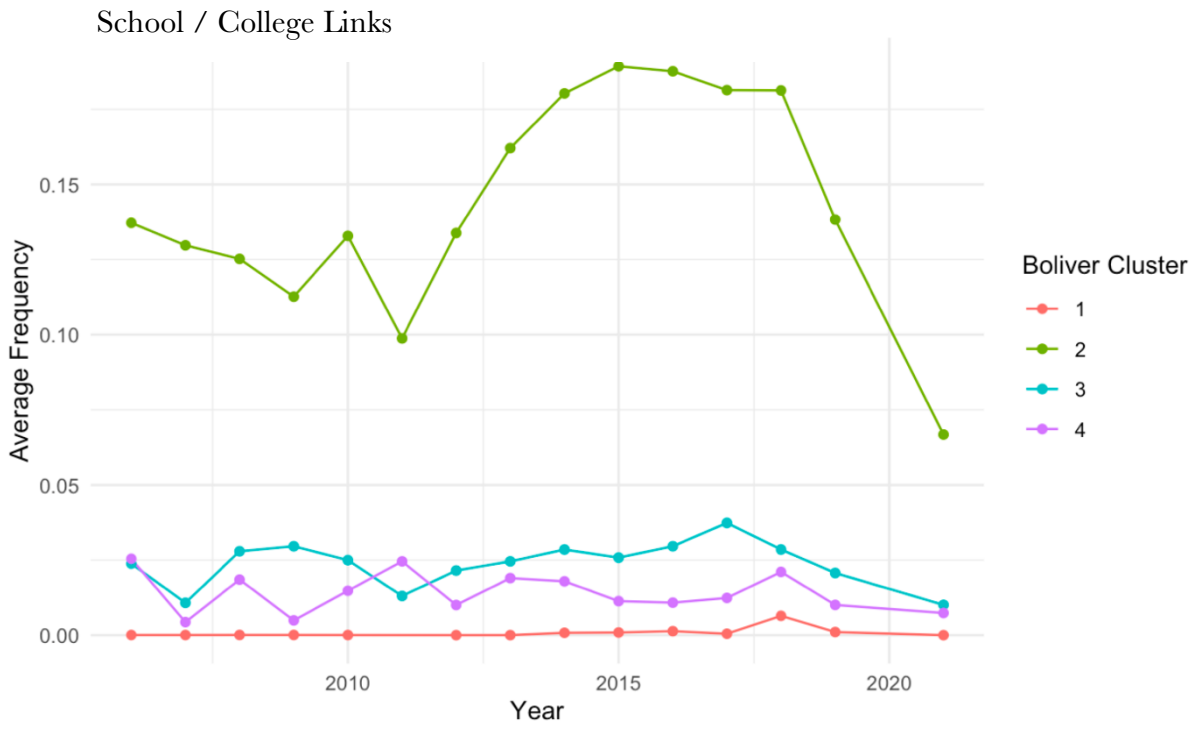
The trajectory of the topic "Progression" shows that whilst each institution stays in its respective ranking position throughout the corpus, a large gap appears to grow between cluster 1 and clusters 2, 3, and 4 from 2012 onwards; by the end of the corpus the gap between these two groups is large.

Figure 54. Topic 4 – Widening Access



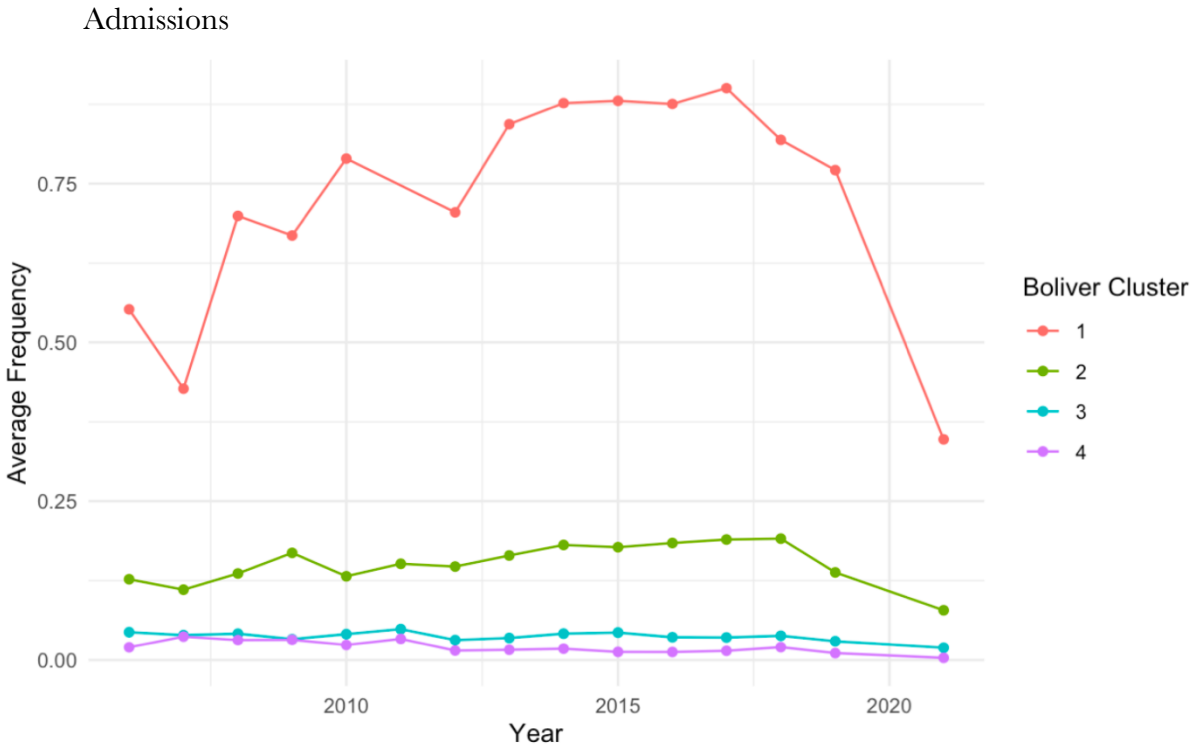
The topic "Widening Access" fluctuates more than many of the other of the seven topics produced by the LDA topic model. There are similar negative trajectories for clusters 2, 3, and 4 which decline throughout the period of the cohort, with cluster 1 remaining at almost 0 for the entirety.

Figure 55. Topic 5 – School / College Links



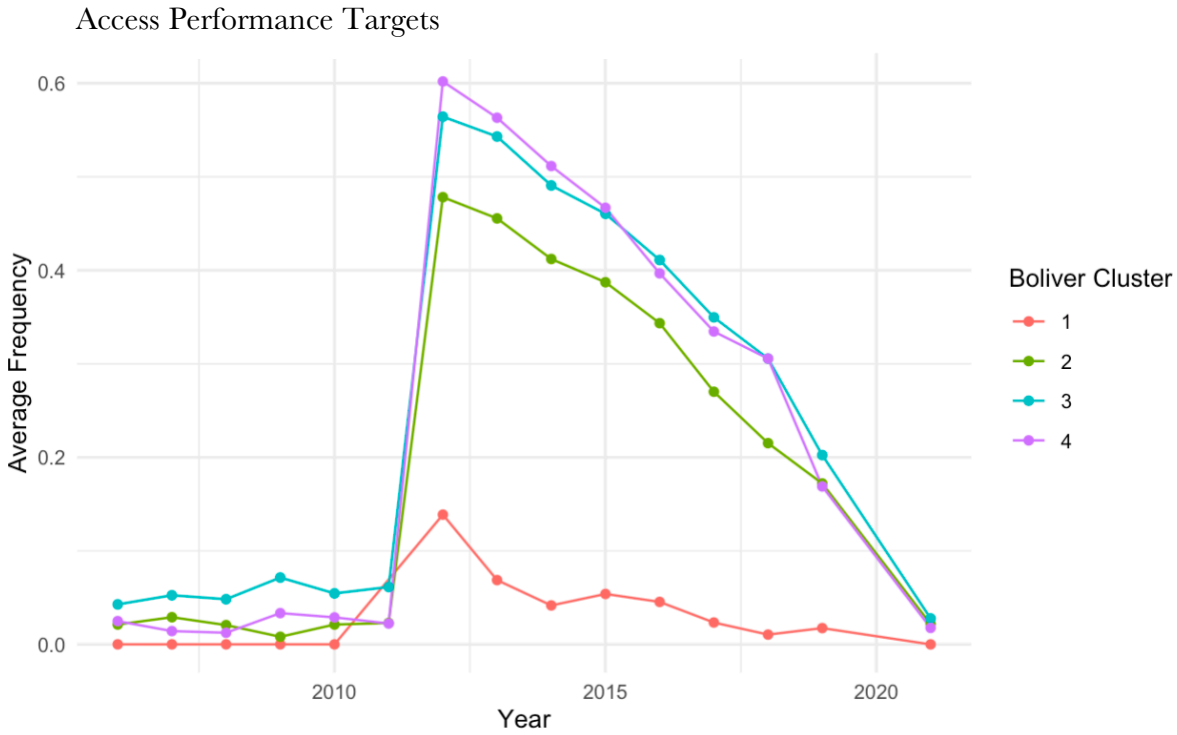
School/College links again forms two groups, one consisting of clusters 3, 4, and 1 and another consisting of cluster 2. Interestingly, cluster 2 universities make most reference to school / college links throughout the corpus, and to a significantly higher level than other clusters.

Figure 56. Topic 6 – Admissions



Admissions is the only topic which is referenced more frequently for cluster 1 when compared with clusters 2, 3, and 4. References by Cluster 2 institutions to the admissions topic are significantly lower than is the case for cluster 1, but higher than for clusters 3 and 4; this perhaps indicates that the topic admissions is mentioned more often by higher prestige institutions across the corpus.

Figure 57. Topic 7 – Access Performance Targets



Discussion

This section focusses on the research question "how do institutional differences influence institutional level widening participation discourses?" and is split between two substantive sections in relation to different patterns between Boliver Clusters: i. topic distributions across the corpus and impact of wider policy drives; ii. use of domain specific language across the corpus, in particular looking at the uptake of business, market, and scientific vernacular. The use of domain specific language section uses some of the key word analysis outlined in Chapter 4 relating to marketisation and competition within higher education but breaks down the analysis by Boliver Cluster, whilst the section relating to "scientific language" uses a more qualitative approach by examining word use in situ within the Access Corpus. This is particularly apposite given that *context* is of vital importance when analysing a corpus.

Topic Distribution and Policy Drives

This first part of the larger discussion section presented here focusses on the distribution of topics by Boliver Cluster, interpreting what the patterns may mean for each Boliver Cluster: is it the case, for example, that particular Boliver Clusters focus their efforts more heavily on certain topics within widening participation discourse compared to others? As a corollary, what does this mean for individual higher education institutions and the sector as a whole? Further discussion under the subheading "Topic Distribution and Policy Drives" focusses on the two key policy inflection points outlined in Chapter 4, namely: the tripling of tuition fees in 2012, and the introduction of the Office for Students in 2018. These two policy junctures are key to understanding how the higher education ecosystem has evolved over the course of the corpus. Analysing the differential impacts of these policy drives is vital for informing the formulation of future policy initiatives and the articulation of their desired outcomes. This discussion sub-section is presented by Boliver Cluster so as to provide a clear structure and to facilitate a substantive interpretation of the issues for each Cluster. It should be appreciated that different institutional types are engaged and operate within a shared policy context and thus there will be mention of each of the clusters across the sub-divisions (e.g. the section concerning Boliver Cluster 1 will also refer to Clusters 2, 3, and 4).

Boliver Cluster 1

The most prominent topic for Boliver Cluster 1 institutions was Admissions; this is by far the most widely referenced topic with a weighted probability score of 0.8 which is significantly higher than for any other topic from the LDA topic model. Admissions refers to the processes by which higher education institutions allow access to their institutions; this includes, for example, the criteria and procedures by which a university selects

prospective students for admittance to its undergraduate degree courses. In Chapter 4, this topic was described as "admissions processes; this is signified by the words: "University", "Admission", "Cohort", "Entry', "Fair", "Potential". These words mirror those that are employed by institutions in relation to their admissions policies, for example, references to "fair access" or considering students' "Potential given appropriate contextual information about their backgrounds."

Given that Boliver Cluster 1 institutions (Oxford and Cambridge) are the two universities with the highest entry tariff requirements, it may be unsurprising that the topic with the most references is that of Admissions. Entry grade requirements are the most challenging at these institutions and, it can be argued, this creates a very high admissions threshold which works against the circumstances of students who are from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. In this situation, widening access to the institution for these students will necessarily be constrained by the stringency of the admissions policy.

It is particularly notable that the standard admissions routes at these two institutions for almost all courses includes interviews, and additional subject-specific tests. Many schools across the UK have Oxbridge specific preparation for their students who are planning to apply to these two higher education institutions – this is unique to Boliver Cluster 1 and is not widely found for other universities. Therefore, the admissions criteria and attendant processes are markedly (almost uniquely) different for Oxford and Cambridge. In the context of widening access to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, this operational feature may explain the significantly higher frequency of discussions relating to admissions by these institutions.

The unique circumstances and popular mythology surrounding Oxbridge institutions further manifests in other ways and beyond the key focus of their institutional APPs being placed on Admissions issues; we can observe, for example, that in the case of the topic Access Performance Targets (Topic 7), these institutions do not follow the same trend as Boliver Clusters 2, 3, and 4. More specifically, all institutions appear to be directly affected by the policy drive of 2012 which involved the tripling of tuition fees across universities in England. This development brought with it an increased focus on performance targets and a closer monitoring of access activities, and yet the impact of this does not appear to have been as keenly felt by the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge. Though there is clearly an increase even for Boliver Cluster 1 in the wake of the 2012 policy drives, the cluster is affected to nowhere near the same magnitude as any other cluster.

Boliver Cluster 2

There are 30 English universities in Boliver Cluster 2; given that there are 18 English Russell Group Universities (excluding Oxford and Cambridge which are in Boliver Cluster 1) this means that the Boliver Cluster 2 cohort extends beyond simply the Russell Group. This profile makes sense given that being a constituent member of the group implies less strong performance in many measures of university performance in relation to access participation. 12 English universities are included in Boliver cluster 2 which are not members of the Russell Group: University of Bath, University of East Anglia, Goldsmiths, University of Kent, Lancaster University, University of Leicester, Loughborough University, University of Reading, Royal Holloway, SOAS, University of Surrey, and University of Sussex.

The two topics that are most discussed by Cluster 2 institutions are "Access Performance Targets" and "Progression", however, the Topic that stands out most prominently for Boliver Cluster 2 institutions is "School / College Links" which is significantly higher in terms of discussion frequency when compared to any other cluster. This is perhaps to be explained by Boliver Cluster 2 institutions experiencing pressure on two fronts: first, to actively compete with other Cluster 2 institutions to achieve internally devised student recruitment targets and, second, to provide evidence to demonstrate that they are fulfilling their commitments to widening participation to their institutions (some of the most prestigious in England) in the face of policy pressure to be *doing* successful widening participation work. Cultivating substantive school and college links can be a primary way for these 30 universities to both achieve internal student recruitment targets and to widen access to their institutions.

The topic "Admissions" is referenced the second most frequently for Cluster 2 institutions (when compared to Clusters 1, 3, and 4); this may at least in part be explained by the fact that these institutions are some of the most prestigious in England and are thus under particular media, public, and policy scrutiny to make sure they are acting in the 'correct' way. This situation is similar to that found in Cluster 1 institutions which, as mentioned previously, reference "Admissions" the most of any Boliver Cluster; this is clearly displayed in the line graph which represents "Admissions" across the entire Access Corpus. Indeed, the amount that Admissions is discussed appears to be negatively associated with institutional 'prestige'; Boliver Cluster 1 has the highest Admissions frequency, followed by Boliver Cluster 2, then Boliver Cluster 3, and finally Boliver Cluster 4

Boliver Cluster 3

Boliver Cluster 3 consists predominantly of post-1992 universities, that is, those education institutions which attained their university status in 1992. These institutions often have a teaching focus (as opposed to the perceived research focus of Cluster 1 and 2 institutions), are often former polytechnics, and are characterised as having an increased focus on student *recruitment* as opposed to Clusters 1 and 2 which are generally regarded as being *selective* and *selecting* in their admissions procedures.

The topic Access Performance Targets is the most widely referenced topic within Cluster 3 institutions; Cluster 3 also has the highest reference frequency out of all the Clusters for this topic. This is interesting insofar as it could indicate that Cluster 3 institutions are perhaps more responsive to widening access policy drives compared to other Clusters (and particularly so when compared to Cluster 1). It may perhaps also be the case that Cluster 3 institutions rely more heavily on governmental support to sustain their financial health and thus there is an increased onus on them to follow more rigidly particular policy drives. This is further supported by the fact that the topic "Funding" is referenced most by Cluster 4 (0.22) and Cluster 3 (0.16)

The topic "Progression" is highest for Boliver Cluster 3 when compared to any of the other Boliver Clusters in the Access Corpus; this perhaps again signals the receptiveness of Boliver Cluster 3 institutions to Office for Students policy drives (which, as illustrated in Chapter 4, increasingly focussed on undergraduate students' progression at higher education institutions). However, as the topic progression also deals with the ability of students to move into graduate level employment or further level study, then it might equally be the case that students from these institutions face more challenges in this area.

In other words, the topic 'progression' could be referenced mostly by these institutions because they have a greater need to improve their performance in this area.

It is interesting to examine Clusters 3 and 4 in conjunction since they appear to act in very similar ways; this is potentially unsurprising, but will be explored further when elucidating the links between Clusters.

Boliver Cluster 4

Boliver Cluster 4 comprises the remaining post-1992 institutions that were not included in Cluster 3 (a detailed list of universities in each cluster can be found in the methodology chapter). The Boliver Clustering splits post-1992 universities into Clusters 3 and 4 which is particularly interesting given that traditionally there has previously been no distinct demarcation in this group of 'post-1992' institutions.

The results of the topic model produced in Chapter 4 supports the Boliver Clustering system which splits post-1992 institutions into Cluster 3 and Cluster 4 since we can see a somewhat linear relationship appearing in three of the seven topics: Gap Analysis, Funding, and Admissions. Cluster 4 institutions refer to both Gap Analysis and Funding the most of any Cluster, and refer to Admissions the least. This further supports the argument proposed for Boliver Cluster 3 institutions; that they are more actively receptive to governmental policy drives when compared to Cluster 1 and 2 institutions, and the argument can be extended to include Cluster 4 universities. It appears as though Cluster 4 institutions even more positively respond to Office for Students policy drives when compared to Clusters 1, 2, and 3.

In an increasingly competitive and market-oriented higher education system, it might be reasonably conjectured that those institutions which are considered to be the most desirable (have greater prestige) will, all things being equal, have less strong reasons to concern themselves with the financial aspects of higher education participation than their less desirable (lower prestige) counterparts. The reason for this may be that the level of demand for higher prestige institutions tends to be more resilient and constant whereas this may not be the case for those with lower prestige. Put simply, it may be the case that lower prestige institutions are required to address 'market factors' affecting higher education participation to a greater extent than higher status institutions. If this is true, then Cluster 4 institutions would be expected to incorporate more references to funding issues than Cluster 1 and 2 as these involve such matters as financial incentives for students to consider in making their higher education choices, for example, bursaries and scholarship schemes.

Cross-cluster comparison

Whilst the above discussions relating to each of the Boliver Clusters and their various characteristics by topic provide detailed information about the distribution of topics across individual clusters, it is important to observe and examine any trends that appear between clusters. The purpose of this subsection is to address these trends.

The first thing to note about the distributions of topics across Boliver Clusters is that it appears as though Boliver Cluster 1 is particularly distinctive compared to the other clusters. When we visually inspect the line graphs representing change over time for frequency of topic, we can see that, although in some cases the line representing Boliver Cluster 1 follows similar trajectories as the other clusters, there are several topics in which Boliver Cluster 1 follows a unique trajectory such as in "Admissions" and "Access

Performance Targets". This observation further signals the ways in which Oxford and Cambridge act in different ways to much of the rest of the higher education sector in England.

A linear pattern is evident in three of the seven topics produced by the LDA topic model; this signals that higher education institutions act in different ways depending on their levels of prestige. We can see from table 2 that Funding appears more frequently as the Boliver cluster increases: Cluster 1 – 0.06; Cluster 2 – 0.10; Cluster 3 – 0.16; Cluster 4 – 0.22. The same pattern is found in Gap Analysis: Cluster 1 – 0.07; Cluster 2 – 0.11; Cluster 3 – 0.12; Cluster 4 – 0.16. Furthermore, the inverse linear trend is found for the topic Admissions: Cluster 1 – 0.80; Cluster 2 – 0.15; Cluster 3 – 0.04; Cluster 4 – 0.02. Though the pattern for the topic Admissions is inverted, this still signals a linear relationship between the four clusters. It is important to make clear that whilst the Cluster *numbers* are not meaningful *qua* numbers, they are still useful to make clear the ordinal nature of the respective Clusters; to elucidate further, Cluster 1 – 4 may just as usefully be termed using alphabet systems: Cluster A – D, Cluster α – δ, or Cluster Whiskey – Zulu.

The linear pattern observable in the resulting analysis of the topic model topics by Boliver Cluster indicates that lower prestige institutions are more reactive to Office for Students guidance and policy drives. This is particularly noticeable when examining the topics that relate to Office for Students policy drives, for example "Gap Analysis", for which Cluster 4 is the highest frequency Cluster, and in "Progression" where, again, Cluster 4 is one of the more prominent clusters in terms of frequency. As outlined in Chapter 4, these two topics in particular reflect key policy drives by the Office for Students during the period of the Access Corpus. In order to build on this preliminary finding that lower prestige

institutions are perhaps more affected by policy drives, the next subsection examines in greater detail the nuances of language used by different Boliver Cluster institutions, paying close attention to those words that signal particular policies (which were outlined in Chapter 4).

Language that Signals Reactivity to Policy

In Chapter 4, it was illustrated that one can observe higher education institutions' reactions to policy drives by observing word bigrams in the Access Corpus. Bigrams such as: `baseline datum'; 'access measure'; 'retention measure' were shown to be increasingly prominent in the years after 2012 (when tuition fees were tripled from £3,000 per annum to £9,000 per annum in England); the reason for this increase was ascribed to a move towards increased marketisation of the higher education system in England. Following this, it is interesting to observe how different Boliver Clusters reacted to this shift in university funding arrangements. The line graphs on the following page show change-over-time in the frequency of different bigrams that reflect marketisation in the Access Corpus by Boliver Cluster; this includes the aforementioned bigrams and more that were discussed in Chapter 4.

The graphs on the following page further signal the differential impacts of policy drives on higher education institutions where it appears that higher education institutions with different levels of prestige are impacted differently in different areas. A clear linear pattern is evident in the bigrams: "Milestone Target", "Basket Indicator", and "Target Baseline" where Boliver Cluster 4 is the most frequent and Boliver Cluster 1 is the least frequent. These three bigrams relate to the increasingly marketised atmosphere in which universities operated in the wake of the tuition fee tripling in 2012 – institutions appear differentially

impacted in the extent to which they felt they ought to report their widening participation activities couched in marketised terms.

Higher education institutions with lower levels of prestige appear particularly susceptible the pressure of the language of marketisation and significantly more than those Boliver Cluster institutions with higher levels of institutional prestige (using Boliver Cluster as a proxy). This is further supported by the fact that Boliver Cluster 4 institutions are also the most prominent in the bigrams "Retention Measure" and "Baseline Datum" which both further signal marketised language.

It is clear from the graphs on the previous page that all of the bigrams increase in frequency around the time of the 2012 tuition fee tripling, which further supports the argument made in Chapter 4 that the tripling led to an increasingly marketised feel to the higher education sector – permeating even widening participation discourses.

That institutions differ in their reaction to policies and more broadly in their policy agenda is perhaps unsurprising given the gamut of geographical locations, institutional histories, and mission statements (amongst many other diverse characteristics) of higher education institutions in England. However, this fact is not well acknowledged in widening participation policy; *all* institutions must submit the same documents for scrutiny – including the documents which comprise the Access Corpus – and all institutions must abide by precisely the same governance structures and mechanisms.

Figure 58. Bigram "Baseline Datum"

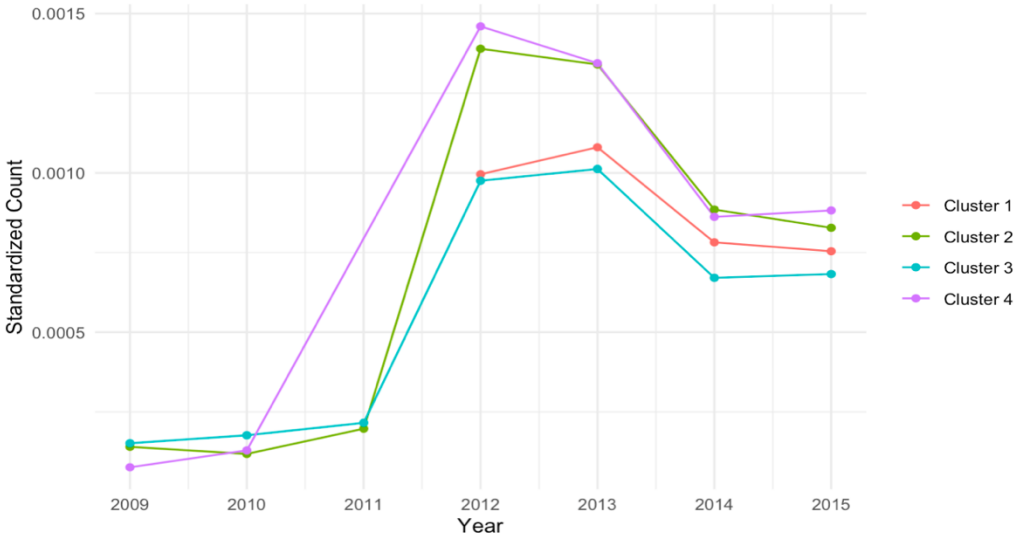


Figure 59. Bigram "Access Measure"

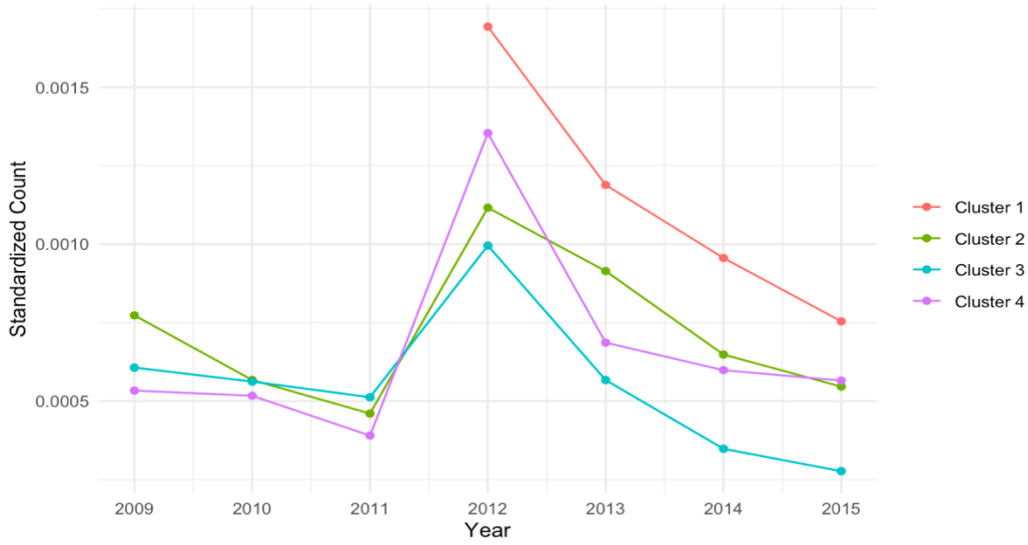


Figure 60. Bigram "Retention Measure"

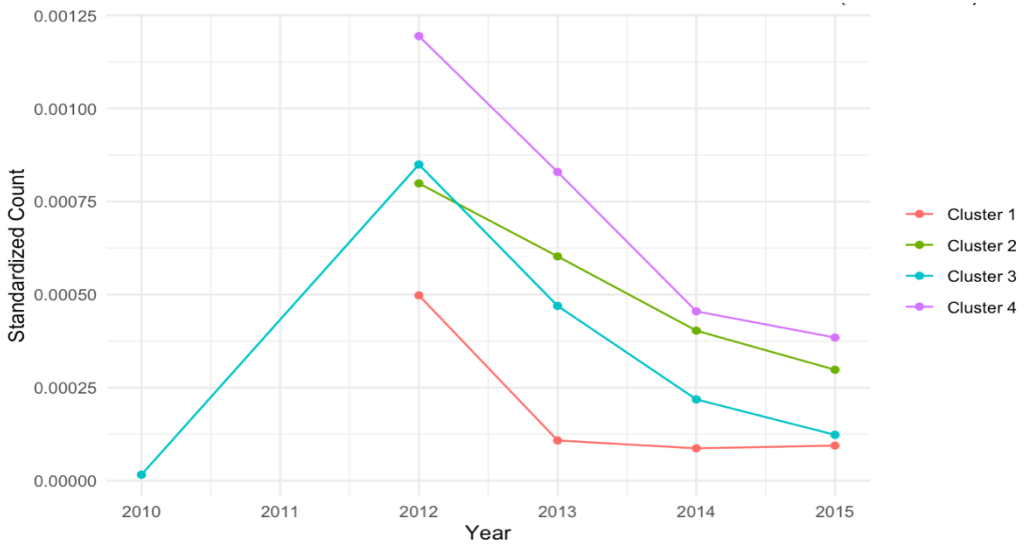


Figure 61. Bigram "Market Research"

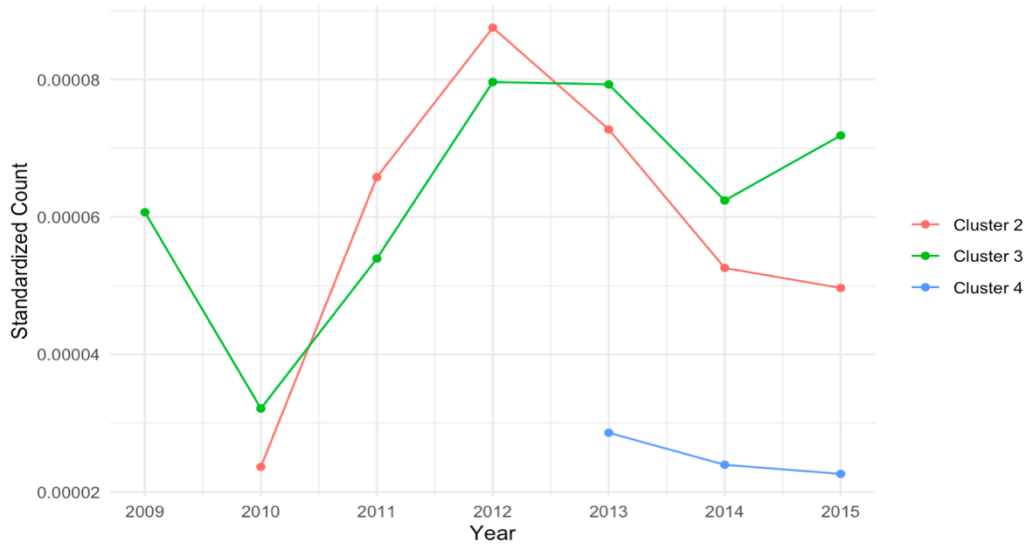


Figure 62. Bigram "Target Baseline"

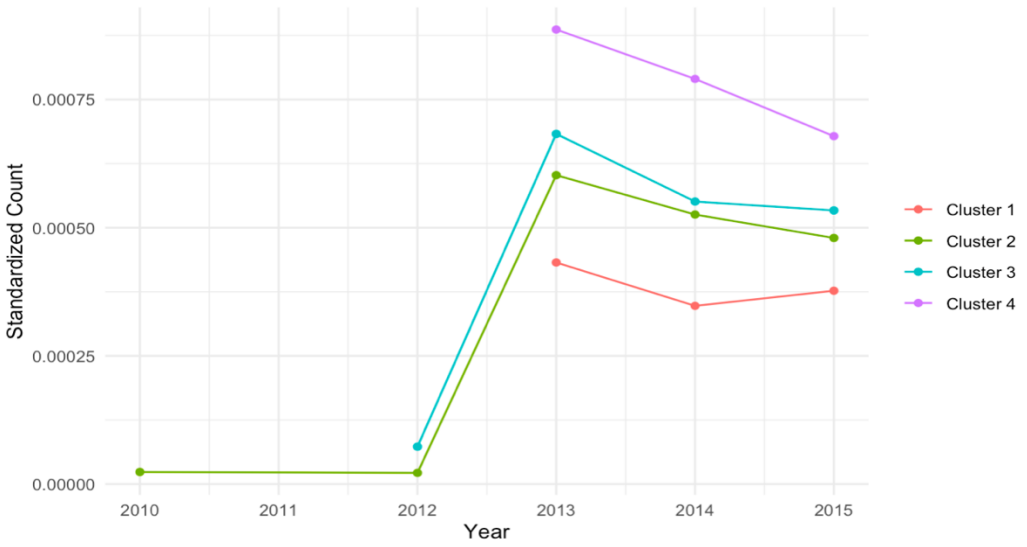


Figure 63. Bigram "Adjust Benchmark"

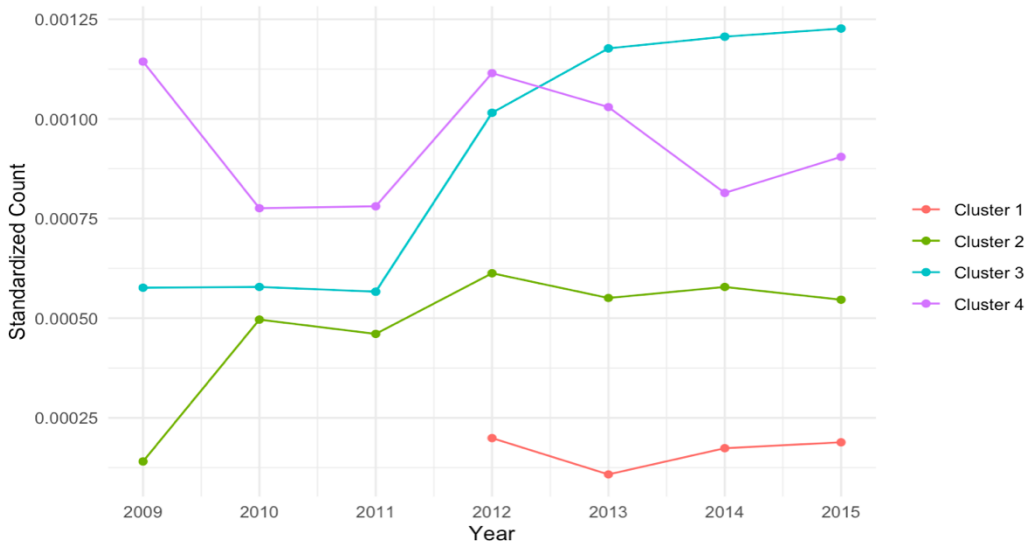


Figure 64. Bigram "Basket Indicator"

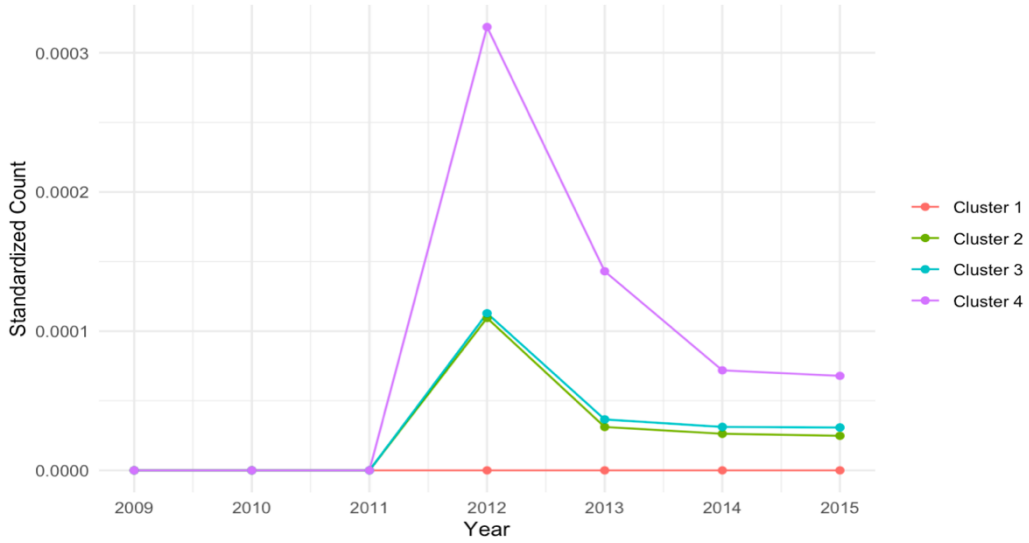
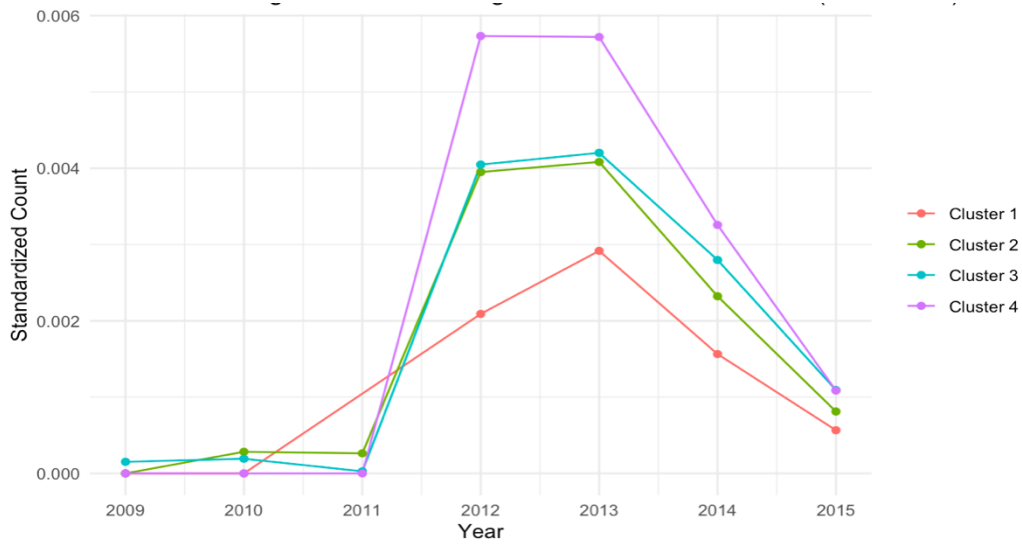


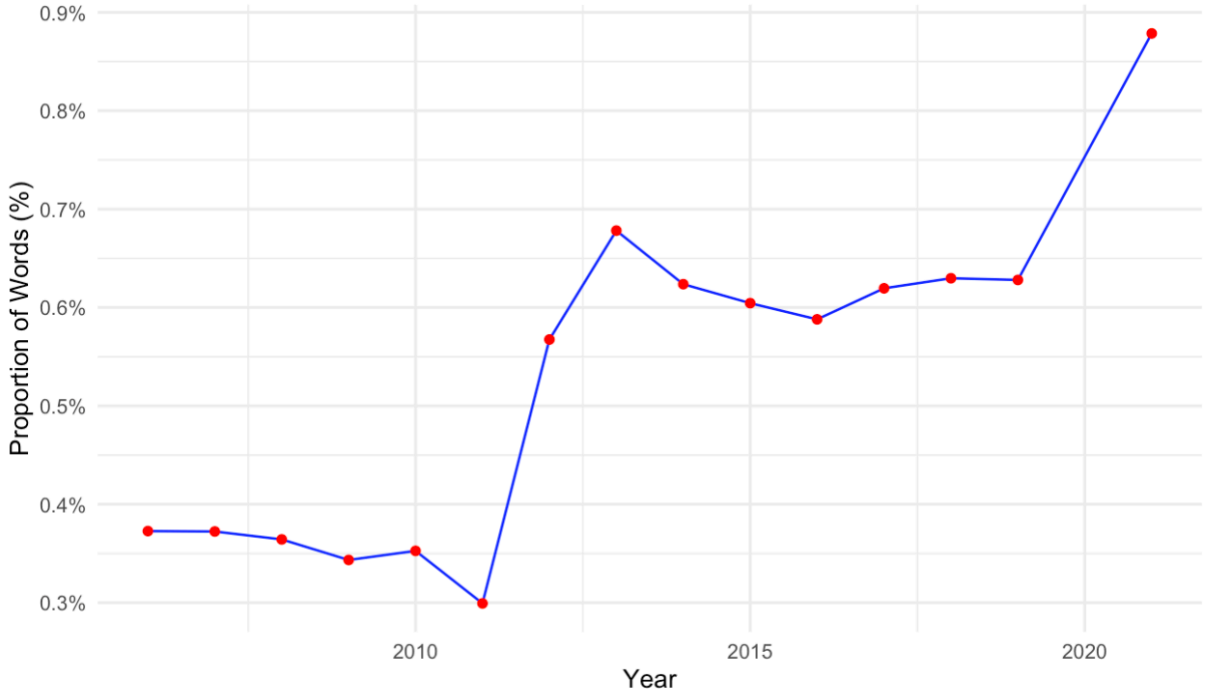
Figure 65. Bigram "Milestone Target"



Use of Scientific Language in Widening Participation Discourses

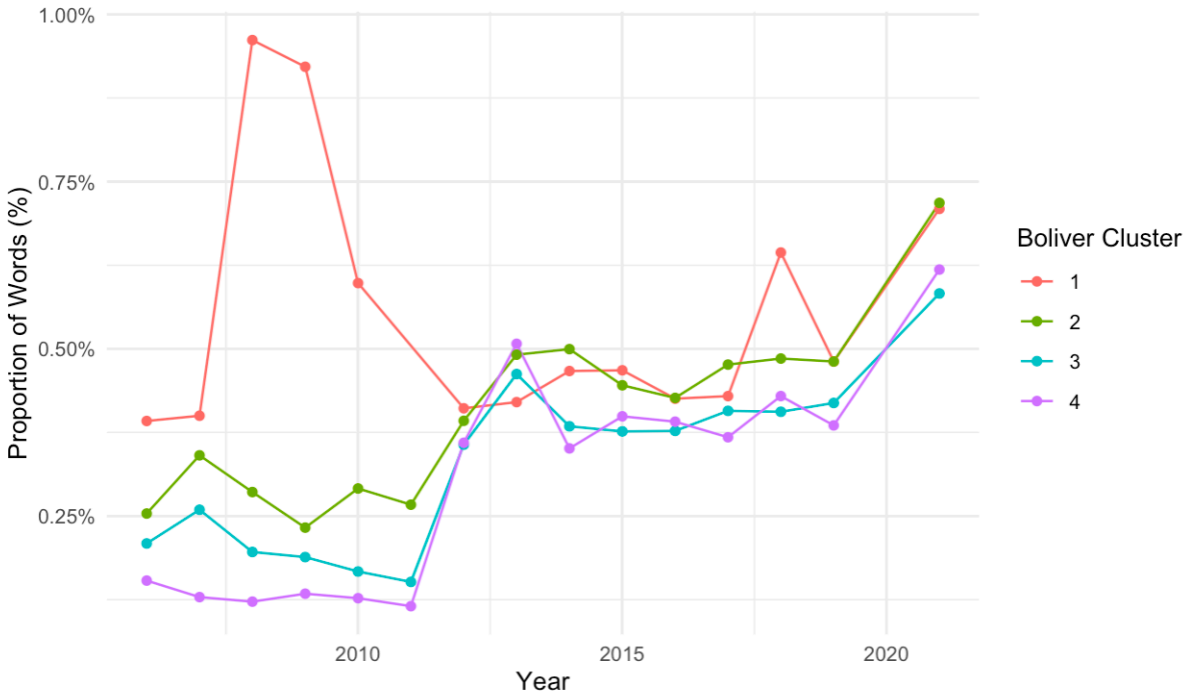
Another significant aspect of widening participation discourse across the Access Corpus relates to the increasing use of scientific language by higher education institutions. In order to further examine the use of scientific language, a small dictionary of scientific words was compiled in order to track the frequency of use of these terms over the 15 years of the corpus, these words are: "causation", "causal", "causative", "objectivity", "validity", "reliability", "rct", "experimental", "rigour", "rigorous", "robust", "randomise", "evidence", "empirical", "hypothesis", "variable", "analysis", "theory", "control", "sample", "experiment", "statistical", "correlation", "quantitative". Whilst these lexemes do not represent the entirety of 'science' and 'scientific practice' *per se*, it is argued that by tracking the use of these tokens we may be able to observe the trends that exist within the Access Corpus pertaining to the use of scientific language – it is hypothesised that there has been an intensification which would be observed in an increase in the use of lexemes found in the science dictionary. The graph below represents the use of scientific language in the Access Corpus:

Figure 66. Scientific Language in the Access Corpus



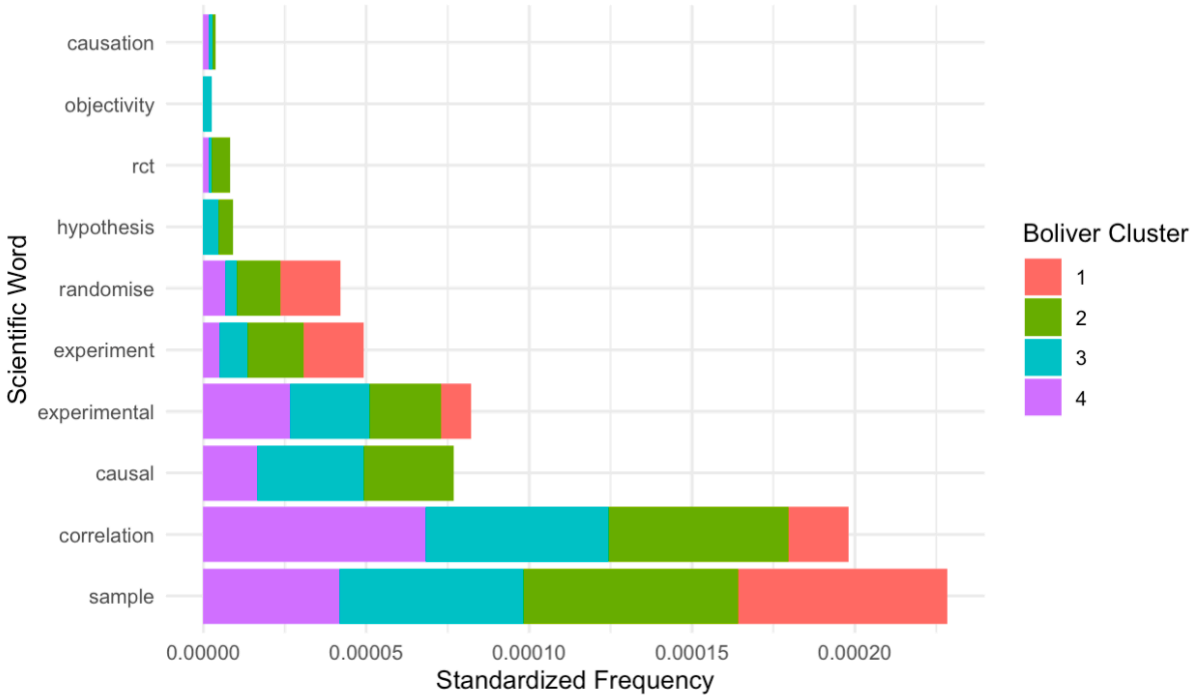
As we can see in the figure above, it is evident that the hypothesis suggesting an increased intensification and frequency of the use of scientific language is proved to be true in the Access Corpus – institutions increasingly use words which signify an underlying ethos with regard to 'scientific' approaches. Whilst this is true for Boliver Clusters when taken together, the graph below illustrates the uptake of Scientific Language broken down by Boliver Cluster.

Figure 67. Scientific Language in the Access Corpus by Boliver Cluster



It appears that cluster 1 and 2 institutions use scientific language to a slightly greater extent than clusters 3 or 4 throughput the corpus – however, this graph does not tell us *how* these words are used. We can split the science dictionary words even further by examining the frequencies of words which signify a particularly positivistic approach, these words include: sample, correlation, causal, experimental, experiment, randomise, hypothesis, rct, objectivity, causation. When observing the frequency split of these words (in the figure below), we can see that cluster 1 appears to use these terms to a lesser extent compared to the other clusters and does not even use some of the key terms at all in the Access Corpus (causation, objectivity, rct, hypothesis, causal). Other clusters appear to use the terms at around the same levels.

Figure 68. Subset of Science Dictionary Words in Stacked Bar Chart



In order to investigate this further, we can take a qualitative approach to the Access Corpus and examine word use *in context* for each of the Boliver Clusters so as to determine how these scientific words are used.

One of the words most strongly indicative of a particularly positivist approach to evaluation and thus, one could argue, to social science in general, is "objectivity" which belies a value-free ideology underpinning research. Its use is predicated on the view that a researcher can be external to the research being conducted; or, in this context, that an evaluator can be external from the evaluation being conducted. This lexeme was only used by Boliver 3 institutions, and examples of this are:

> We will aim to triangulate results from multiple perspectives to increase self-reported data reliability, objectivity, accuracy and validity (Gloucestershire, 2021)

> This framework embeds the Access and Participation Standards of Evidence and reinforces our whole institution approach, strengthening the importance of relevant, rigorous and objective evaluation, facilitating monitoring to ensure improvement and providing robust mechanisms by which to share expertise (Bournemouth, 2021)

The terms objective and objectivity are, again, often found in conjunction with the words rigorous and robust; as noted in Chapter 4 these two lexemes are almost floating signifiers without a fixed meaning in the Access Corpus. Indeed, the use of these two terms in a non-technical sense appear to be often utilised to create a layer of surface-level technicality to the documents within the corpus, and in the documents of each Boliver cluster:

> Robust annual evaluation and a five-year review will be built in to the programme from the start (Oxford, 2018 – Cluster 1)

> …provide robust and rigorous academic research on specific outreach programmes and/or activities (Imperial, 2021 – Cluster 2)

> The Theory of Change is fundamental to the evaluation process, and its rigour and robustness are essential in ensuring that the impact of an intervention is comprehensively explored (Teesside, 2021 – Cluster 3)

> For many of these groups, we do not have robust data (St Mark & St John, 2021-Cluster 4)

From further examination of the Access Corpus, it is evident that all institutions, no matter which Boliver cluster, use these terms in broadly similar ways, as mentioned in Chapter 4.

The token "causal" was used by clusters 2, 3, and 4 and it is interesting to see how this term is used by different institutions and across time. From a qualitative analysis of all instances of the term "causal" it appears that there are more cluster similarities than differences. All institution types display attitudes which: i. indicate that they intend to introduce causal analysis ii. outline the difficulties of causal designs in this area and iii. already employ causal analysis. Notably, the most common orientation to causal methods is where institutions outline their willingness to adopt, but presently do not employ, causal methods. Indeed, whist there are few institutions from cluster 2 which do purportedly employ causal methods, there are no cluster 3 institutions which state that they do, and only a single institution from cluster 4. Below are a few examples from clusters 2, 3, & 4 which indicate the views outlined above:

Intention to introduce causal analysis

> All belonging and efficacy-related interventions will be evaluated in partnership with What Works, using appropriate evaluation methods including randomised control trials in order to establish causal impact and embed best practice (King's College London, 2021 – Cluster 2).

> As we evaluate our activities, we aim to understand the principal institutional causal drivers which can enable academic success for all our students (Coventry, 2021 – Cluster 3).

> We aim to move towards causal level evaluation of our access and participation activities (Solent, 2021 – Cluster 4).

Already employs causal analysis

> During the last two years…[we] have been developing and refining a theory-driven approach to evaluation…This process enables us to develop carefully calibrated evaluation measures that have a robust causal relationship with intervention outcomes (Sheffield, 2021 – Cluster 2).

> We also have programmes which use…causal evaluation methods; these include Mentoring and AccessHE Online (empirical and narrative), and Upward Bound which deploys a combination of all three evaluation methods [one of which is "causality"] (London Met, 2021 – Cluster 4)

Difficulties of causal methods/ no immediate plans

> It is often not possible to undertake causal evaluation due to the ethical considerations in selecting only some students to be able to take part in a programme (Royal Holloway, 2021 – Cluster 2).

> Feedback from teachers suggests that these interactions make a difference to children's interest in a subject, but identifying a direct causal impact on attainment continues to be a challenge (Brunel, 2019 – Cluster 3)

> We are not proposing to undertake any causality evaluations of the identified strategic measures at this stage (Wolverhampton, 2021 – Cluster 4)

It is also perhaps notable that there are several misconceptions with respect to causal methods apparent in the Access Corpus; whilst some of these misconceptions may be due to a lack of information provided in institutional documents, others appear to be misunderstandings concerning which research approaches allow for claims of causation, for example:

> Those positively identified as the 'have experienced outreach' group, will be invited to focus groups and further longitudinal survey throughout their time at Bucks. This will build a picture of the impact our outreach work is having and provide us with rich feedback, upon which we can implement positive changes. Exit questionnaires for these students (whether they have graduated or not) will provide some additional insight into attrition and any causal effect based on previous outreach work. (Buckinghamshire, 2019).

Simply providing exit questionnaire to students would not necessarily allow for any causative claims to be made, especially when there are extraneous factors which may act as confounding variables. One of the potential problems which may befall this method is self-selection bias, given that students often have to 'opt-in' to outreach work, this would bias the sample and not allow for causative claims to be made. Further data may be required, which is potentially not measured, and these include but are not limited to: prior attainment, education experiences to that point, geographic location of students prior to their higher education experience, social class, and motivation. Further misunderstandings

are found throughout the Access Corpus. A further example can be found in the following: "Although more challenging to evidence, establishing causality is an aim where possible through the use of triangulation of different sources of evidence and data" (Middlesex, 2021); triangulating different sources of evidence and data can certainly help in strengthening evidence for a certain phenomenon since there are benefits of methodological pluralism (see methodology chapter for more on this), but simply claiming that through triangulation one can establish causality may be problematic.

A final misunderstanding evident in the Access Corpus is found in the following excerpt from a 2021 Access and Participation Plan:

> Over the last four years, we have trialled a number of quasi-scientific comparator designs (causality), but these have failed, usually because of challenges in sourcing adequate comparator data from partners. Where appropriate, we will continue to aim for effective trial designs (Sheffield, 2021)

This use of "quasi-scientific" is particularly interesting in the context of this quote and within broader discussions of how evaluations occur within widening participation. University Access and Participation Plans undergo scrutiny from numerous individuals within their respective higher education institutions before they are submitted to the Office for Students to be approved, and so it can be argued that the language contained in them is meaningful and has institutional legitimacy, even in the case of what may seem like parapraxis. Even though the *intended* term in this case may have been something like "quasi-experimental" it is still significant that the term "quasi-scientific" has been included in this Access and Participation plan, especially since the document will have been reviewed by multiple stakeholders within the institution. It is also perhaps unsurprising that this term

was used in the context of an institution which appears committed to expand significantly on their attempts at causal inferences. Indeed, the first of their "four areas for improvement" is "…develop better causal models of what we expect to happen, why and to whom as a result of our interventions, and to develop more effectively calibrated evaluation measures" (Sheffield, 2021). The use of "quasi-scientific" perhaps signifies an underlying ethos of scientism within the institution where methods like randomised control trials, and comparator group analysis are viewed as 'scientific' whereas qualitative methods, which the institution already utilises (such as narrative analysis), are viewed as unscientific and of somewhat lesser significance. It is perhaps understandable that this ethos has grown within widening participation discourse given that the Office for Students' "Standards of Evidence" document (OfS, 2019) hierarchically ranks types of evaluation, as shown in the figure overleaf:

Figure 69. OfS Standards of Evidence (OfS, 2019)

	Narrative Evaluation A coherent explanation of why the activity is expected to work and why	**Empirical Enquiry** Collects data to show those receiving an intervention have better outcomes	**Establishing Causality** Provides evidence of a causal effect
Multi-activity intervention programmes (e.g. transition support programmes)	◆ Important for all activities to inform programme choice and delivery	◆ Important for all activities to justify use of resources	✪ Commended for resource intensive programmes for which an evidence base needs to be established and where there is access to reliable outcomes data and appropriate comparison groups
Intensive interventions (e.g. residential programmes)	◆ Important for all activities to inform programme choice and delivery	◆ Important for all activities to justify use of resources	✪ Commended for resource intensive programmes for which an evidence base needs to be established and where there is access to reliable outcomes data and appropriate comparison groups
Long term interventions (e.g. mentoring programmes)	◆ Important for all activities to inform programme choice and delivery	◆ Important for all activities to justify use of resources	✪ Commended for resource intensive programmes for which an evidence base needs to be established and where there is access to reliable outcomes data and appropriate comparison groups
One-off interventions (e.g. campus visits, subject taster sessions)	◆ Important for all activities to inform programme choice and delivery	★ Important for innovative projects for which an evidence base needs to be established	⊘ Not usually feasible unless part of a multi-intervention package
'Light-touch' intervention (e.g. information dissemination projects)	◆ Important for all activities to inform programme choice and delivery	★ Important for innovative projects for which an evidence base needs to be established	✪ Commended in situations where it is possible to capture appropriate outcomes data and the effect of the intervention can be isolated

◆ Expected for all types of activities; ★Commended for resource intensive and pilot interventions; ✪Highly commended if conditions allow and conducted appropriately; ⊘ May not be feasible unless special conditions apply.

Whilst it is interesting to observe scientific language *in context* within different institutional clusters, it is evident that there is more *between group* differences compared to *within group* differences when examining this element of widening participation discourse. Each cluster displays similar sensibilities with respect to regard adopting a particular *scientific* language. Looking in greater detail at the distributions, it is evident that clusters 1 & 2 make use of the science dictionary lexemes to a slightly greater extent than clusters 3 & 4; however, when observing the sub-set of science dictionary words which signal a more positivist outlook, it becomes clear that cluster 1 institutions use these words to a lesser extent.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on answering the research question "How do institutional differences influence institutional level widening participation discourses?" through: a thorough analysis of the topic model output from Chapter 4, broken down by Boliver Cluster; an analysis of the frequency of use of business bigrams and scientific language; through qualitative analysis of language use *in context* in the Access Corpus.

When breaking down the topic model output by Boliver Cluster it becomes evident that, whilst a few of the topics are similar for all clusters, there are significant differences between the clusters in many of the others. This is particularly marked in discussions relating to: Funding, where cluster 4 refers most frequently to this issue throughout the entire corpus; School / College Links, in which cluster 2 has the highest reference frequency throughout the corpus; and Admissions where cluster 1 remains prominent throughout.

Perhaps one of the most significant findings from the examination of the topic model breakdown is that cluster 1 appears to act completely differently to the others with distinct patterns discernible in several topic frequency plots – for example, in the topic Admissions. The different approach of cluster 1 institutions to widening participation strategies perhaps signifies that these institutions have in practice been able to exercise more latitude to their plans; they have not felt constrained to adhere as rigidly to OfS strictures as in the case of other clusters. This is perhaps not surprising given the exceptionalism which surrounds the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Wider public discourse frequently involves conversations concerning admission to these institutions and an awareness of their prestige. Indeed, this aspect is thus reflected in Oxford and Cambridge's institutional widening participation plans whereby Admissions is frequently discussed. A linear pattern is evident

in three of the topics: Access Performance Targets, Funding, and Admissions signifying the differential emphasis placed on particular themes of widening participation discourse by Boliver cluster. It is therefore clear that certain aspects of widening participation strategies are institutionally more important than others for different higher education institutions with different levels of prestige and, in particular, that such differential emphasis arises *because* of unequal levels of institutional prestige.

An exploration of bigrams relating to business reveals that institutions with lower levels of prestige, i.e. from lower Boliver clusters appear more impacted – this manifests in an increased use of market language. Again, a linear pattern can be observed in many of these bigrams with cluster 4 appearing the most frequent and cluster 1 the least, this is particularly evident in bigrams "Target Baseline", "Milestone Target", and "Basket Indicator", furthermore Cluster 4 institutions are the most prominent in several other bigrams including "Retention Measure" and "Baseline Datum". Chapter 4 concluded that the tripling of fees had a large impact on the use of market language, and this is unsurprisingly borne out in the plots produced in this chapter where each of the bigrams increases significantly around the time of the tripling of tuition fees.

Chapter Six: Practitioner Understandings of Widening Participation Discourses and Consequences for Practitioners of these Discursive Constructions

Part One: Practitioner Understandings of Widening Participation Discourses

Introduction

This chapter marks a shift in focus of this thesis from large-scale, macro level understandings of widening participation discourses in the form of linguistic analyses of the Access Corpus, towards a more micro level inquiry into the understandings of individual practitioners through semi-structured interviews. In this particular chapter, the first research question posed is: how do practitioners understand the discursive construction of WP? This question builds on many of the findings from the topic modelling and linguistic analysis but places the focus on practitioners' *abstract* understandings of particular elements of widening participation discourse. The next chapter, *Consequences for Practitioners of the Discursive Construction of Widening Participation*, focusses on the concrete effects of practitioners' abstract understandings on their quotidian widening participation activities. Thus, the foci of these chapters, which use interviewing as the primary method of inquiry, signify a move from macro to micro understandings; where the macro level inquiry informs the micro level inquiry.

More specifically, in answering the research question, this chapter discusses issues relating to: causation in the social sciences, the ethics of particular research methods used in evaluation, the complexity of social change and how this can be understood, the role of scientific language, the underlying politics evident in the use of statistics, and how different practitioners' epistemological positions are framed within wider widening participation discourses. Thus, this chapter is, by necessity, more abstract than previous findings chapters since the matters discussed are inherently more conceptual and hermeneutic – though this does not mean that the inquiry detailed in this chapter is abstruse. Whilst there is some discussion throughout this chapter of the findings presented, a more comprehensive discussion of these findings, and particularly in the context of the thesis *in toto*, can be found in Chapter 7: Discussion and Synthesis of Findings.

Causation in the Social Sciences

One of the interview questions asked to each of the participants in this research related to their understanding of the abstract concept *causation*. Specifically, this question facilitated many participants to comment on the application of the term to widening participation evaluation and, even further than this, to comment on its suitability within widening participation discourses. Indeed, this was one of the questions within the interview schedule which sparked the most animated response from participants who each had different, but equally strong, views about the term.

It may be suggested that the reason for such an animated response to the question of causality in widening participation is due to the upsurge in adoption of causal thinking with OfS policies and, more broadly, within the sector as a whole. As outlined in previous chapters, this fact is notable when examining institutional policy output in the Access Corpus where there is a clear upward trend in relation to lexemes which reflect a positivistic epistemology. Against this backdrop it is perhaps unsurprising that participants, who are all practitioners within the field of widening participation, have thoughts – however well developed or logically coherent – about the nature of causation in widening participation.

Given that causation and associated terms (e.g. causative link, causative, causal…) are so prominent in widening participation discourses and are widely used by both the higher education regulator (OfS) and by individual institutions themselves in a gamut of policies, it may be expected that there is an underlying consensus about both the *what* and the *if* of causation: *what* is causation in widening participation evaluation? And *if* it is indeed possible to prove causation. If the term was used frequently within the field but was somewhat irrelevant to the practices of practitioners then it could perhaps be ignored, however the

sheer frequency of the term *in combination* with its centrality to understanding both governmental policy, regulatory policy, and university output mean that it is impossible to ignore. Indeed, to neglect to seek to understand the use of this term would mean missing a significant part of the underlying ontological assumptions that guide widening participation as a field.

Practitioners had several views on how causation works in widening participation evaluation which can be categorised in only a few different ways, some of which more coherent than others. These opinions were often mentioned alongside participants' academic background – which ranged from accountancy to a doctoral degree in a STEM subject – and on the basis of these interviews it was clear that interviewees views on causation were partially influence by their academic background. Indeed, one participant who had an academic background in academic philosophy provided the most nuanced and thoughtful perspective on the concept causation. The categories of explanation can be split into: Hard Model of Causation; Counterfactual Model of Causation; Impossibility of Causation; Undeveloped Acceptance of Causation.

Hard Model of Causation

This model of causation, supported by a minority of interviewees, suggests that causality is possible in social sciences and just depends on a fine-tuned research design with randomised assignment which accounts for variability in populations, and on isolating the requisite variables.

Fully randomised, a properly conducted randomised control trial. You know, obviously, you take away any other mitigating factor, if it's properly conducted…you will take away the other confounding

variables and the think that you would be left with is then the assumption that it was the thing that you did which caused the change. And so in that sense, I do believe it can show causality.

I'm quite positivist in that…I've always had a natural affinity with numbers…so I actually strongly agree with the randomised control trial, I think you can show causality.

Counterfactual Model of Causation

This model was often presented by participants who were thinking through their answer whilst they were answering the question in an act of dynamic reasoning. The initial position is that they would like to know: if a student *did not* take part in a given programme, would they be in the same position as if they *did* take part in the programme. A good example of a participant's dynamic reasoning can be found in the quote:

I think part of the question, I think, is what underpins educational research…I think on a very basic counterfactual model of causation, it is possible to have a causal impact. So to have impacted upon that if we hadn't done this, this wouldn't have happened [long pause] so that just makes it a question of how to best investigate and how to evaluate the impact [lomg pause] I think there is different ways of doing it and they all come with their own uncertainty tag…I think that's it…I think they're stronger and weaker evidence towards saying "yes, it is because of what we did – the cause is what we did and we had an impact"…But I think there's never definitive evidence for this kind of thing [long pause] I think this is a very difficult question even in very complex science which cannot ascertain with certainty…

In the above quotation we can see the participant's dynamic reasoning from an instant reaction that causation is possible in educational research, to questioning whether it is possible to obtain the right evidence to support a counterfactual claim, through to an realisation that there is no possible evidence to prove this counterfactual, and finally an

acknowledgement of the complexity of such a question. Another participant again acknowledged the difficulties of providing evidence to support a counterfactual claim:

But you also don't know if they hadn't had the session, would they have been successful at it [applying to university]?...would they have been as successful if they hadn't had your intervention? If it was a different practitioner, or a different university would they still have ended up in the same place? We'd like to think we'd have an impact and I hope that we did

This response to the question of causality possibly represents those who are unsure about the foundations of their answers and have not had the space to think about these issues during their working hours – certainly thinking about counterfactuals does not preclude participants from believing that they are able to prove a causative link which then *proves* the counterfactual, but it was evident that where participants did speak of providing evidence to prove a counterfactual, it was spoken tentatively.

Impossibility of Causation

Some of the more powerful responses (and certainly the most frequent) in relation to this topic called into question the possibility of evidencing causation in the social world. Interviewees cast doubt on causation in the background of complex and multifaceted contextual factors which are ever present in the social world and which they thought could not be addressed by any given research design.

I don't think it's possible to demonstrate a 100% causal relationship, there's so many variables, it's impossible to tell, you know, often students will be involved in more than one widening participation scheme, it's impossible to tell which one of those was actually effective and to what degree one was more influential.

I don't think we can prove causation…And that is acceptable, how they say we can prove causation, I think is problematic…

It's not going to be fully accurate and it will never be. We're not testing kids in a lab, so it'll never be comparable to medicine…

So it's the support that they get when they go home and discuss it with their parents, or with someone else in school, it might be the exposure that they get, and the experiences that they then get. Trying to pick on e thing out and say that that's what changed is difficult…

The view that proving causation is impossible is perhaps alarming given that the OfS standards of evidence document prompts all institutions to strive for evidence that "provides evidence of a causal effect" and succeeds in "Establishing Causality" (OfS, 2019) – it can be seen as the most highly commended form of evaluation in almost every case.

Figure 70. OfS Standards of Evidence (2019)

	Narrative Evaluation A coherent explanation of why the activity is expected to work and why	**Empirical Enquiry** Collects data to show those receiving an intervention have better outcomes	**Establishing Causality** Provides evidence of a causal effect
Multi-activity intervention programmes (e.g. transition support programmes)	◆ Important for all activities to inform programme choice and delivery	◆ Important for all activities to justify use of resources	✪ Commended for resource intensive programmes for which an evidence base needs to be established and where there is access to reliable outcomes data and appropriate comparison groups
Intensive interventions (e.g. residential programmes)	◆ Important for all activities to inform programme choice and delivery	◆ Important for all activities to justify use of resources	✪ Commended for resource intensive programmes for which an evidence base needs to be established and where there is access to reliable outcomes data and appropriate comparison groups
Long term interventions (e.g. mentoring programmes)	◆ Important for all activities to inform programme choice and delivery	◆ Important for all activities to justify use of resources	✪ Commended for resource intensive programmes for which an evidence base needs to be established and where there is access to reliable outcomes data and appropriate comparison groups
One-off interventions (e.g. campus visits, subject taster sessions)	◆ Important for all activities to inform programme choice and delivery	★ Important for innovative projects for which an evidence base needs to be established	⃠ Not usually feasible unless part of a multi-intervention package
'Light-touch' intervention (e.g. information dissemination projects)	◆ Important for all activities to inform programme choice and delivery	★ Important for innovative projects for which an evidence base needs to be established	✪ Commended in situations where it is possible to capture appropriate outcomes data and the effect of the intervention can be isolated

◆ Expected for all types of activities; ★Commended for resource intensive and pilot interventions; ✪Highly commended if conditions allow and conducted appropriately; ⃠ May not be feasible unless special conditions apply.

Undeveloped Acceptance of Causation

This response was one of the most frequent by respondents and reflects a view that causation *is* possible and should be aimed at, but where participants did not provide coherent arguments for this view. This perhaps again reflects a situation where practitioners had not had the chance to think deeply about this issue enough to hold an established belief about it. In a similar vein to responses in the Counterfactual Model of Causation, participants could often be found dynamically reasoning their way to an answer to the *what* and *if* questions of causation. This particularly long quotation is useful in again observing dynamic reasoning in action, where the participant is thinking their way through their answer as they proceed:

Yes. It's just in what capacity, you know? And that, that really depends on the circumstance and I think you, I suppose why I say yes, is because when you think of different interventions. One could be a single intervention, and you give an information and guidance talk to a group of randomly selected people who have no connection to [university name] whatsoever, there might be a very, you'd be able to say that's a very loose causal thing to whatever they're going to then feel afterwards. You might be able to measure that with some kind of evaluation. But I would say that, even if they can get really positive results, that's potentially a fluke…but when you have sustained intervention, let's say over time, or another form of widening participation that you think is going to work better. The instinct, I suppose, is to say it has more of an impact. So you have interventions that have more or less impact, then there is a causal, there is something causal happening, because some are less, and some are greater than the others. But to what extent that is…I think that's very difficult, even the ones that are sort of maximum impact and do have an impact. I'm kind of conflating causal with impactful but yeah I think if there are some things that are more or less impactful, then we've got to say yes, there is a cause happening to maybe a greater or lesser extent.

As we can see, the interviewee immediately starts with agreeing that it is possible to show causation in the evaluation of widening participation work before then thinking about, and explaining why this immediate affirmative response is justified. The key tenet of the argument appears to be that you can prove causation for programmes that are longer, but not those that are short – though it should be acknowledged that the interviewee does accept that there may be a conflation of impact and causation in this understanding. Indeed, this is the reason for the title of this categorisation being "Undeveloped Acceptance of Causation since there is a firm belief that causation is possible in this field and yet the reasons for this belief are perhaps incoherent. This is again found in the quote:

Like, I guess there's definitely interventions, like serious long term interventions that are really deep and, depending on what your aims are, I mean, I'm sure you could have a causal. I'm not sure, I guess the standard of evidence has to be like, so high for that, that has to be full on, like, a lot of deep interviews and really solid work with someone to work out that it is again a properly good programme. So yeah, maybe for most programmes.

This quotation is perhaps more confused in understanding causality – there is again mention of longer term interventions being easier to show causal links, and again still an affirmation that causality is provable in most programmes. Despite this, the logic of answer is incoherent and is not persuasive to the point of view that causality is possible.

Figure 71. Typology of Practitioner Understandings of Causation

Typology	Character
Hard Model of Causation	Causality possible and should be aimed for. Research needs to be fine-tuned and randomised.
Counterfactual Model of Causation	Evidence of dynamic reasoning whilst answering the question. Employs counterfactual reasoning (i.e. what would the case be if the intervention did not occur) but this is not developed into the Hard Model of Causation and instead can lead to doubts surrounding causation.
Impossibility of Causation	Causation is not possible in this domain. Social structures are too complex to control for all confounding factors. Other influences play a large role in the success or otherwise of students and we cannot prove 'cause'.
Underdeveloped Acceptance of Causation	Participants intuitively say 'yes' causation is possible but do not develop their line of logic into a coherent whole.

In addition to this typology of understandings of causation, participants reflected on the nature of their own activities as being only a part of the wider picture of factors that, in combination, may support school students in applying and being successful in their university applications. This viewpoint directly influenced their understandings of causation in widening participation evaluation:

Individual activities are part of the picture not the whole picture – everything works to a greater of lesser extent

What they don't understand is everything works. Everything works to a greater or lesser degree, but we're being pushed to find the kind of golden chalice

I don't think necessarily the work of a [job title] should aim to be causal, because you're just trying to contribute a part of the picture, right?

This therefore casts doubt on the suitability for widening participation to be expending valuable resources on the pursuit of the 'golden chalice' of causation – it is clear that participants, in many cases, do not believe that proving causation in their activities is an effective use of resource. This is discussed to a greater extent in the Chapter 7: Consequences for Practitioners of Discursive Construction of Widening Participation.

Ethics of Causal Methods

Participants were concerned with the implications of the introduction of 'causal' methods into the widening participation evaluation toolbox, which they thought produces ethical quandaries which may not be effectively addressed. The archetypal example of these ethical concerns is the use of randomised control trials, which many participants believed inherently disadvantages certain students over other students, since a innate characteristic

of randomised control trials is the random selection of particular students over other students – thus there is, by definition, an element of exclusion in this method. Interestingly, where these ethical concerns were outlined by participants, they were often mentioned as fact; there were no doubts in participants' minds that these ethical issues were concrete and unavoidable. These concerns are detailed in the quotes below which encapsulate the unease which participants felt regarding randomised control trials in particular:

You can't just be unethical to be like, I'm just gonna see what happens if I don't do anything with this group of kinds that could do with some intervention. And then, oh look! They did worse! Great. That's like 20 kids' futures that you've just actively decided to ignore…I don't know if I could do that

There are real ethical implications to using proper control groups, you know, where you physically look at a student and say "I'm not going to work with you", or you approach a school and say, you know, "Can we evaluate this group and working with them, and not work with this group", there are ethical implications to that

Just I guess my feeling would be there's actual people involved

Even those supportive of randomised control trials acknowledged that there are potential ethical issues to their implementation:

It's a challenge, both in terms of technical understanding, but also persuading ethically…

There's still a way to go particularly in terms of the ethics…the other day I heard somebody have a conversation with a parent of somebody who went into [a randomised control trial] and then their son wasn't selected, and even though they knew this was a possibility…and as evaluators you're not on the front

line getting those kinds of responses and hearing those unique stories from people saying, you know, this person is really deserving of this intervention because of x, y, and z, and they haven't been picked. So it's really easy to justify why they're necessary for future funding and all those kinds of things but… you're not the one who's actually having that conversation

Whilst most proponents of randomised control trials sympathised with some of the ethical concerns, one participant believed strongly that the fears that practitioners hold about randomised control trials were overblown, in one part of the interview stating that there are those who believe that:

…randomised control trials, we don't believe in randomised control trials and they are unethical, blah blah blah blah blah blah…

The most strongly felt opinion on randomised control trials was certainly held by those who believed that there were severe ethical implications to their implications which are insoluble and which means that therefore they should not be the key aim of widening participation evaluation. This argument is reminiscent of the Biesta (2010) in the article "Why 'What Works' Still Won't Work: From Evidence-Based Education to Value-Based Education" which argues that values should be more relevant in education in the context of the increase in What Works discourses. In the context of this research, one could state that many practitioners' values hold that randomised control trials are unethical because they require the deliberate withholding of an intervention from certain students who could benefit from them and that therefore this should be the primary factor contributing to the decision whether a randomised control trial takes place, instead of maintaining the view that the method that produces the 'best' evidence should be conducted *at any cost*. Of course,

I am not suggesting here that randomised control trials produce the best evidence about social phenomena but merely employing that view in this hypothetical situation.

Understandings of Key Evaluative Terms

Throughout the Access Corpus it is clear that there are particular words which are used by different higher education institutions in very different ways; this is the case both within the same individual documents, across different institutions, and over time. Thus, one of the questions asked of every interview participation related to two of these specific terms in order to identify whether the was a consensus of understanding what these words meant, the terms are: rigorous and robust. Not only do these terms represent the increasingly prevalent scientific language used by institutions in the Access Corpus over time, but they also have specific and technical definitions. What is perhaps more alarming to those familiar with historical and contemporary social science is that the specific and technical definitions of these two words can depend on: the academic background, epistemological positioning, and ontological assumptions of individual actors. Thus, the importance of this question of definitions is not to be diminished; it is central to practitioner understandings of widening participation discourses.

Illustrative examples of the definitions of rigorous and robust, by interviewees, are:

Rigorous, I suppose, something that's detailed? So something that's thorough, you will have looked at all the avenues, or all necessary avenues possible with whatever you're implementing… Robust, I guess that's referring to any intervention that is kind of more hardy…that's going to sort of almost stand the test of other changes going on…

So I would say that robust means that if you were to do a form of evaluation, it was done up to scrutiny. For example, using a validated scale over a scale that I have made up. A validated scale would be much more robust because it has the research behind it to sort of show that it's valid and applicable. Rigorous would be more around not necessarily just doing one sort of questionnaire and saying that's fine, but constantly trying to find a different way to dive into the same concept…making sure that you are questioning the validity of everything you do

[Rigorous] means you've done your research in depth, that you've asked like a statistically significant amount of people and that you've done control groups…I'm not sure what the difference would be with robust? I guess you're not letting things slip through so you're covering all aspects of your events…

In terms of rigorous, that it's a programme that's going to be multi-intervention and the evaluation is thought out…robust, that you've thought about the aims of the programme and what you're actually doing doesn't deviate from that and then again your evaluation reflects that…

Whilst several interviewees attempted to provide a definition of the two terms immediately after being asked the interview question, as above, a majority of participants first acknowledged what they perceived to be a problem with the use of the two terms: the fact that they can be used interchangeably and therefore do not effectively contain any specific meaning.

They're filler words, aren't they? …Basically yes, something's thought out, well done.

I think if people thought about them enough, it would probably be that they are very similar. But I would say they're the sorts of words people just skim over…

Even participants who did provide definitions immediately signalled that the terms perhaps can be used in the same way:

Well, I mean they're both for me, they're both associated with high quality. So rigorous is more about the process that you went through to get to a state, well actually, can I distinguish between the two [terms]? Robust is about how easy it is to refute the findings…if something's robust, it would be harder to poke holes in…I don't know how I distinguished between the two but for me they are both kind of high watermarks for quality…

Given the apparent polysemic nature of these two words, illustrated by the fact that interviewees provided different responses to the same question of definition, and by the fact that several participants explicitly acknowledged that the two words either are used in the same way, or, even stronger, that they are meaningless filler words, it is perhaps surprising that these words are used so extensively throughout the Access Corpus but particularly in present day discourses relating to widening participation. What are technical and precise terms in some domains and perhaps in some academic disciplines are in the process of having their initial meaning eroded within widening participation discourse – the words robust and rigorous are but two examples of this erosion. The intended meaning of the use of these terms is now no longer related to the semantics inherent to them, but instead to the signalling power which they hold (without even taking into account their traditional semantic value) – this will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 8: Discussion and Synthesis of Findings and is central to the new conceptual framework outlined within that chapter which relates to understandings of discourse.

Competing Epistemologies

What is evident from the above quotations from practitioners involved in widening participation is that there are several competing epistemological perspectives with regard to understanding how social change and interventions can be understood. Epistemology refers to the underlying beliefs of '*how* we know' or 'how we *can* know', its focus is on understanding the act of knowing. This is a primary concern of this research given that understanding *how* we can know things impacts directly on the work of widening participation evaluators, whose different individual conceptualisations of epistemology may change the way they evaluate. In addition, these same different conceptualisations of epistemology may align, or not align, with the underlying epistemological positionality of the Office for Students, whose position can be gleaned through policy documents and interactions with universities throughout the sector. Thus, tensions may stem from these competing epistemological positions at a multitude of different levels within the higher education system, for example: between an individual practitioner and the Office for Students; between University *X* and University *Y*, and between practitioner *A* in University *X* and practitioner *B* in University *X*. These tensions may produce disharmonies which can be more or less disruptive for the practice of widening participation evaluation, even where institutions or individual actors may share the same, broad, ultimate goals – to widen participation to higher education institutions.

These competing epistemologies are even evident in practitioner understandings of the terms 'robust' and 'rigorous', where participants definitions signal particular epistemological understandings. A clear example of this is from the quotations outlined earlier:

So I would say that robust means that if you were to do a form of evaluation, it was done up to scrutiny. For example, using a validated scale over a scale that I have made up…rigorous would be more around not necessarily just doing one sort of questionnaire and saying that's fine, but constantly trying to find a different way to five into the same concept…making sure that you are questioning the validity of everything you do

[Rigorous] means you've done your research in depth, that you've asked like a statistically significant amount of people and that you've done control groups…

These two quotations may be said to hold views that align with a positivist epistemology which emphasises the use of collecting numeric (*validated scale*) and often large-scale data (*asked a statistically significant amount of people*) about social phenomenon which can be analysed quantitatively. It could be argued that this epistemological position also aligns with Office for Students' policies on widening participation evaluation, and particularly the Standards of Evidence document presented above (OfS, 2019).

Whilst these epistemological positions are often unspoken, but obvious from practitioners' answers to interview questions, one interviewee explicitly stated that their views can be characterised as positivistic

Yeah, well, I'm quite a positivist in that I've always had a natural affinity with numbers

Despite the fact that it is unclear whether positivism is used here in its traditional sense, it is interesting to observe that some within the field are engaging directly with the philosophical underpinnings of social inquiry in the form of epistemological positions. Whilst no participants called themselves interpretivists, this broad view was prominent

amongst a majority of interviewees who emphasised not only their opposition to some aspects of positivism (notably the use of randomised control trials outlined earlier) but also their support of measures such as co-production.

Given that there are clear differences in the epistemological assumptions of practitioners, it must be considered how the regulatory body can mediate these different camps through their policies – though this consideration may be seen as 'begging the question' given that it should not be assumed that the regulatory body *must* mediate these camps. Indeed, they may not feel the need to.

Politics Behind Numbers

In earlier findings chapters (Chapter Four: Understanding Widening Participation Discourses Through the Access Corpus, and Chapter Five: Institutional Differences in the Access Corpus) it was made clear that the general orientation of Office for Students' policies and thus university reactions to these policies was towards a more positivistic epistemological approach. This thus leads to documents such as the standards of evidence where there appears to be a hierarchy of evidence which is acceptable to the regulatory body from Type 1 (narrative) to Type 3 (causal). There is a clear push for institutions to evidence their activities and the success of their activities in numerical and quantifiable form; this aligns with the epistemological positions of some practitioners, and misaligns with the position of others.

Given that there is such a clear agenda towards a more positivist approach to evaluation, we must ask ourselves *why* this is the case. Indeed, this question was asked of participants in the interview process whose answers were varied but illustrated the views which

practitioners hold in relation to the OfS. Several practitioners suggested that it is far easier, in policy terms, to deal with numbers as opposed to words, and thus by extension, to deal with quantifiable and numeric data when compared to narrative evidence and that this is the reason for the push towards quantification

But there's always that kind of positivistic kind of numbers are better than anything else, you always get that

In addition to this, another point of view held by one participant was that people find it more difficult to critique quantitative, experimental research when compared to more narrative interview style research and therefore, because it is more difficult to see the flaws in the former, they are encouraged

People find it easier to critique this kind of research ad any form of social sciences style research, because it's something we experience every day. So it's really easy to see the flaws in the arguments, I think that with some of the other sciences, they're held on a bit of a pedestal because people don't have that same level of understanding…

The essence of this argument can be outlined as:

a. People find it easier to critique social science research (here characterised as e.g. interviews) because they view the methods as more intuitive
b. People find it more difficult to critique hard science research because they find it more complex to understand

Therefore..

c. "scientific" methods are prized in research, including in the social sciences

This is an argument which is both difficult to prove and to disprove without conducting further research into the matter, though is important to present. Another, more political, point was made by an interviewee who, in the large quotation below, suggested that the increasing shift towards objective and value-free evaluations is indicative of the policies of a government who are desperate to prove that universities can and do allow for social mobility, and thus who are in need of 'concrete' evidence that agrees with this. In this way, and with this concrete evidence in hand, they do not need to do as much as they otherwise could, to aid social mobility

We are asked to provide measures of evaluation for our programmes that other sectors are not, and other departments, workers, whatever, who also receive government funding are not asked to do…I can't categorically answer why we're asked to do this and others aren't – and it doesn't feel like we're being ***asked*** *to do it…I think it speaks to living in a country that is deeply divided and deeply unfair in terms of the progression outcomes of young people…Blair made the commitment that 50% of young people would get to university, we're at that now, it hasn't helped our inequalities…University has been held up as this thing to work towards, and social inequalities will be resolved…getting a degree in and of itself, that educational, academic, pastoral experiences that you get while you're at university is phenomenal, but you can't bridge this gap and I think there's a complete denial by the Tories and the government that's been in power to recognise that there is a bigger role of the state to play in bridging this gap and inequalities that universities can't solve on their own, you can't solve it just by education*

This quote further brings into question recent OfS policies which encourage universities to engage in 'attainment raising' exercises in schools across the education sector. Universities and widening participation teams are dubious about this policy drive given that the expertise of university widening participation teams are not in educating secondary school students. These policy pushes support the quotation above in their implicit suggestion that

universities should be doing more to remedy social justice and societal inequalities. Indeed, the argument is reminiscent of Basil Bernstein's 1970 article "Education Cannot Compensate for Society" in which it is argued that society-wide social issues cannot be addressed by education alone – that the education system is not the silver bullet for remedying societal inequalities.

Conclusion

Part One of this chapter addressed the research question "how do practitioners understand the discursive construction of widening participation?" by analysing the transcriptions from interviews with practitioners in higher education institutions. A focus was placed on practitioners' abstract understandings of key widening participation and evaluation terms which are commonly used in the broader discursive construction of widening participation but where it is not clear that the meanings are shared by all those who engage with this discourse.

In particular, and in keeping with analysis in prior chapters, the use of scientific language in widening participation discourses was explored by investigating practitioner beliefs surrounding the nature of causation and associated 'scientific' words such as 'rigour' and 'robust'. Practitioners were split between believing that causation is a realistic goal for the social sciences and believing that it is an impossibility. In particular, those who believed causality to be possible to prove fell into four groups: Hard Model of Causation; Counterfactual Model of Causation; Impossibility of Causation; Undeveloped Acceptance of Causation. These different group display different characteristics which range from believing that causation can be displayed through meticulous research design, to believing that it is possible, but not being able to provide an informed explanation. Ethical

quandaries were explored where rejecting students from an intervention (particularly a randomised control trial) was thought by many to be immoral; this facilitated further questions about *how* causality can be shown in the social sciences if some of these methods are ruled out. The words rigour and robust were largely thought to be devoid of exact meaning, and were interpreted in very different ways by different participants; an attempt to define these polysemic signifiers was provided by a few interviewees but others simply retorted that these lexemes are filler words.

These conflicting beliefs in relation to this area of widening participation discourse are a symptom of a competing epistemologies within the field. It became clear through the interview process that participants held vastly different epistemological beliefs which impacted on the ways in which they intended to conduct widening participation evaluation; this was particularly visible in prior discussions relating to causation and 'scientific' words. The key question arising from these overt differences amongst practitioner is "What are the consequences for practitioners of widening participation discourses?". Indeed, this is the question which Part Two of this chapter is focussed around. Whilst this has been introduced, through a discussion of the "Politics Behind Numbers" which investigated the reasons practitioners believe that the OfS is pushing a policy agenda which relies heavily on numbers and quantification, this is thoroughly explored in Part Two of this chapter: Consequences for Practitioners of Discursive Construction of Widening Participation where issues surrounding practical consequences of practitioners understandings of widening participation discourses are discussed and analysed; this includes perception of a 'researcher' is widening participation, pressures placed on widening participation practitioners, and partisan epistemological positioning by the higher education regulator.

To finish this chapter, it is perhaps fitting to include a quotation from one practitioner who inadvertently outlined the problems with competing epistemological positions in their interview:

We want to have good research designs. But what that looks like can be very different. And so I think this focus on causality too often leads to different cams. One camp that says "all these people just want to do RCTs and that's the only thing that works and that just doesn't work in practice" and then another camp that is "we can only assess and evaluate using these type of methodologies, anything else doesn't work" and to me, it's like a healthy in-the-middle that we want to get to, and I think that if it were to be presented more as in like, you have different approaches, and here are the benefits and disadvantages of each approach, and just highlight some of the issues that exist it would be the correct way…

Part Two: Consequences for Practitioners of Discursive Construction of Widening Participation

Introduction

Given that the previous section (Part One: Practitioner Understandings of Widening Participation Discourses) focussed so heavily on abstract issues relating to widening participation discourse; particularly on issues relating to causality, scientific language, and the politics behind the quantitative agenda, this chapter changes tact to examine the concrete impacts, for practitioners, of widening participation discourse and understandings of this discourse. The research question addressed is: What are the Consequences for Practitioners of Widening Participation Discourses? The data used for this exploration, similarly to Chapter Six, stem from the interviews conducted as part of this DPhil. The chapter starts with examining practitioners' perceptions of how widening participation evaluation policies have changed over their career, and proceeds to explore how practitioners' understanding of key documents shapes not only their practice, but also their perception of their own role – for example, do they see themselves as 'researchers'? Indeed, what does it mean to be a 'researcher'? Finally, the chapter closes with an examination of pressures which evaluators face in their roles due to several factors such as: reputational concerns; personal involvement; accountability for donors, alumni and other interested parties; and position within organisation.

This is the final findings chapter of this thesis, and contributes to the overall whole by providing the final piece of the macro-to-micro jigsaw: from a focus on large scale linguistic analysis of the entire field and different institutional 'groups' in the Access Corpus, through to exploring practitioners' abstract understandings of widening participation discourse, to now seeking to understand the practicalities and implications of these abstract understandings. As with other chapters, though discussions occur in this findings chapter, it is largely treated in isolation and it is the job of the chapter Discussion and Synthesis of

Findings to bring together these isolates in conversation with one another – notably through the introduction and development of a conceptual framework seeking to understand and explain discursive shifts in discourse; with widening participation discourse as the focus in this case.

Changes Over Time in Policy

Interviewees had varying levels of experience in the field of widening participation and had been practitioners for different amounts of time ranging from just under a year to more than 20 years. There is therefore necessarily a difference in the amount of information that some participants were able to provide about their own perceptions of changes in the field of widening participation. This is not to diminish the responses of those who had not been in the field for an extended period of time; these interviewees were able to respond with erudition and perhaps more insight into the acute changes that have taken place only over the past few years (even if they had only been formally employed for just under a year, they all showed interest and knowledge of the field which predates their start of employment). Changes were noted across different areas of widening participation, but a key focus of participants' answers related to an increasing amount of evaluation, a focus on the type of evaluation, and changing targets. It is not surprising that these were the key areas of discussion given how close these changes occurred temporally; however, if the same question was asked 10 years ago of participants relating to changes in the widening participation field it can be suggested that they would still focus on significant changes that occurred close to the time in which the question was asked of them.

One of the longest serving practitioners, who has worked in the field for 20 years suggested that there may have been some changes in the increasing focus on evaluation but that the field had largely remained in a similar state

On one hand, I'd say it's not changed at all, in 20 years, because before there was the HEFCE evidence group…it was obviously a different structure…Do I think there's more emphasis on evaluation now than there was 20 years ago? Maybe. But it's really interesting we've had to argue that we need this…and that, to me, is the one thing that changed

This quotation is interesting because it suggests that the few changes that have occurred over the 20 years of this practitioners' experience have been strongly led by practitioners. This is somewhat surprising given that many of the other quotations from those who have worked in the field for a similarly long amount of time indicate that there have been significant changes in many different areas over their time

I think that there are certain focusses and/or concepts that are talked about more, and some that are talked about less over time. So when I first started, growth mindset was a big one…we talked a lot about trying to improve the growth mindset of pupils. There is now more of a focus on attainment, there is more of a focus on capital, social capital, cultural capital, rather than growth mindset…it's becoming a little more attainment focussed

However, another long-standing member of the widening participation field with significant experience at different institutions suggested that the changes in widening participation are cyclical and that particular issues go in, or out, of fashion over time. This may potentially explain the first quotation which suggests that perhaps not as much has changed as may be expected

It's all kind of a big circle, isn't it? And we have ideas, and then we dismiss them, and then we go back to them later, it kind of how it feels a bit…it seems to be about now all that medical stuff coming around [referring to methods of evaluation like randomised control trials]…it just seems like a very much like a circular motion a lot of the time

An element of the bottom-up policy orientation, suggested in the first quotation (*we've had to argue that we need this*) was also suggested by a practitioner with significantly less experience – about a year and a half of employment in the widening participation sector, and straight out of their undergraduate degree. Their perspective was that, in the broadest possible terms, policy changes simply underscored what people in the field were already obliged to do – but with an increased push

I feel like it's that maybe it was more confirming what everyone knew was important already…But I would say that since I started. There's been this feeling that, oh, you need to be doing more…

This sentiment was supported by another participant who similarly noted that there was 'pressure' to measure and evaluate in a particular way

And there is certainly an increasing pressure and demand for measured impact…randomised control trials and experimental methods and more rigorous forms of evaluation. That's changed

With the exception of the first interviewee quoted in this section, participants almost unanimously agreed that there was an increased push towards increased evaluation, and increased evaluation of a particular kind, over the past few years.

Partisan OfS

Whilst towards the end of the previous chapter the matter of the OfS's epistemological positioning was briefly discussed, it is important to explore this to a greater extent here since it is central to the functioning of a successful nation widening participation programme. The epistemological position of the OfS can be described as partisan, their policies clearly display support for a view which is more closely aligned to positivism than, say, interpretivism. This partisan approach is particularly evident in the standards of evidence document (OfS, 2019) mentioned throughout this thesis – where there is a clear support for 'causal' methods of evaluation and where 'narrative' evidence falls at the weakest end of this spectrum.

Indeed, it is interesting to note that despite the document itself stating that "The three types of impact evaluation are distinct but not hierarchical. The standards are concerned with the robustness and certainty of the evaluation strategy and appropriateness to the activities you are undertaking" (OfS, 2019: 2), practitioners did not believe that there is no hierarchy implied in not only this document, but also in the OfS's approach to evaluation. Participants unanimously and independently (at least, those who engaged with the standards of evidence) cast doubt on the non-hierarchical nature of the document.

I think there is really that kind of feeling that it's a bit of a hierarchy in terms of that kind of gold standard of evidence…

Honestly, it is viewed as a hierarchy. I think type one is almost a minimum standard, type two is what we should have, and type three is what we're working towards…

The standards of evidence are generally seen as a hierarchy, with type 3 as the "gold standard" that institutions should aim for…

While officially described as "non-hierarchical", in practice type 3 causal evidence is the expected goal, even if it is difficult to achieve in widening participation…

This is further supported by findings from analyses of the Access Corpus in earlier chapters which illustrate a shift towards more causal type approaches late on in the corpus, and following the introduction of the OfS in 2018. Given that this signifies the partisanship of the OfS when it comes to epistemological positioning, for whatever reason, the implications of this position on practitioners is perhaps large – it influences the way in which universities partake in evaluation exercises directly and can impinge on the agency of individual actors within the widening participation space. This leads us to the question of where individual widening participation evaluators fit into this evaluation landscape.

Evaluator as Researcher

The evaluation of widening participation bears many of the hallmarks of research, or of research projects: they are a systematic inquiry into a matter using methods which are found across traditional academic disciplines to investigate and analyse the strengths, weaknesses, and potential successes of activities. Indeed, these evaluations have research questions – whether implicit or explicit. However, in the face of a partisan higher education regulator in matters related to epistemology, it is important to ascertain how evaluators position themselves in relation to research; it is clear how there could be a conflict between a practitioner who believes themselves to be a researcher engaging in research, but must

conduct this research under strict directives from a regulator who has its own agenda and positionality which may impinge on the academic freedom of evaluator/researcher.

The quotations below encapsulate the views of participants when asked if they believe evaluators are engaged in research or if evaluators *are* researchers:

To some extent, research and evaluation are quite often using the same methods…and you're basically doing research all the time…

Yes, I do see it as a form of research

Yeah, I think so. That might be because I have a research background…I think that is one of the main benefits of doing a Masters' or PhD, it's about understanding…

One participant even referred to themselves as a researcher inadvertently in relation to another question in the interview schedule:

But then, you know, the Vice Chancellor might be a politician, we can't be, we've got to be the researchers

Two participants were more equivocal in their acceptance of this label for evaluators – the former quote is notably from a participant who is not directly involved in evaluation processes:

In my job, and most people's jobs, they would have to be communicators, or they'd have to do communication as part of their job that doesn't necessarily mean that they are communicators. Yes,

they are using that skill. They're doing research, in essence. I would probably define a researcher as someone who devotes a lot of their time towards it…So I would say our staff are research informed

I think we're purposefully trying to blur that line. So I think it's sometimes quite helpful to think of them as distinct. In my mind there is an intrinsically normative element of evaluation, so I think it's very difficult to do evaluation without having a predefined notion of what a failure and success look like in terms of an activity…this brings you into this territory where if you're doing research on a particular policy, but with the aim to improve that policy, you in the research process must make normative decisions around what you want to be the case, which may be much more prominent than in proper research. So I think on a theoretical basis, you could divvy those up maybe along those lines, but I think in practice we're trying to blur them as much as possible

This last quotation appears to be suggesting that evaluation intends to improve, whereas research does not intend to improve. This is perhaps indicative of a very specific view of what research is, and how researchers are positioned in the research process, perhaps viewing researchers as disinterested in their research goals and outcomes – this is perhaps a naïve point of view, particularly in the field of education, and more broadly in the social sciences, where the research endeavour is often driven by a personal interest in the subject, for whatever reason. The former quote is interesting insofar as it separates research and the researcher; by this definition many people could be research*ing* different topics as part of their role, but this does not make them a researcher *per se*. The role of researcher is reserved for those who participate in research by using 'a lot' of their time on it; presumably in this view there is a certain number of hours a week which can act as the demarcation between a person being a researcher, and a person not being a researcher.

Despite these two voices countering the dominant narrative, an overwhelming majority of interviewees had no problem with defining themselves as researchers and their work as *bona fide* research. This brings about further questions about the impartiality of research endeavour given that the frameworks in which these interviewees operate are, to a great extent, determined by the higher education regulator. This is particularly the case when it comes to the *methods* which are open and available to widening participation evaluators; as mentioned previously, particular methods are prized by the OfS over others, particularly in the view of evaluators. This was established in the subsection "Partisan OfS", where participants overwhelmingly acknowledged that not only does the standards of evidence document (OfS, 2019) clearly place research methods in a hierarchy of merit, but also stated that the OfS place positivistic methods and methodologies in higher esteem than other methods and methodologies. The reasons for this particular epistemological positioning are explored in the previous section (Part One: Practitioner Understandings of Widening Participation Discourses) and include: a focus on producing quantitative results for ease of persuasion, more difficult to critique research methods which are viewed as more specialist, and because the OfS may believe that quantified numbers indicate 'proof' of a phenomenon more than any other kind of evidence, for example, from interviews.

Based on these findings, participants were asked whether they think there is a tension between perceiving themselves as researchers and being somewhat dictated to, by the OfS, about the methods they are able to use in their research. This question elicited interesting answers from participants, many of whom believed that they could make the 'rules' work for them in their given situation and were able to continue to practice as they wanted to.

Well I suppose at the end of the day you are allowed a certain amount of latitude, right? A good example of that would be in the standards of evidence, it's not a question of, you know, you don't get marked as such. If we say something is type one level of evidence, nobody's going to come in, it's not like there's auditors that come in and say something.

I would say that I feel restricted by the framework if I am given a target about how many I need to do and what if I got told I need to do type three evaluation on every programme? Then I would feel restricted…

No researcher really likes to be told what to do. So that's problematic…and I suppose the reason for having a central governing body now is that all of those years of research haven't led us to the answer of What Works yet

The last quotation is from a participant who is supportive of the underlying epistemological positivism of the Office for Students and thus equally prizes methods of evaluation which centre around such assumptions. It is interesting to note that this practitioner, who has been in the widening participation field for more than 20 years, seems to suggest that years of research in widening participation has not led us to the answer of 'What Works?'. This is certainly not an opinion shared by other interviewees who did not suggest anything near to this point of view, but it may perhaps be suggested that the results of decades of widening participation research have not been aiming for an answer to the question 'What Works?', if indeed this question is answerable in these specific and temporally situated terms. By posing this question, 'What Works?', one must also be able to imagine an answer to this question, and in many cases these 'answers' can be found in rather reductive and unnuanced ways, take, for example, the following abstract:

Despite substantial financial commitment to widening participation activities internationally, robust evidence demonstrating 'what works' in facilitating disadvantaged learners to access Higher Education (HE) is remarkably sparse…

The first part of the abstract sets out the same position as the interviewee in the present research, stating that lots of research has been done in the past and yet we do not know 'what works'. The results of this paper, also from the abstract indicate:

The more learners engaged with UniConnect, the greater were their chances of HE acceptance, but the benefit of each additional engagement beyond five or six engagements was small. To our knowledge, these findings are the first to indicate the number, type and combinations of interventions that are most effective in supporting progression to HE

This is perhaps one way of answering the question 'What Works?', by suggesting an exact number of engagement with widening participation programmes which aids disadvantaged students in their pursuit of higher education, but the strength of studies which suggest such grandiose applicability and generalisability of findings must surely be questioned. Despite lengthy 'limitations' component of this paper, the conclusion still states that:

In order to make best use of funding resources and pupil time, future intervention programmes should encourage pupils to participate in at least one – but no more than six – activities (Burgess *et al.*, 2021).

Pressures on Widening Participation Evaluators

Another significant implication, for practitioners, of widening participation discourses is an increased feeling of pressure on their evaluation exercises; these pressures are outlined in Hart (*in press*) but are significant for the purpose of this thesis, so are outlined in this

subsection. The key areas of pressure relate to: reputational concerns; personal involvement; accountability for donors, alumni, and other interested parties; and position within organisation. Each of these pressures will be briefly outlined in this subsection.

Reputational Concerns

A tension was felt between the understanding of "what works" with regard to current activities, and the reputational concerns subsequent to a potential finding that present activities are not as effective as might be imagined. Indeed, the present call for independent and public evaluation of widening participation programmes, in which the evaluations would be publicly available intensifies the pressures of reputation. Though this fear was vocalised by participants, it is notable that these fears are not addressed in OfS policies which remain steadfast in their call for the publication of evaluations which evidence both the successes and problems of present widening participation. Hart (2024) writes that "There is a clear rationale underpinning the OfS position; it is important to not replicate unsuccessful (however 'success' is measured) interventions across the sector since this would be wasteful of time and money, and thus potentially constrain overall sector-wide progress with the task of ensuring greater inclusion of under-represented groups in the HE sector" (Hart, 2024: 239). Whilst it may be a noble goal, and perhaps in line with broader 'open-science' principles for all evaluations to be published and publicised, this approach does not appear to fully recognise the potential consequences for individual practitioners and institutions of this course of action:

It's potentially damaging for the institution. You, know, if you've been running something for a long time and it doesn't work, then that's potentially damaging

It's how it reflects on an institution as well. You might find that a practitioner is perfectly happy to tell you all the things that went wrong with their programme. But, actually, some of those things, particularly the process related things, might reflect badly on the institution and institutions that they're working with, which would be damaging for relationships

Personal Involvement

A common situation within the field of widening participation is that the evaluator of a widening participation programme may also be the key individual involved in the inception, and execution, of that same programme. Given this obvious conflict in the roles of individuals in such roles, it is perhaps easily imaginable that there may be problems in that individual's assessment of the programme, whether deliberately or otherwise, their assessment is somewhat biased:

If it's a scheme that you've developed for yourself…then you are clouded in any form of judgement around whether or not it works, because it's something that you've put your heart and soul into…it's your baby

The investment of personal effort into the programme and responsibility for that programme bear the classic hallmarks of a situation where biased evaluation may easily occur – even if it is not intended. This is even more likely to be the case given the often significant amount of pecuniary investment in such programmes by individual higher education institutions. There is a positive incentive for programmes to work, for these individuals who have responsibility for them:

I think there's an internal pressure, when I've worked with staff who have programmes, they have a real kind of 'I really want this to work, I want to prove this works'

There is a pressure to show it in a positive way. But nobody cares about outreach as much as we do, so actually, it's kind of that we want to be positive

Accountability for Donors, Alumni, and Other Interested Parties

Interviewees noted that one of the key sources of pressure on their evaluations was the pressure to demonstrate outcomes to show that donors, alumni, and other interested parties that their money and/or lobbying for widening participation was indeed being taken seriously and has been actioned in way which have created results for widening participation at whichever institution. As Hart notes "it is clearly harder to say to a donor that their financial contribution was effectively used on an intervention that had no real impact, but, not to worry, because it is just as important to know what does *not* work a what does…" (Hart, 2024: 240). One participant noted that:

If you have to suddenly justify 'oh, yeah, no, I spend your money wisely' then I can see that there is much more pressure and that if you have projects that you need to evaluate…where you need funding for the next year, that is more likely to result in biased results

Whilst it is clearly the case that the most affected institutions are those who rely more heavily on external sources of funding for their widening participation endeavours, institutions who self-fund their widening participation programmes are not immune from the pressures of demonstrating impacts. An interesting phenomenon was uncovered by the interviews in this research, that where donors are from private companies, they are more likely to seek a numerical and quantitative measure of the impact of their money

I feel more pressure to kind of write up at the end, to say, you know, 90% of students said it was really engaging and have those key headline figures that donors and stakeholders like seeing

We're getting gifts of, you know, a couple of hundred pounds all the way up to a million pounds, and obviously you can't take a million and not demonstrate that something is working, so, you know, the pressure is massive personally to show we are actually doing something with this money…and private companies are particularly interested in having a clear sense of impact because they want to know that their money is not just being frittered away…it does yield quite a lot of pressure so you could describe [this] as external stakeholders and how they pressurise us to demonstrate results

In addition, stakeholders within institutions are increasingly likely to push for positive outcomes of widening participation endeavours; this includes current students (whether undergraduate or postgraduate) and staff. One group of interested stakeholders who were mentioned several times by participants were alumni groups who seek to be communicated with about the changes that are happening at their *alma mater*:

We have a lot of investment these days, for example, we've suddenly received a lot more interest from alumni. I think historically alumni have been interested in putting their name on a building or, you know, investing in other things. But alumni have become very interested in widening participation…

There is pressure, you know, we write magazine articles for alumni to update them on what's happening in outreach and we want it to look good; partly so we get more funding and that kind of stuff

In some institutions, the pressures on practitioners were so large that one interviewee compared the relationship to having shareholders in a corporate business.

Position within Organisation

The final set of pressures identified amongst interviewees related to their position within the organisation and the associated hierarchical power structures that act on them – this is particularly the case where senior leadership figures, such as the vice-chancellor, is personally involved in widening participation: "The asymmetrical power dynamic between a practitioner and a senior manager can lead to practitioners feeling that they need to prove their worth, or portray themselves and their widening participation activities in the best possible light" (Hart, 2024: 242). Indeed, one participant noted that:

If the vice chancellor asked you to do an evaluation of something, there is the internal pressure there that, especially with spending thousands of pounds, to eke out the positives. There is an internal pressure, no doubt.

Associated, participants reported that the reporting of evaluations which do not illustrate the successes that they had originally wished is difficult for them, since they do not want to appear professionally inept and certainly do not wish to tell a senior member of staff that their strategy and advice has directly resulted in negative outcomes:

With the best will in the world, you're not really wanting to go in and say 'oh, you know that thing that you said we need to do? Well, it basically backfired and they've all dropped out' you know, there is that internal pressure

The pressures outlines are compounded by the current state of higher education in the UK where market logics exist: "Within an HE system which is inherently competitive it seems to follow that individuals and institutions will strive, more than might otherwise be the case,

to appear successful in their activities – even when they may not have been" (Hart, 2024: 243).

Chapter Seven: Discussion and Synthesis of Findings

This chapter has two primary functions: first, to synthesise the individual findings chapters into a cohesive whole and, second, to describe different ideological positions relating to understandings of widening participation. In terms of the former, this thesis is structured in such a way as to be easily comprehensible *in toto*, and it is important to ensure that no findings are lost or forgotten through a reading of this document in its entirety, but also to make explicit the links between findings from different *types* of analysis and methods throughout. Though the thesis clearly and explicitly starts from a broad, sector-wide, macro-level analysis and proceeds to micro-level semi-structured interviews, the contours of analysis must remain at the forefront. It is possible within such a large document for the reader to be unable to see the 'wood for the trees'. The second function of this chapter is necessarily theoretical and conceptual, as it deals with abstract understandings of widening participation discourse by seeking to understand differing ideological positions, conceptual applications and semantic structures. The subsequent chapter deals with abstract understandings of discourse by outlining a new conceptual framework which can be used as a heuristic device in order to more comprehensively understand the nuances and topology of widening participation discursive changes.

The theoretical analysis in which underpins this chapter aligns with Bloor's view of the role of sociologist in investigative matters: "the sociologist will be concerned with beliefs which are taken for granted or institutionalised, or invested with authority by groups of people…the sociologist seeks theories which explain the beliefs which are in fact found, regardless of how the investigator evaluates them" (Bloor, 1991: 5). The conceptual schema outlined provides researchers with the ability to understand these taken for granted or institutionalised beliefs with a view to explaining the nature of their production. Broadly

speaking, part one of this chapter focusses on the substance of research findings whereas part two of this chapter focusses on theories and concepts which help to explain them.

Though the findings chapters of this research are structured in such a way as to take the reader from broad notions to more narrow issues, the present discussion will not be structured in the same manner; whilst the former approach made sense for the findings chapters, it does not make sense here given that the focus is now not on presenting evidence, but on exploring what this evidence *means*. Thus, if we are to produce an effective account of the results of this research this needs to happen through a synthesis of the findings and through an understanding of the results of different analyses in this mixed-methods study. Isolating the results of different methods would lead to a disjoined and meandering discussion with no clear and cohesive direction.

Proving Worth & Quantification

One of the key findings of this research relates to the increasingly pressurised atmosphere that is evident in the field of widening participation and is experienced by those concerned with *proving* the worth and value of access work; this does not comprise an existential threat to the work itself, but is instead regarded as something of an 'existential threat' to the practitioners who are undertaking this work. There is an increasing pressure on practitioners to quantify the outcomes of widening participation interventions in order to attempt to prove *What Works* in these particular contexts. These pressures are seen in both the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of this thesis which both signal an increasingly regimented and dogmatic view of widening participation (and its evaluation) being promulgated by the higher education regulatory body - the Office for Students. These

findings support the literature which problematises the increasing focus on *what works* ideologies in the field of education (Biesta, 2007; Biesta, 2010).

The quantitative component of this research confirmed what perhaps many in the field have been thinking, though without the 'hard' evidence to support their views, namely, that over the past 15 years of widening participation activities there have been significant changes which have led to an increased marketisation within the field. The consequences of the resultant pressures leave widening participation practitioners increasingly preoccupied with different ways of justifying their work in particular (time-consuming) ways. This is not to say that individuals within the field ought not to show that what they are doing is beneficial for students, their institutions, and, perhaps most importantly, the disadvantaged students that they are seeking to support. However, it should be noted that the increasing emphasis upon 'scientific' discourse outlined in the findings chapters leads to a significantly increased pressure on practitioners' time and energy which is not always experienced positively.

There is also perhaps a naivete in the views of the Office for Students with regard to how the evaluation of widening participation practice should be undertaken – this is particularly notable in the suggestion that institutions should peer review other institutions' widening participation evaluations. Whilst this may be a reasonable idea *in theory*, the practicalities of undertaking such an endeavour within the marketised higher education system which has been created through a number of different policies – including the tripling of tuition fees in 2012 – means that any such 'cooperative' ideals are a source of concern for many practitioners whose institutions are competing against one another for student numbers. In this case, there are incentives for institutional 'marking' of other institutions' widening

participation evaluation findings to become biased – whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Indeed, the impact of the 2012 increase in tuition fees was felt significantly by widening participation practitioners within the field who were faced with the challenge of increasing participation in higher education in a context of a large hike in fee levels. It also became evident that an increased focus was placed by the OfS on "Access Performance Targets" at the expense of other key areas such as "School and College Links" or the broad area of "Widening Access". This aligns with Ball's views on first order and second order activities which, whilst developed in relation to the position of teachers in schools, the principles involved would seem also to apply in this case: "This contradiction arises between intensification – as an increase in the volume of first order activities (direct engagement with students, research, curriculum development) required by the demands of performativity – and the 'costs' in terms of time and energy of second order activities that is the work of performance monitoring and management. The increases in effort and time spent on core tasks are off-set by increases in effort and time devoted to accounting for task work or erecting monitoring systems, collecting performative data and attending to the management of institutional 'impressions' (Ball, 2003: 221). One may adapt the above quotation and update it for the particular circumstances of widening participation work in England, where practitioners' first order tasks including summer schools, information advice and guidance sessions, and school visit days have been potentially offset by a range of second order activities such as developing an understanding of Randomised Control Trials, Realistic Evaluation, and What Works Centres – alongside, of course, planning and enacting these particular evaluations.

Paradigm Enforcement & Nature of Science

Many of the developments in the widening participation field over the past five years suggest that the Office for Students is attempting to enforce particular ontological and epistemological positions onto practitioners; this is evident from both the quantitative and qualitative findings of this research. The hallmarks of these positions include: a focus on perceived "scientific" methodologies; the introduction and promotion of allied concepts such as 'causation'; development of a hierarchy of epistemologies; the pursuit of objectivity. Whilst a number of these considerations may be positively embraced by *some* practitioners in the field, it is notable that many do not agree with some or all of them and, further, may hold diametrically opposed views on the nature of the evaluation endeavour. Ball notes that the contradiction between what practitioners believe in a given circumstance, and what they are forced to believe, can lead to a "value schizophrenia" in which "commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance" (Ball, 2003: 221).

Further complications arise from the promotion of particular epistemologies within the evaluation field, a notable example of this is derived from the fact that many widening participation evaluators perceive themselves to be 'researchers' – as evidenced in the transcriptions of interviewees in the present research. This raises further questions related to the fact that, traditionally, those in a research role have exercised a great deal of autonomy over their research agenda and have been able to conduct research in a manner which they see as aligning most effectively with the research questions of any given project; this impacts even more strongly where research can lead to potential publication (as has been suggested in the case of widening participation evaluation). It can be argued that in implementing policies and providing guidance about the 'correct' way in which to carry

out evaluations of widening participation activities, the higher education regulator is attempting to enforce a particular paradigmatic view of *science* on the field with the expectation that this agenda will be more or less uncritically followed, and that 'normal science', in the Kuhnian sense, will naturally follow.

There are a number of shortcomings in Kuhn's description of the scientific enterprise, one of which critiques the rigidity of his posited system: "the events, procedures, and results that constitute the sciences have no common structure; there are no elements that occur in every scientific investigation but are missing elsewhere" (Feyerabend, 2010: 1), Kuhn's explication of the development of science can be a useful heuristic device with which to more fully understand the development of different fields of scientific endeavour. The imposition of a Kuhnian frame of reference onto the present subject matter ought not to be accepted, though, without further clarification and explanation. Applying the entire schema of Kuhn's notion of paradigms to OfS driven developments in the sphere of policy guidance for undertaking widening participation evaluation is not necessary for present purposes as it will suffice to recognise the most salient areas of widening participation discourse that align with key aspects of it.

The first application of the Kuhnian schema involves noting that the field of widening participation at this stage can be identified as essentially pre-paradigmatic, that is, a situation where there is no clear consensus about the 'correct' or 'agreed upon' way of conducting widening participation evaluations. One of the key signs of this phase is a lack of consensus across the sector about how to conduct evaluation exercises, and a lack of coordination in effort. Extending Kuhn's framework, it could be argued that there is a distinct phase within the nascency of a field which can be hypothesised as "pre-pre-

paradigmatic" where individuals and institutions are completing their endeavours (in this case, completing widening participation evaluations) with no clear cross-sector consensus *or even large-scale debate* on the methods which should be used to complete these evaluations; this circumstance can be viewed as pre-pre-paradigmatic because there are very few of the elements present that combine to make pre-paradigmatic *science* (though even this word should not be used uncritically): "The pre-paradigm period, in particular, is regularly marked by frequent and deep debates over legitimate methods, problems, and standards of solution, though these serve rather to define schools than to produce agreement" (Kuhn, 1962: 48). Indeed, in a pre-pre-paradigmatic phase, it can be suggested that there is: a lack of structure of inquiry, a lack of 'joined up' thinking across the sector, and a focus on descriptive work (rather than building theory or attempting to produce deeper insights).

If we are to take the previous statements mapping Kuhnian notions of scientific development onto the field of widening participation (and its evaluation) to be true, which we *can* given that the evidence provided in this thesis supports this view, then we can attempt to further map this system of thought onto the field. This can be accomplished by identifying whether there has been any significant movement of the field of widening participation evaluation from pre-paradigmatic through to a paradigmatic stage. Whilst this is a complex process, as evidenced in many of the examples given by Kuhn himself, it is perhaps made more complex in this specific case where a 'regulatory body' has powers to attempt to enforce a particular paradigm onto members of the evaluation community.

One of the difficulties at this juncture of mapping Kuhn's framework onto widening participation evaluation is that it is not yet clear if a period of 'crisis' is over; there is no distinct and pervasive paradigm which is accepted and agreed upon by a majority working

within the sector. Instead, institutions are compelled to work in certain ways and to use particular methodologies, but many of the individuals within these structures do not necessarily believe in these same methodologies and particularly in the underpinning philosophical assumptions which they belie. This has the potential to create schisms between different camps of epistemologically opposed practitioners. However, *outwardly* a significant majority of practitioners do in practice conduct their work in the way in which they are expected to by the higher education regulator – whether this accords with their own professional epistemic leanings or not. In a situation whereby practitioners are mandated to more or less uncritically follow top-down hierarchies of methods, and where differential rewards are provided for particular approaches to subjects, it is easy to discern where resentments may build and the commitment of practitioners to their work may diminish due to growing feelings of alienation. It may be added that the current 'paradigm' of widening participation has in many respects been artificially produced given that it has not been created by any new understanding of how social interactions occur within the field, nor by a natural progression of knowledge, but instead by the imposition of a structure of thinking by a powerful institution – thus, the term 'artificial paradigm' may be usefully employed here to capture the type of process which has taken place. There appears to be no solid base of support for this artificial paradigm stemming from practitioners themselves having created the paradigm, but instead a top-down imposition of ways of thinking about the rules governing the game of widening participation evaluation.

The increasingly prescriptive approach to regulation taken by the OfS, clearly evident throughout the data presented in this thesis accords with the recent House of Lords report which evaluated the operation of the OfS. Findings from the report "Must do better: The Office for Students and the looming crisis facing higher education" (House of Lords, 2023)

aligns with the findings of this thesis in suggesting that the OfS has: "become overtly prescriptive and has shown a willingness to direct providers' activities, with insufficient explanation and little regard to the need to protect institutional autonomy" (House of Lords, 2023: 6). This is directly supported by evidence discovered during research for this thesis. Research findings not only identify an increase in prescriptive language use affecting institutional Access and Participation Plans, but also evidence in qualitative interviews revealed the regulatory atmosphere that has been created – this was particularly the case in discussions relating to widening participation evaluation.

Ideology & Effects of Policy

Whilst it may be argued that universities retain a degree of latitude by which to conduct much of their widening participation evaluation work in a manner they deem to be fitting, it would be illogical to argue that the relevant policies and agendas of governmental institutions in this area have an insignificant impact on the working of the institutions which they directly regulate. Many policy utterances and textual products from the Office for Students ought to be viewed, if not through the lens of *performativity* (in the Austinian sense (Austin, 1973)), then through the lens of the illocutionary force they contain and thus the perlocutionary effects on higher education institutions. The fact that texts of the Office for Students have particular illocutionary forces is undeniable. Indeed, one may argue that a cohesive illocutionary narrative of the OfS in relation to widening participation evaluation concerns the promotion of particular ontological and epistemological perspectives.

Although there may be occasional performative utterances by the Office for Students, as is the case with many regulatory bodies, it is the illocutionary acts and perlocutionary

consequences that are of particular interest in this thesis. It should also be noted that *performativity* is here used in the philosophical sense, defined as: "not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it." (Austin, 1973: 6); an obvious example of this type of utterance can be found in the institution of marriage, or in the anointing of a *Dame* or a *Sir*. In both instances, the way in which the 'action' occurs is *through* the utterances themselves: in order to be married both parties say, "I do", which *is* the action and the couple are therefore married; in the case of anointing a Dame or a Sir, a person states something along the lines of "I pronounce you Dame/ Sir *Surname*" and this statement, in this context, is sufficient for the adoubement. Illocutionary forces are more central to an understanding of the policy drives of the Office for Students as this pertains to the intended consequences of texts or utterances and accounts for the fact that one can ask another person to commit an action, without *explicitly* asking for the action to be committed: "performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to performance of an act *of* saying something" (Austin, 1973: 100). The production and reception of illocutionary and perlocutionary forces are embedded within the conceptual framework introduced in the next part of this chapter, and help to explain the way in which discourses operate in the domain of widening participation and its evaluation.

What is important to note here, though, about the relationship between illocution and perlocution is the premise upon which it is based in this particular context. It can be argued that the premise of Office for Students texts and utterances relate to the *ideological* underpinnings of that institution. Given that ideology is central to an understanding of the motives, and certainly the consequences, of policy, it is important to give this component of discourse a comprehensive analysis. This is not easy to accomplish given that Mannheim describes how the first task of definition is "to disentangle all the different shades of meaning

which are blended here into a pseudo-unity" (Mannheim, 1960: 49). However, Mannheim's definitional work on the subject is useful to the discussion of ideology in this chapter. He split the term into two: total, and particular. Particular ideologies refer to when: "we are sceptical of the ideas and representations advanced by our opponent. They are regarded as more or less conscious disguises of the real nature of a situation, the true recognition of which would not be in accord with his interests. These distortions range all the way from conscious lies to half conscious and unwitting disguises; from calculated attempts to dupe others to self-deception." (Mannheim, 1960: 49); whereas, in total ideology "we refer to the ideology of an age or of a concrete historico-social group e.g. of a class, when we are concerned with the characteristics and composition of the total structure of the mind of this epoch or of this group" (Mannheim, 1960: 49). An argument can be made that the ideological positioning of the higher education regulator fits well within the Mannheimian conceptualisation of particular ideology wherein the messy realities of a particular situation are not acknowledged since these realities would be increasingly difficult to contend with.

The OfS has implemented policies which are based upon particular epistemological and ontological perspectives derived from their conceptualisations of scientific practice and which are assumed to be readily transferable to other fields of inquiry. As a consequence, it appears to be more legitimate to persuade those in the field to undertake evaluations which produce quantitative and more *certain* results as opposed to results which are contingent and may produce more complex outcomes. The latter are also likely to be more difficult to convince others (including stakeholders) of their merits and rigour because of their inherently interpretivist nature.

It can be argued that the decision to implement, unilaterally, policies which push towards What Works and positivist methods for widening participation evaluation are ideologically driven and can be viewed as distortions involving be "more or less conscious disguises of the real nature of a situation, the true recognition of which would not be in accord with his interests" (Mannheim, 1960: 49). The reasons for institutions or individuals holding to particular ideological positions may lie in their positionality which is captured well in Althusser's analysis of ideology: "What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live" (Althusser, 1971: 155). The complex way in which *interpellation* can occur in this context is more comprehensively examined through the theoretical framework proposed in part two of this chapter, which, in its attempt to more fully articulate and theorise discourse, necessarily explores the process of interpellation. At this point it should also be acknowledged that we can see both institutional and individual interpellation occurring at multiple different levels, and thus there may exist what could be called a meta-ideological non-symmetrical recursion which produces different impacts *because of* the different levels in which this recursive process occurs – there are clearly instances of interpretation at each of the levels. Relevant levels for purposes of this analysis include, for example: governing institutions (OfS); individuals within governing institutions; higher education institutions; individuals within higher education institutions. The evidence provided in the earlier findings chapters illustrate the policy imperative upon practitioners to provide quantitative evidence of success and *impact* of their widening participation work; this ideology does not start at this level but is instead transmitted from higher levels such as that of the governing institution (OfS).

The ideological underpinning of the Office for Students can be argued to be predicated on an increasingly pervasive view of human, social interactions as capable of being treated in analogous way that one would treat, for example, the study of bacteria in a petri dish. The perceived superior legitimacy of natural scientific methods is not a recent phenomenon and has been the source of academic debate since the time of the fathers of sociology: Weber, Durkheim, and Marx. Therefore, it is somewhat unsurprising that these debates are now prevalent in the field of widening participation evaluation which straddles the dual role of being both concerned with research (evaluation) and the practicalities of undertaking access work. It appears that the sociological debates concerning the merits and demerits of different epistemological positions within the context of the social sciences are somewhat taken for granted by regulatory bodies in the field of access and widening participation which ascribe a value hierarchy to competing philosophical positions – for example, as demonstrated in the OfS standards of evidence document. As previously mentioned, the alienation which may be felt by practitioners who do not ascribe to the same philosophical and ideological norms of the regulatory body may result in fragmentary practice due to epistemic rifts. An example of this can be seen in non-verbal cues evident in the interviews conducted for the present research, where several practitioners 'rolled their eyes' when asked about engagement with the What Works centre for widening participation (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes) which was regarded as representing the positivistic and natural scientific view of the field.

It is clear that the powers of the higher education regulator have a significant influence on the approach taken to the field of widening participation evaluation by particular higher education institutions in different ways. One of the key aspects of influence evident in this thesis is the ability of the OfS to promote particular concepts which, previously, were

deemed inappropriate by institutions; an example of this was evident in one institution which, in 2016, espoused phenomenological analysis and yet a mere five years later supported the quest for 'objective' measurement in matters relating to widening participation; whilst it is possible that the contrasting approaches arose simply from evolving viewpoints over time, the magnitude of the change suggests a broad institutional shift in approach: from "…and it utilises a phenomenological qualitative approach to enrich knowledge of the role of resilience in the prediction and facilitation of academic success, including the pedagogic understanding of 'success'" (Bournemouth, 2016) to "the Access and Participation Standards of Evidence reinforces our whole institution approach, strengthening the importance of relevant, rigorous and objective evaluation, facilitating monitoring to ensure improvement and providing robust mechanisms by which to share expertise" (Bournemouth, 2021). It is suggested that this change is largely, if not exclusively, caused by the influence of regulatory pressure and the legitimacy of these recent conceptual usages can be questioned in such circumstances. Indeed, it is further suggested that the approaches to evaluation increasingly adopted and promoted by those within the field can be considered to accord with the requisite standards of the definition of *scientism*.

It must be noted, however, that the impact of policies and changes within the field do not affect all institutions in the same way. Academic literature focussing on widening participation has, in recent years, begun to investigate the practices of elite English higher education institutions; and this was touched upon in the Literature Review. Previous research has outlined the differential outcomes for graduates of elite institutions compared to graduates of non-elite institutions: "High-status universities, such as the Russell Group and universities established before 1992, typically have higher earning graduates" (Belfield, 2018: 6); this is a widening participation issue insofar as access to these elite institutions is

not equitable, even for those students from more disadvantaged backgrounds who attain the same academic grades at age 18 (Boliver, 2013). This research contributes to the literature concerning the widening participation practices of elite higher education institutions since it has been found the widening participation discourses evident in such universities do not reflect field-wide discourses; elite universities appear less affected by sector wide changes and new widening participation policies.

Scientism

Scientism is a concept used in many different fields to refer to the overuse and fetishism of *science* (broadly construed). One of the more useful definitions of the term is provided by Susan Haack, who states simply that scientism is "an inappropriately deferential attitude to science" and provides six signs of its existence in a particular domain: "the honorific use of 'science' and its cognates; using scientific trappings purely decoratively; preoccupation with demarcation; preoccupation with 'scientific method'; looking to the sciences for answers beyond their scope; denying the legitimacy or worth of non-science…" (Haack, 2012: 75). It may be suggested that this hexapartite definition of scientism may be usefully applied to the utilisation of quantitative methods, but adapted as follows: deferential attitude to numbers and quantification; using quantitative trappings purely decoratively; preoccupation with demarcation; preoccupation with quantitative methods; looking to quantitative methods for answers beyond their scope; denying the legitimacy or worth of non-quantitative methods – it would be reasonable to call this *quantitativism*.

Given that there is not sufficient space here to expand on this potential extension of the concept *quantitativism*, it is important to place our focus on the six hallmarks of scientism described by Haack, and to observe whether these align with the findings of this thesis. It

will become clear to the reader that the field of widening participation evaluation in many respects aligns very well with almost all of the characteristic signs of scientism – this is evident particularly in the large scale analysis of the Access Corpus, but also evident through the analysis of interviews. Honorific use of science (and its cognates) can be seen by the regular use of specific terms which represent scientific language. If we were to simply search *science* in the Access Corpus, we would of course encounter many uses of that word pertaining to academic subjects (biological sciences, natural sciences, neuroscience, librarian science, etc.). However, if, instead we use proxy terms which equate to the concept of *science* it is clear that the adoption of scientific terms has not only grown significantly, but has also increased considerably over the period of the corpus. The decorative use of scientific terminology is an aspect of widening participation discourse which will be discussed in greater length later on in this chapter and it will suffice here to note that there is significant evidence for this phenomenon , for example evidenced through the now widespread use of words such as 'rigorous' and 'robustness'; these terms often appear somewhat divorced from their original usage and often used in part *for the purpose* of appearing to be 'scientific'.

Preoccupation with demarcation is perhaps one of the characteristics outlined by Haack that does not apply so readily to the field of widening participation – although it could be argued that specific demarcations happen within this domain at the point where epistemological hierarchies exist, as demonstrated in the OfS standards of evidence document. This last point merges with the category 'denying legitimacy or worth of non-science' given that much of the rhetoric within the field of widening participation concerns itself with the promotion of particular methods (which are seen as scientific) and thus a

corresponding neglect of other *non-scientific* methods (though obviously this is not couched in these terms).

The final two categories concern 'looking to the sciences for answers beyond their scope' and 'preoccupation with "scientific method"'; these are both evident in widening participation discourse where there is certainly a growing preoccupation with the conducting of, for example, Randomised Control Trials. This method is viewed by many as the 'gold-standard' which should be aimed for in all cases that are viable; indeed, this preoccupation can also be regarded as 'looking to the sciences for answers beyond their scope' ., RCTs have often been viewed as the gold standard of systematic inquiry even against a backdrop whereby a great deal of social scientific research has led many academics within different academic domains to believe that other methods are more suitable and that other types of evidence are more valuable in deepening appreciation and understanding of a range of social phenomena.

A recent iteration of the emphasis placed upon the importance of establishing a 'scientific' approach towards the evaluation of widening participation activity is evident in a blog by TASO, a What Works funded centre working in this area, which promotes *Open Science*. It is perhaps useful here to reproduce a quotation from an article which calls upon the field to adopt what are termed 'open science' principles:

"Picture this: you come across an interesting paper evaluating the impact of a promising intervention, conducted at an institution like your own. However, as you attempt to access it, you hit a paywall. Luckily you manage to get access through a colleague and see that the intervention shows promise and you decide you'd like to try and conduct a similar

evaluation in your setting. But as you look to follow the researcher's process, you realise you cannot access the code or data. You see that they've conducted the analysis with a method you're not familiar with using subscription-only software. You're left wondering how you'd perform such an analysis on a similar dataset from your institution…the solution to these barriers lies in open science" (TASO, 2024)

The perspective revealed by this What Works statement also serves to provide evidence to support a number of other points made in this thesis. I will outline here two of the more significant issues that it raises. First, is the suggestion that without code or data, it is impossible to conduct the same type of research on one's own data; it is important to remember here that almost no two datasets are identical and that they each contain their own idiosyncrasies. The implication is that widening participation evaluators are unable to carry out their own research, independently, using specific methodologies – a suggestion that does a disservice to the professionalism of practitioners. The second, and perhaps more fundamental, problem with the statement is that there is a preconception that "You see that they've conducted the analysis with a method you're not familiar with…" (TASO, 2024), and the answer to this must necessarily be open science. If a widening participation practitioner does not have knowledge of a particular method of analysis (which is very understandable, and not a reflection on the competencies of that practitioner), open science is in itself unlikely to provide a straightforward solution. The code may be made available through open science, but this does not foster or promote a sufficient understanding of a particular method. The analysis may be run on a free open-source software, but, again, this does not fully compensate the knowledge deficit.

One of the risks of this particular interpretation of open science as a means of solving many, if not all, of the shortcomings of the present state of widening participation evaluation is that it has the potential to embolden non-expert practitioners who are unfamiliar with certain methods, to attempt complex statistical analyses that they are not sufficiently trained to conduct. This could create the circumstances in which a substantial amount of research is conducted, but where the quality of the resulting analysis is deficient in potentially significant respects.

Concept Application

The question of 'training' staff in widening participation evaluation is one of utmost importance within the field – it is clear from the discussion thus far that expectations for the conduct of evaluation exercises are somewhat technical and include the use of specialised methods, specific concepts and complex terminology. It is perhaps optimistic to expect a significant majority of practitioners to have experience and expertise in, for example, conducting a successful Randomised Control Trial or in using complex concepts such as rigour and robust in the design and implementation of relatively sophisticated methods.

Many of the profiles of practitioners involved with widening participation and its evaluation indicate that they are not specifically trained in these matters, and much of the learning that does take place usually happens informally through networks within institutions. Whilst this type of informal learning is not necessarily a major problem *per se*, it is a weakness inasmuch as it may be problematic where such informal teaching is weaker and, furthermore, raises a number of issues relating to *how* concepts are learnt and applied. Barnes (1987) suggests that concepts are learnt through *ostension* – a somewhat

Wittgensteinian notion: "How do I explain the meaning of 'regular', 'uniform', same', to anyone?... If a person has not yet got the concepts, I shall teach him to use the words by means of examples and by practice. And when I do this I do not communicate less to him than I know myself" (Wittgenstein, 1967: 208).

Important consequences of the process of informal teaching and learning of widening participation evaluation techniques is only revealed upon a broader examination of the general processes of conceptual application through the lens of sociological finitism. Concepts are not applied neutrally and objectively, they are applied within the framework of historical usages and contemporary circumstances (perhaps exemplified in the Marx quote: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx, 1935: 5)). Concepts are learnt by ostension by individuals in a process "by which [they] connect language with the physical environment" (Barnes, 1987: 32) thus, the process by which conceptual application occurs can be viewed as a social phenomenon with causal roots just as any other.

The process of ostensive learning relies heavily on connecting perceptual and mental experiences of a perceived phenomenon with other experienced past phenomena through an identification of resemblances and this is where confusion may arise. Concepts are, necessarily, 'underdetermined' and their future applications and interpretations are not fixed, and therefore we may infer that future conceptual applications are contingent on a multitude of different contextual factors. In the process of conceptual application, it can be argued that there exists "ex post facto rationalization of ostensively-based linguistic

practice" (Barnes, 1987: 25) where justifications for the use of particular conceptual terms are justified *after* the fact of their use as opposed to *before* the fact of their use. Indeed, where this ex post facto rationalization of ostensively-based linguistic practice has taken place, there are often vested interests that influence the ways in which concepts are applied: "All these acts will be the products of contingent determination. Such determination may be unsystematic, reflecting many contingencies and diverse interests, but more commonly it will involve the systematic and continuous operation of specific interests and thereby generate a highly uniform linguistic practice based on a recognizably shared body of knowledge" (Barnes, 1987: 33).

It can be argued that particularly powerful individuals or, more often, institutions, are able to create an orthodoxy of conceptual application by virtue of their soft powers of influence, and, in more extreme circumstances, their direct hard powers of control over agenda setting. Once a defined social group with similar interests, or a group of individuals who have been influenced by others with particular interests, begin to apply concepts in a particular way, that particular mode of conceptual application can tend to become sedimented and entrenched within the psyche of those affected. Indeed, Barnes notes that "Through explicit training and through the imitation of others such agents will find themselves able to apply concepts blindly, without thought or reflection: when an object is encountered a specific term for the object will immediately come to mind" (Barnes, 1987: 42) – we may see this as a specific process of socialisation. We may state the a few of the key tenets of this approach are:

1. Concepts are learnt by ostension
2. Ex post facto rationalization

3. Contextual and contingent application of concepts
4. Underdetermined nature of concepts
5. Specific cases of conceptual application often more to do with power relations and other interested parties than, say, 'objectivity'
6. Can be viewed as an act of socialisation into a group

In the case of widening participation evaluation, concept application is nested within field-wide power structures which exist within a well defined hierarchy – this can frequently be the case in all domains where a regulatory body has powers over the way in which institutions operate. In particular, the OfS acts as the "systematic and continuous operation of specific interests" (Barnes, 1987: 33) within the domain of widening participation and it enforces a particular paradigmatic view of 'science'; this is not to say that the enforcement of a paradigm leads to 'correct' or 'thoughtful' practice, but to note that it commonly leads to a more uniform practice than would otherwise be the case.

It may be suggested that one of the reasons for OfS support for a particular 'scientific' paradigm within widening participation evaluation arises from the resemblance which stakeholders in the field perceive to hold between traditional lay conceptions of 'science' and widening participation evaluation. This is exacerbated by underlying society-wide embracing of scientism, characterised, again, by "an inappropriately deferential attitude to science" (Haack, 2012: 1); it would not be surprising for this lay view – of the *superiority* of science for revealing to us the *truth* about the physical and social world – to also be held by widening participation practitioners given that the profile of practitioners is such that they may not be well-acquainted with the complexities and nuances of either physical science or social science research beyond what may be expected at undergraduate level. In a

context where society wide scientism is well documented, the 'scientific method' has, perhaps understandably, come to be regarded by many individuals as the gold-standard of any research endeavour. This combined with the fact that practitioners within the field are often not trained in research methods, and that widening participation evaluation has a strong resemblance to academic research, there create optimal circumstances for scientism to pervade the domain of widening participation evaluation. Thus, the contingently determined approach to widening participation evaluation becomes one which is consistent with scientism; as practitioners acknowledge the resemblances of evaluation with a lay conception of science and the scientific method, they increasingly aspire to a 'scientific' approach to widening participation evaluation.

Practitioners within the field of widening participation and evaluation are unlikely to have been socialised into a traditional academic scientific mode of thought and thus their perceptions of science are largely framed through the lens of society-wide assumptions and mythologies; assumptions and mythologies which are, subsequently, transmitted into widening participation evaluation. Whilst practitioner conceptions of science may not have developed through scientific training, such conceptions have usually been influenced and shaped by others from *within* the widening participation community; this has the potential of leading to simulacrum, whereby practitioner conceptions of *science* are not formulated through engagement with science itself, but instead from interpretations made by other practitioners: "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none" (Baudrillard, 1994: 166).

Semantics

Within a good deal of widening participation discourse it is clear that words are used in ways which do not always correspond to their traditional semantic meanings; this is particularly the case when the language of science is used; this has been a thread throughout the thesis, with a focus on this subject in both the quantitative *and* qualitative components. It is important here to provide a philosophical and sociological understanding of the way in which these usages have morphed over time through deracination and shifting semantic frames. An archetype of these shifts can be seen in the words 'rigour' and 'robust', two terms which were both mentioned in the qualitative interviews and also explored in the Access Corpus. As outlined previously, the words are confusing to practitioners who do not fully understand them *as used by* policy actors and other practitioners; it is clear that the words in isolation provide an underdetermined account of their own semantic meaning. Despite this, many of the non-semantic meanings imbued within these two lexemes, for example those which signal scientific legitimacy, remain attached to them; this leads to a situation in which words traditionally used within specific domains of research are applied in a different context, and with a different range of meanings, and yet still contain within them the original qualities of legitimacy. This is an insidious process within the field of widening participation and involves actors who use these terms being treated as more legitimate than those who do not, even though usage of these terms does not necessarily denote good practice, but merely the use of a particular parlance which gives credibility to the speaker.

Chapter Eight: Discursive Integration Of Conceptual Apparatus

This chapter develops a novel theoretical framework which aims to enhance understandings of discourse and discursive shifts using the instance of widening participation discourse as an example. The data collected for this thesis serves as an ideal case study for this theoretical framework, entitled Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus (DICA). The framework can be used to explain many of the strands of this thesis within an overarching theory that encompasses, amongst other topics: concept application, conceptual change, emergent structures, and meaning potential. This theory draws inspiration from distinct fields and multiple actors within those domains – one particular intellectual stimulus is Gilles Fauconnier's *Mappings in Thought and Language* (Fauconnier, 1997), and others include the intellectual legacies of Wittgenstein, Barnes, Ogden, and Richards – all of whom have been mentioned previously in this thesis.

Because the structure of DICA is inspired by Fauconnier's idea of 'conceptual blending', a significant amount of time is spent at the beginning of this chapter outlining key aspects of this approach, including its historical usage in cognitive sciences, and also outlining how I believe it can be extended, with certain modifications, to encompass an understanding of discourse. This is particularly important because the domain in which Fauconnier worked was cognitive science and thus, as a consequence, many of the theories produced concerned specifically the cognitive operations of individual actors. An attempt is made here to extend this intellectual trajectory in order to encompass discourse, and thereby to encompass an extra-cognitive dimension.

The chapter is structured as follows: first, I clarify what is meant by discourse within this thesis, and within this conceptual framework, encompassing a discussion of meaning and meaning production within socially situated ecosystems; next, I provide a broad

introduction to the framework which explores the similarities and extensions when compared to Fauconnier's thesis of conceptual blending; finally I apply what has up to this point been abstract theory to the subject matter of this thesis by seeking to explain the emergence of particular discourses that have been described within it – particularly scientism, conceptual application, and marketisation – and explore the multifaceted insights that DICA can provide.

Discourse

A definition of discourse has already been provided in this thesis (see Methodology chapter); however, it is useful here to restate and extend this initial explication with an increased focus on the ways in which meanings are produced and discourses shift over time. Given that the process of thinking is inherently a creative and social process which is undertaken in particular social and material circumstances, it is important to fully articulate the importance of these conditions for the creation of meanings: "All forms of thought are creative in the sense that they produce new links, new configurations, and correspondingly, new meanings and novel conceptualizations" (Fauconnier, 1997: 149). Whilst it may be the case that this fact of social and material circumstances (combined to create a structure) directly influences the thought patterns of individual actors, this does not affect the extent to which social actions *do* change the social world, as Rosa Luxembourg notes: "Men do not make history according to their own free will. But they make history nonetheless" (Luxembourg, 1967). There is an interesting tension here – between the structure of the social world affecting one's actions, and the individual agency which individuals possess over their own actions. This tension is clarified by noting that there is always some constraint on individuals due to structural factors, but this still allows for a range of human action and thought to occur within it. Thus, the pre-existing structural circumstances

framing social meanings do not entirely determine the actions of individuals who have varying levels of autonomy to make choices to act in ways that are not fully in keeping with accepted norms, values and beliefs.

Discourse has been a central subject of this thesis, both explicitly and implicitly, throughout the discussions of, for example, scientism and marketisation. In both of these areas of discussion, a focus is placed on the way in which meanings are constructed in relation to these terms by practitioners and institutions within the higher education system. This again is an implicit acknowledgement that the contexts in which utterances are produced (including temporal factors) impact the meanings produced: "no satisfactory semantic theory…can ignore the role of the contexts in which expressions are used and interpreted." Stalnaker, 1998: 3).

The fact that discourses change over time and that specific lexemes which characterise particular discourses change with them is no surprise; indeed, this changing nature of discourses, symbols, and ultimately meanings, has been written about extensively, and perhaps most powerfully by Nietzsche: "But everything has evolved; there are *no eternal facts*, as there are likewise no absolute truths. Therefore, *historical philosophising* is henceforth necessary" (Nietzsche, 1910 :15). The historical philosophising conducted within this thesis concerns the development of notions and concepts of widening participation and the changing nature of recognisable *facts* and *truths* within this domain – this is made possible through the unique combination of data collected as a foundation for the subsequent analysis and conceptual framing of this subject matter.

Discourse is understood here through the lens of evolving truths and underdetermined semantic meanings being attached to symbolic lexemes; the outcome of viewing discourse through this lens leads to a quest for understanding about how actions and utterances within particular domains are created and form the very things that they are acting *on* or come to comprise the subject of which they are *uttering*. Indeed, in finitist parlance this approach "rejects the idea that meanings determine use; instead it sees meanings as the continuously created product of verbal behaviour. Meanings are the continuously created outcomes of the use of words, not the determinants of that use. Since meanings are continuously made (and re-made) by language users, these meanings are never sufficiently stable and fixed for them to be able to determine extensions." (Kusch, 2004: 68).

It is theorised here that the action of using a particular word has a dual reaction – a double force is engendered. When an actor uses a particular word, the traditional and accepted semantic meaning ascribed to the symbol is often understood by the reader (or listener); this provides the utterance with a meaning which is assumed to be aligned with the semantic meaning. When this is the case, there is a reinforcement of the accepted meaning of the term. However, difficulties occur when the use of the term, and its accepted traditional interpretation , are oppositional to one another; in this case, though the utterance may be imbued with the traditional meaning of the lexeme, a force is also imparted on the lexeme itself which erodes its traditional meaning and morphs this meaning in a given way. Thus, with any particular use of a word, meanings are changed to a greater or lesser extent (depending in part on the context in which the utterance is happening) with a morphing of the semantic unit occurring. It can be inferred that the precise original meaning of the lexeme is to an extent distorted after its usage and that

attempts to restore the use the original meaning are henceforth impossible – the original meaning is rendered inaccessible for further use.

To make these abstract ideas more concrete and domain specific, we may think of a particular use of a word which is often deployed in ways which may not be congruent with its traditional definition – an example of this is 'robust' in the field of widening participation evaluation. As described in the results chapters, the use of this term varies to a great extent and this has led to the confusing situation in which the lexeme is used very frequently, and yet is understood by many practitioners as vague and even regarded as a 'filler word'. We may therefore suggest that the double action which occurs as a consequence of the usage of this term results in the traditional meaning of 'robust' being transferred to whichever substantive element the authors (as in the case of Access and Participation Plans) are describing – this is commonly in relation to a method of inquiry. The method of inquiry is imbued with the traditional definitional qualities of the concept 'robust', even if the term is not correctly utilised: this comprises the first force. The second force is a whittling away or erosion of the traditional meaning of the word 'robust' in the cases *when it was used* in the contexts described Because of a distorted application of the word 'robust', it no longer contains within it the same meanings that it had *before* its current usage. Instead, the term denotes a meaning which no longer fully captures the former characteristics and qualities of 'robust'. Given that so many instances of this word have occurred over the timespan of the Access Corpus, a pattern can be discerned whereby the sheer frequency of usages of the term have significantly changed and moulded its meaning in a cumulative way.

Building upon this theoretical understanding of how the meaning of words can change as a consequence of differential usage over time, a key question concerns the complicating

factor of extra-domain knowledge, and the impact that this can have on the domain in question; here it is important to understand how other areas of knowledge within society can impact on the trajectory of widening participation and a number of important questions can be posed: how does this work? What other areas of knowledge affect the understanding of widening participation? How does the process of extra-domain knowledge blending affect the original domain? These are significant questions which the theoretical framework Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus seek to answer. Context is key to this framework given that contextual factors play a large role in the production and dissemination of meanings throughout any system of cognitive endeavour.

Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus

The name of the framework - Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus - contains within it key technical terms which represent different components described within the framework itself. A particular focus concerns the integration of different mental discursive frameworks with one another which then facilitate the creation of a new discursive understanding of a given topic – the meaning of this will become more apparent throughout this chapter as each section of the framework is broken down, piece by piece. The substantive contribution of this theoretical framework is to provide a means of explaining the process by which discourses can change over a given period of time and, in particular, to explain how extra-domain discursive frameworks influence a target domain frame to create a hybrid and emergent discursive space.

The elements for the proposed interpretive framework described here are drawn from the book *Mappings in Thought and Language* by Gilles Fauconnier (1997) who theorised about the ways in which humans use mental frames by blending together disparate areas of their

experience and knowledge. Though some examples are given by Fauconnier of cross-domain mappings, an illustrative example can readily be seen within the domain of politics where sporting references are regularly utilised:

"He's throwing his hat *in the ring*"

"They appear to have moved *the goalposts*"

"The candidate is really *on the ropes* now"

"She hit her maiden speech *out of the park* which provided a *knockout blow* to her detractors"

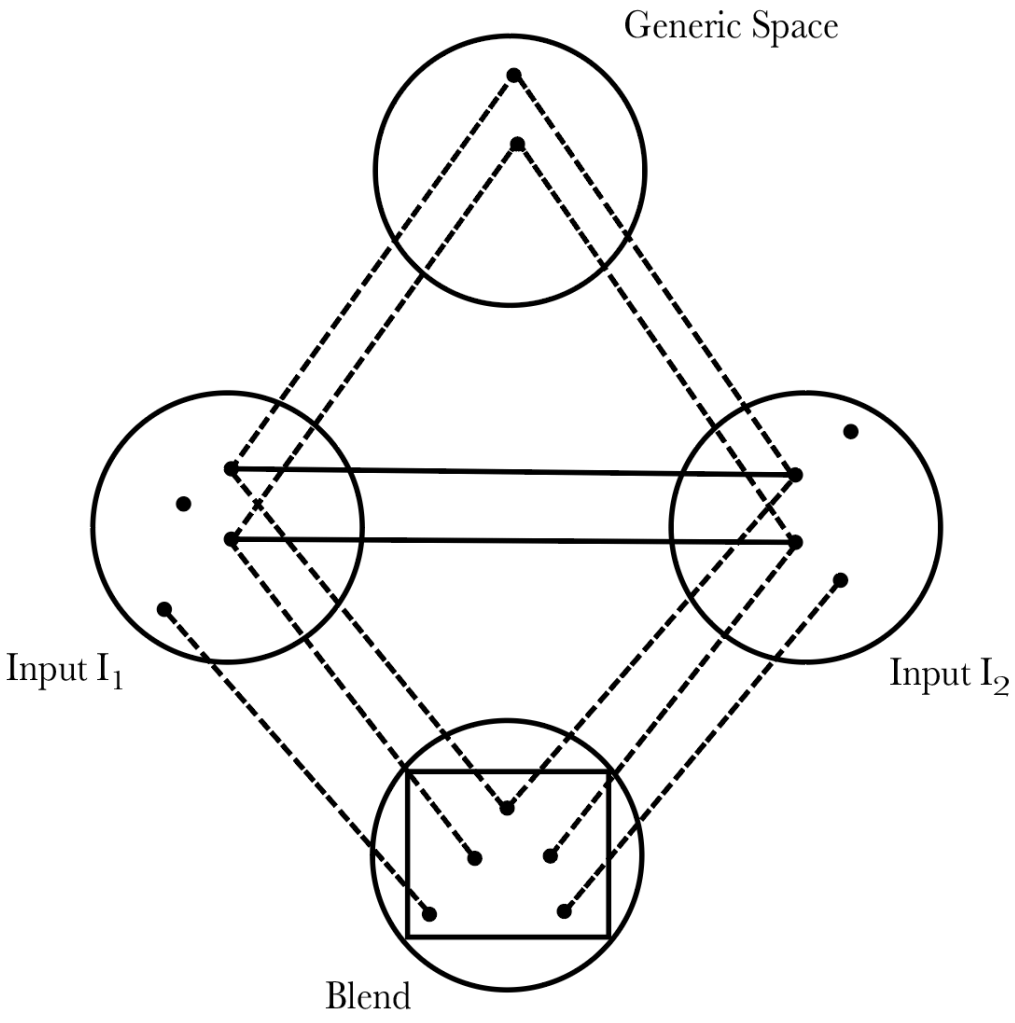
These turns of phrase, often used by political commentators, as well as the general public, all have their roots in the sporting world. *In the ring*, *on the ropes*, and *knockout blow* derive from boxing; *goalposts* are found in many different sports; and to *hit something out of the park* is something one aims to achieve when batting in a game of baseball. Thus, these are examples of cross-domain mapping and conceptual blending where ideas from two distinct domains – in this case, sport and politics – are combined to produce a third space which uses both in some manner.

The key difference between conceptual blending theory (outlined by Fauconnier) and the Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus (outlined in this thesis) is that the former comprises a purely cognitive, within-person, mental processing theory, and the latter proposes a discourse level, semantic, and object *forming* (rather than *describing*) theory. The Damoclean sword entailed with outlining a novel theory is in the possible charge of being more or less derivative i.e. in merely repeating the essential character of an already established account; this charge cannot be levelled at the Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus given that it extends and transforms a prior theory so profoundly

that it emerges as an entirely different entity – though one which has some similarity with conceptual blending theory in its diagrammatical form.

Below is a visual representation of the Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus framework (n.b. the same illustration as found in Fauconnier (1997: 151)); it contains four distinct areas which interact with each other to make the whole structure, these are: Generic Space, Input 1, Input 2, Blend. Whilst some parts of this framework might be familiar from reading previous sections of this thesis, as they are applied in relation to DICA they are not self-explanatory and so may cause a degree of confusion. Therefore, I will briefly explain each component of the DICA framework represented here.

Figure 72. DICA



Generic Space

Generic space refers to the concepts and ideals that are common to both input spaces; these are often abstract notions at some fundamental level of understanding. It is the generic space which allows for the blend to occur and it provides the opportunity for discursive integration to occur. It is postulated that the domain specific generic space is fluid and flexible in character, and that its formation as an object to be apprehended, interpreted and understood is a creative process in much the same way that human thought, and the formation of all ideas, are creative processes. This aligns with much of the underlying principles of this thesis concerning the fluidity of language and the ebb and flow of semantic meanings over time. Further, it is suggested that this same logic of enabling and constraining forces acting upon individual lexemes can be extended so as to include the meanings and structure of domain specific generic spaces. This initial space in the DICA framework is susceptible to ideological influence in a number of directions given that the interpellating forces of ideology necessarily affects the individuals who actively form and create the space. The generic space is thus constrained and enabled in its role within the process of conceptual integration by the mediating the forces of ideological inputs.

An example of this generic space described above can be explicated based on the example of sport and business mentioned earlier. The generic space in this mapping may include, amongst other things, the idea of competition, a victor and a loser. There is also perhaps a commonality amongst both input spaces (i.e. in the generic space) that relate to the concept of *violence* as many of the metaphors used in the reporting of business deploy sporting metaphors from the combat sport of boxing, but there are other descriptions of business functions which similarly utilise violent imagery, for example when the business world is described as *cut-throat*.

There is an interesting component of the DICA framework which is manifest in the generic space. Namely, particular domain specific discourse (which is partially characterised in the generic space) is *formed* by the discursive integration of conceptual apparatus, but it also *forms* the discursive integration of conceptual apparatus. In particular, the generic space within DICA is shaped by other discourses, which is the reason that it can usefully be described as a fluid or a liquid space, where both words are used in a similar vein as described in Zygmunt Bauman's work, for example, in *Liquid Modernity*: "What all these features of fluids amount to, in simple language, is that liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape…fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it…Descriptions of fluids are all snapshots, and they need a date at the bottom of the picture" (Bauman, 2000: 2).

The logical outcome of the contingency of fluid generic space is that, even if a mapping can successfully be made at a particular point in time due to the existence of a coordinated generic space, the same concepts, created through discursive integration, may not be mapped in the same way at another point in time because of the inherently fluid nature of the conceptual formation of these objects. That is to say, the generic spaces of concepts are fluid and thus alignment occurs only in specific circumstances and are thereby context and temporally bound. However, it ought to be noted that there is always a legacy arising from processes of discursive integration. This means that once a mapping is formed (i.e. in the blend), this too changes the nature of future discourses. Whilst the generic space of concepts is fluid it is also underdetermined, meaning that future usages of particular concepts are to an extent unpredictable; the line of thought concerning the underdetermined nature of

concepts is well developed in the finitist work of Barnes and so will not be further developed here (Barnes, 1987; Barnes, 1983).

Cross Space Mapping

If the generic space in DICA concerns abstract similarities between input spaces, for example in the example of the idea of competition previously referred to, the cross-space mapping (lines between input 1 and input 2) makes these abstract notions more concrete. This is where the abstract becomes grounded and linkages are made between the two input spaces. In the case of our illustrative example of business and sport, some linkages may be as follows:

a. Competitors: Input 1 = boxers; Input 2 = businesses
b. Victory: Input 1 = knock Out; Input 2 = a better deal / increased market share
c. Struggling: Input 1 = boxer on the ropes; Input 2 = a company losing customers

These are examples of cross space mapping linkages which can occur in any domain in which there is a sufficiently shared generic space. Furthermore, there is often a mapping of *relationships* within input spaces, for example where *Team A* is competing against *Team B*, this would be mapped onto *Company A* competing against *Company B*; though clearly there are always aspects of input spaces that do not map perfectly onto one another, which leads to partial mappings. The process of cross space mapping is a creative process but one which occurs so regularly it is often afforded little attention, for Wittgenstein this would be unsurprising given that "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity" (Wittgenstein & Anscombe, 1968: 50).

The Blend

The final stage of the DICA framework is the blended space, which can be seen at the bottom of the DICA diagram. This is the resultant blend produced from the culmination of the process which started with the generic space and continued with cross space mapping. The mapped elements are combined with partial mappings to form an integrated conceptual space which has both existent features from input 1 and input 2 but also contains emergent properties.

A key point to make about the blend is that it does not merely consist of a combination of both input spaces in a mechanical synthesis, but involves more complicated processes of merging, selecting, and emergence. Emergence occurs because of the interactions between elements of the two input spaces; an example of this is evident in the phrase "She hit her maiden speech *out the park*" where the allusion to a baseball home run brings about meanings that would not be present if the sentence were rephrased to more simply state "Her maiden speech was good". The former example of cross space mapping may engender feelings of exuberance and celebration in audiences who are familiar with baseball, and also similar feelings in those who are not. Indeed, in an English context, the phrase may even be modified to : "She hit her maiden speech for 6" in an allusion to the game of cricket. In this case, the imagery of cricket is applied to a person's speech where the associated feeling of jubilation is induced (amongst cricket lovers) since it is associated with the positive emotion of hitting a 6 in cricket or witnessing such an event. This aspect will be particularly important when we apply the DICA framework to widening participation discourses. In this case concepts from other domains are deracinated and applied to widening participation, but they retain some of the meanings which pre-existed in their original domain. Importantly, for blends to be successful they require that their

participating users understand elements of both target domains in order to facilitate effective comprehension.

The blend is always selectively created. That is to say, it takes parts of the spaces Input 1 and Input 2 but does not merely copy each directly into the blend; aspects of the input spaces are selectively included by individuals within the blend. This is a creative process by which certain aspects of input spaces are disregarded and other aspects are treated as paramount to the successful blend. This characteristic is to be expected given that it is clear that both Input spaces cannot exist *in pure combination* in the blended space as each must necessarily alter in order to combine successfully ; in the example of being 'on the ropes' we can see that certain aspects of the boxing frame must be disregarded in order for a successful blend to occur, for example, mapping across a boxing ring, gum shields, head protectors, or even a referee would not be appropriate since these are not useful for the blend function to be fulfilled.

It must be noted here, though, that blends are created for different reasons and by different actors with particular intentions and motivations. Blends can be used in the following ways: as a rhetorical tool to convince; to effectively crystallise a line of thinking; or they can be created *organically*, and it is these organic blends that are the particular focus when using DICA as an explanatory tool in this thesis. In an organic blend, it is often the case that no rhetorical point is consciously being made by individual actors but, instead, the effect of underlying ideological and philosophical beliefs act upon the individual to create a blend in a specific contextual configuration. There is therefore an important distinction to be made between a blend that has been created *for the purpose of* making a specific point, and a blend created *organically*; the example mentioned earlier - 'on the ropes' - is a rhetorical

blend created for the purpose of deliberately imbuing additional meaning within a description of an event or occurrence. Another example of a deliberate and specific blend created to imbue a specific discourse with particular meaning can be seen in the rhetoric surrounding the 'war on drugs'. It is not, however, entirely straightforward to distinguish between *deliberative* and *organic* blends given that their occurrence and influence affects not only the minds of individuals, but also those of whole communities and social groups where individuals are likely to have a range of motivations and beliefs.

As mentioned previously, the blend always has an emergent character; it is more than simply the sum of its parts (the input spaces), and contains its own defining properties that are not found in either Input 1 or Input 2. In the same way that concepts are underdetermined in their future usage (based on present usage), the same can be said for concepts used as part of the Input spaces: they are underdetermined in their usage within the context of the blended space. A good example of the emergent properties in a blend can be found when examining conceptual metaphors, for example, the famous blending of time and money (time is money; that conversation *cost* me an hour; I'm not sure if it's *worth* my time; how did you *spend* your time at the weekend?) which is "metaphorical since we are using our everyday experience with money, limited resources, and valuable commodities to conceptualize time. This isn't a necessary way for human beings to conceptualize time; it is tied to our culture. There are cultures where time is none of these things" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). There are clearly cross space mappings between the Input 1 (time) and Input 2 (money) in this blend, but what is more interesting is to explore the emergent characteristics of this particular blend which lead to unpredictable outcomes. An example of its emergent nature can be perceived in the commodification of time in particular circumstances; the blend leads to a view of time which mirrors thinking about

money as a resource to be used, and that value can be attached to each moment of a human's life. Further, this leads to a process of efficiency-seeking whereby individuals try to optimise their time in the same way that they would with money. We can therefore see that the emergent characteristics of the blend change the way in which we operate socially.

Whilst it is hard to attribute which is prior in this configuration – the ideology or the conceptually blended metaphor – what we can infer is that they are mutually reinforcing: the metaphor reinforces the ideology *and* the ideology reinforces the metaphor. Both play a role in shaping the social realities of actors. Indeed, to a large extent it is irrelevant whether the ideological position or the metaphor is prior, since any explanation could be argued to be ex post facto rationalisation. What is important is that they are both seen as mutually reinforcing and as a lens through which people not only understand present conditions, but also a lens through which they can view past conditions. Given their mutually reinforcing nature, it can be argued that the two are somehow interlinked and were created simultaneously – but this must not be assumed since this would again be falling victim to ex post facto rationalisation.

Another example of an extremely common blend can again be found in Lakoff & Jonhson and pertains to the input spaces *argument* and *war*:

> "Your claims are *indefensible*.
>
> He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.
>
> His criticisms were *right on target*.
>
> I *demolished* his argument.
>
> I've never *won* an argument with him.
>
> You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*

If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.

He *shot down* all my arguments" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

In DICA, there are certainly parallels with Hegelian dialectics which can be seen in the formation of a synthesis (from thesis and antithesis), but through the blend space (from Input 1 and Input 2) in DICA. Although Hegelian dialectics form through *oppositional* concepts, this is not the case in DICA where concepts in either Input space need not *necessarily* be directly oppositional, and may even be complementary. An important similarity is that the synthesis in Hegel contains within it emergent characteristics, similar to the blend space function in DICA. Indeed, in the preface to *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel uses the metaphor of the process of a bud becoming a flower to explain the process of knowledge production. This rather long quotation is illustrative: "The bud disappears when the blossom breaks through, and one might say that the former is refuted by the latter. Likewise, through the fruit, the blossom itself may be declared to be a false existence of the plant, since the fruit emerges as the blossom's truth as it comes to replace the blossom itself. These forms are not only distinguished from each other, but, as incompatible with each other, they also supplant each other. However, at the same time their fluid nature makes them into moments of an organic unity in which they are not only not in conflict with each other, but rather, one is equally as necessary as the other, and it is this equal necessity which alone constitutes the life of the whole." (Hegel & Pinkard, 2018).

In the quotation above, there is an emergent quality existent in the account of a bud becoming a flower which is useful to help us to understand the emergent characteristics of the blend in DICA: each stage is necessary since the blend requires two input spaces and even though the blend supersedes each individual input space, they are both necessarily

involved with the creation of the blend itself; the creation of the fruit from the blossom is symbolic of the creation of an emergent structure from something entirely different – though it must be emphasised that a more apt metaphor for DICA would be where one does not know what fruit will emerge from the bud in any given situation given that concepts (in the input spaces) are underdetermined.

Applying DICA to Widening Participation Discourses

DICA aims to provide a framework with which to understand discursive and conceptual change, the true test of such a framework is in its implementation; that is the challenge of this section. I will explore key aspects of widening participation discourse outlined in this thesis through the DICA framework and explore how it can provide us with a nuanced understanding of discourse both in the specific context of widening participation, but also beyond these bounds. Since 'widening participation' discourse is so broad, the focus will be on particular strands of WP discourse which have been a focus throughout the thesis, these are: language of science; conceptual application; and marketisation. These three discourses will be explored through the DICA framework by breaking down each into their constituent generic space, cross-space mapping, and blend. After this task is completed, I will outline the primary benefits of using DICA to understand discourse and the insights that it can provide us.

Language of Science

Widening participation discourses have been increasingly permeated with scientific language over the past 20 years, this is evident from both the Access Corpus and from the interviews conducted with widening participation professionals. Higher education institutions use the language of science with increasing frequency, and practitioners now

employ scientific lexemes to describe their work. In this context, the DICA framework is able to provide insights into the emergence of present-day scientific discourses in widening participation through understanding how distinct discourses were mapped and blended to create what we observe in the present.

Broad Overview

As explained previously, there are several components of the DICA framework that help to explain the discursive integration of conceptual apparatus, these are: Generic Space, Input Space 1, Input Space 2, and finally the Blended Space. The most effective way to explore the DICA framework is 'chronologically', starting from the generic space and ending with the blended space. This means that it is useful to have in mind, when reading of the generic space, what Input Space 1 and Input Space 2 are called, in this model Input Space 1 is entitled 'Scientific Language and Scientism', and Input Space 2 is named 'Widening Participation'.

Generic Space

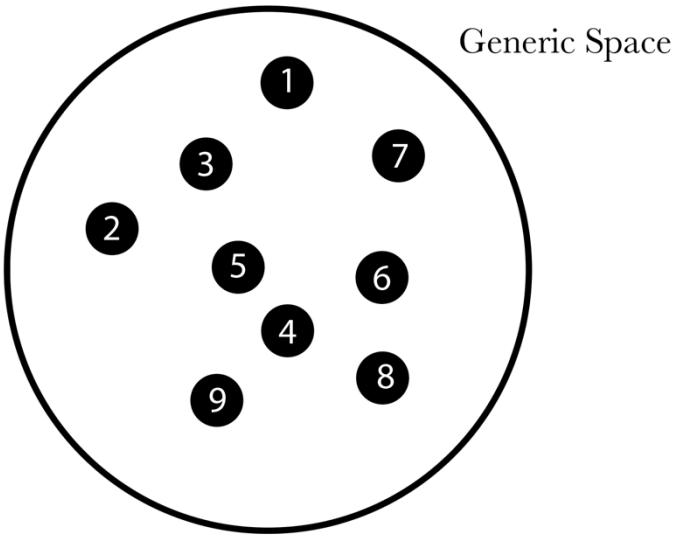
The generic space in this DICA framework is the coordinated space between the two input spaces which allows for both the cross space mapping and the blend to be possible. It is the contingent alignment of the abstracted conceptual apparatuses of two input spaces, 'Scientific Language and Scientism' and 'Widening Participation' that permit the initiation of the DICA framework; if the two abstracted conceptual apparatuses did not align, there would be no blend. The Generic Space in this particular DICA framework consists of:

1. *An inquiry into a matter*
2. *Some methods used to inquire*
3. *Evidence produced to justify conclusions*
4. *Seeking to improve something or to understand something*

5. *Importance for society*
6. *Public good*
7. *Ideological framework*
8. *Often occurring within institutional hierarchies*
9. *Legitimacy of knowledge production*

The conceptual apparatuses in the Generic Spare are coordinated between Input 1 and Input 2 and thus the framework may be initiated. We can visualise this in the magnified diagram below which represents specifically the Generic Space in this DICA model – though without the dotted arrows showing *each* of the 9 points connected to *both* Input Space 1 and Input Space 2. They are not represented here (for reasons of clarity) but the relationships still exist.

Figure 73. Generic Space



Input Space 1 and Input Space 2

Input Space 1 represents Scientific Language and Scientism in this DICA model, meaning that key tenets of this particular discourse are represented in Input Space 1. These include, for example:

1. *Infallibility of sciences*
2. ***The** way to know things about the world*
3. *Trustable*
4. *Replicable*
5. *Necessity of particular methods of inquiry (and indeed already has these in the 'scientific method'*
6. *Aim to change things in society*
7. *Developed tradition of research*
8. *Mostly work on non-human objects*
9. *Objectivity*
10. *Quantifiability / quantitative methods*
11. *Generalisability*
12. *Predictions*
13. *Politics*
14. *Knowledge as cumulative*
15. *Pubic understanding*
16. *Ethics*

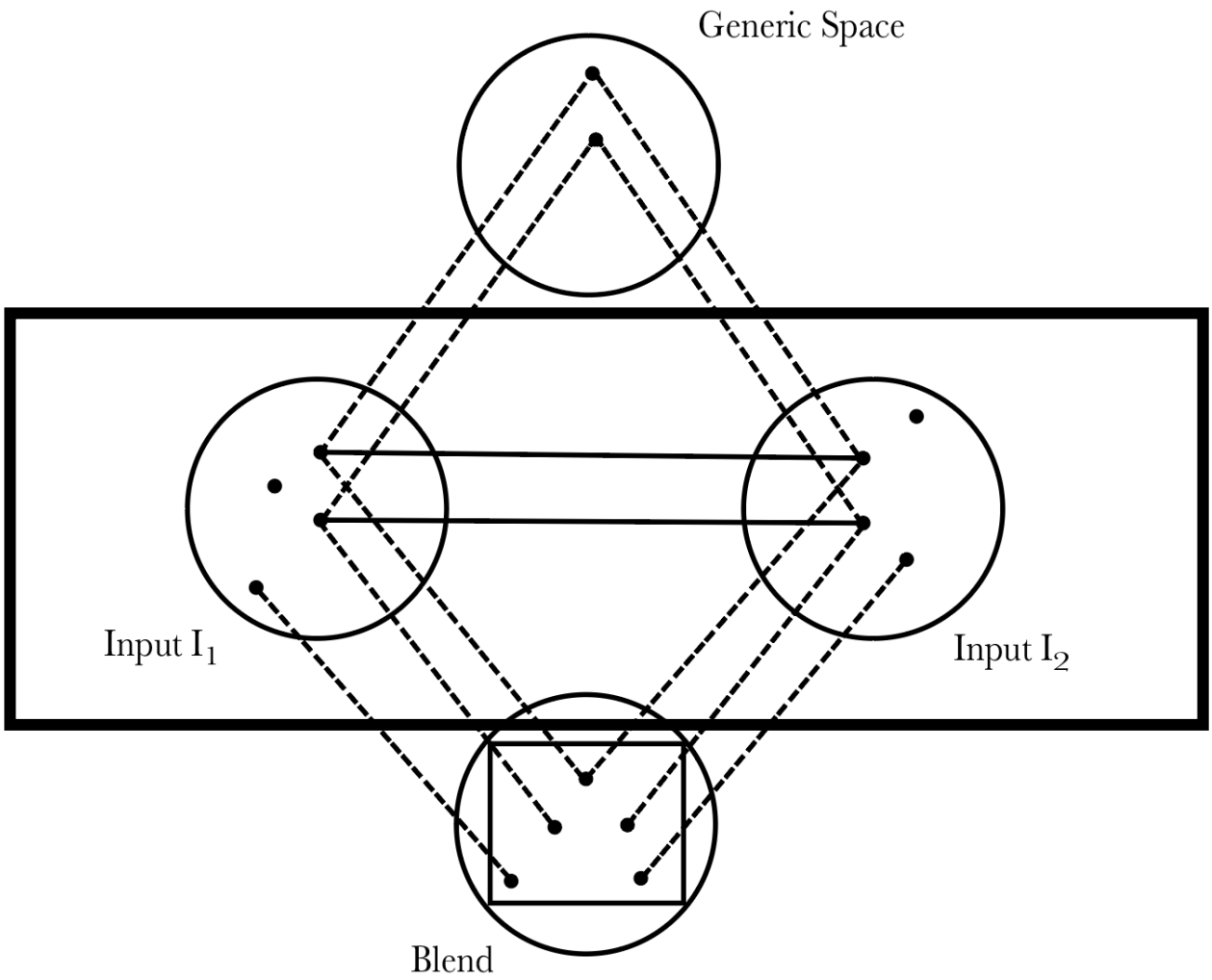
Input Space 2 on the other hand represents Widening Participation discourse generally and includes within it:

1. *Need to have methods of inquiry (which are underdeveloped presently)*
2. *Aim to change things in society*
3. *Undeveloped tradition of research*
4. *Work with humans*
5. *Difficulty measuring success*
6. *Diversity, equality, and inclusion*
7. *Social justice*

8. *Politics*
9. *Community engagement*
10. *Social mobility*
11. *Qualitative methods*
12. *Ethics*

These Input spaces are visualised in the box superimposed on the DICA framework illustration below:

Figure 74. DICA with Input Spaces highlighted



Cross-Space Mapping

There are clear links between both Input Spaces in this DICA model in which Scientific Language and Scientism is mapped onto the Widening Participation space, for example (Input Space 1– Input Space 2):

Systematic Inquiry – systematic inquiry

Knowledge generation for social change – knowledge generation for social change

Replicable methods – no replicable methods

Developed research tradition – undeveloped research tradition

Often quantitative methods – often qualitative methods

Predictive capabilities of science – difficulty in measuring the success of widening participation

Work on non-humans – work on humans

Generalisability – context dependency

As outlined in the theoretical exploration of DICA, the blend is not just a cumulation of the cross-space mappings, but instead has an emergent character which is more than the sum of its parts. In addition to this, some aspects of Input Space 1 and Input Space 2 are mapped into the blended space though partial matches; when there is no cross-space mapping but nevertheless a particular aspect of either input space is transmitted into the blended space.

The Blend

The blend is the final stage of the DICA framework which contains emergent characteristics, partial mappings, and ultimately a blended space. The current situation in regard to scientism and scientific language in the field of widening participation is well

documented throughout both the large-scale quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis conducted as part of this thesis; DICA allows for an understanding of the context in which, and mechanisms by which, these discourses emerge. The blended space in this instance is a product of the inherent tensions between Input Space 1 and Input Space 2, whilst the totality of the DICA framework is necessarily mediated by ideological pulls. This subsection does not intend to *comprehensively* outline the nature of discourse in detail since this task has already been completed within the findings chapters, but instead selects particular components of this discourse to highlight how DICA explains their emergence.

The emergent character of the blend of Input Space 1 and Input Space 2 is not merely the product of an additive equation between the two input spaces but instead represents the creation of new concepts, values, and dispositions within the field of widening participation which distinct frames are synthesises in a process characterised by tension and negotiation. Thus, the nature of the blended space cannot be understood by analysing either of the input spaces in isolation since individual discourses and concepts are underdetermined in their future usage. The blend can only be understood when viewing the DICA framework as a whole.

One of the key emergent properties of this discourse is the promotion of 'scientific' and 'evidence-based' practice within the field; whilst widening participation evaluation has typically been guided by qualitative inquiry, it is now increasingly expected that institutions employ quantitative and often experimental designs; the emphasis on measurable and replicable findings is found in tandem with the increased usage for scientific language throughout the field. Indeed, the shift towards scientific language is evidence of a blending of the two Input Spaces in the DICA framework where the potential for legitimation which

is inherent within scientific research paradigms is translated into the context of widening participation. Thus, the blended space illustrates the current situation in which quantifiable and measurable outcomes are prized by widening participation policy makers as the gold-standard and more 'traditional' methods used in the widening participation domain are less favoured. The developed research tradition of science has superseded the underdeveloped research tradition in widening participation through the discursive integration of concepts from the two domains – the strong ideological pull which is held by 'science' is hard for lesser developed domains to resist. Many of the dyads within the cross-space mapping section are weighed in favour of the scientific input space at the expense of the widening participation input space.

Another emergent property of the blend which is facilitated by the strength of 'science' is found in the reporting of widening participation successes. Where previously, reporting of the successes and weaknesses of particular widening participation activities occurred through narrative accounts of the consequences of activities, the increase in scientific language and scientism within the field of widening participation has led to an increased expectation of reporting to hold values which align with Input Space 1. This leads to reporting which is heavily based on numbers, and holds the underlying premises of objectivity, lack of bias, and impartiality on behalf of the widening participation staff (who can be seen as researchers). Thus, an emergent characteristic of the blend is evident in the way in which widening participation is reported on; which is now expected to be more similar to 'traditional' scientific approaches.

Whilst many of the cross-space mappings are asymmetrical, other can be described as partial mappings: this is where elements from one input space do not map onto the

corresponding input space. This leads to a selective integration that reflects the complexity and nuances of blending two distinct conceptual domains and illustrate the fact that input spaces are never perfectly aligned, but are instead forced together in an uneasy union. Indeed, the partial mappings are an example of the shaping of discourse where there are no cross-space mappings available between input spaces; yet the blend is shaped by these un-mapped concepts. It is useful to think of partial mappings as occurring in two distinct ways: pure and impure. A *pure* partial mapping occurs when a particular component of an input space has no corresponding match in the other – this can mean that the concept can enter the blended space without interaction with the second input space. An *impure* partial mapping, on the other hand, refers to a situation where there **is** a mapping between two input spaces, but the mapping is asymmetrical – there is no full correspondence between the two concepts, but one element dominated the other, often for reasons of ideology.

A clear example of a pure partial mapping is the idea of 'prediction' in the 'science' Input Space, which refers to the capabilities of scientific results to be predict future outcomes; this had no mapping in the widening participation Input Space. As a result of this pure partial mapping, the idea of prediction can enter the blended space unmediated by a corresponding concept from the other Input Space and influence the blend. An impure partial mapping can be seen in the idea of objectivity which is an impure partial mapping with subjectivity – both relate to the same abstract epistemological idea – however, the mapping is still somewhat partial because of the extent of asymmetry within the competing positions, where societal views of science and objectivity are held in higher regard compared to subjectivity.

Importantly, it is argued here that pure and impure partial mappings are resolved at different levels of the DICA framework. Impure partial mappings are resolved in the cross-space mapping element of the framework, whereas pure partial mappings are only resolved in the blend. Indeed, it can be argued that pure partial mappings are never fully 'resolved' in the sense that they are creators of an inherent instability within the DICA framework. Impure partial mappings result in a dominating of one concept over another, whereas pure partial mappings lead to a difficulty of integration within the blend space and the increased emphasis of one particular aspect of one Input Space over another. Partial mappings have significant consequences for the field of widening participation. For example, the impure partial mapping of objectivity and subjectivity leads to the foregrounding of quantitative metrics and a 'traditional' scientific approach to widening participation which holds dominance over qualitative approaches which may be employed within the same domain.

Ideology plays a large role in the DICA framework throughout each stage. The coordination of generic spaces is facilitated by particular ideologies, the cross-space mappings are allowed due to ideological factors, partial matches are mediated through a negation of ideological tensions, and the blend is shaped by ideological forces. The resultant discourse is therefore not a *neutral* interaction between stand-alone input spaces, but instead a natural reflection of ideological pulls which influence every aspect of DICA. Ideology has previously been defined in this thesis but, for clarity, Mannheim's quote which relates to a 'total ideology is useful to restate here: "we refer to the ideology of an age or of a concrete historico-social group e.g. of a class, when we are concerned with the characteristics and composition of the total structure of the mind of this epoch or of this group" (Mannheim, 1960: 49). Ideology is an active factor at every stage of the DICA framework.

The Applicability of DICA

From the previous discussion, we can see that the DICA framework is a useful lens through which to understand widening participation discourses; it allows for a nuanced perspective to be formed which is based on an understanding of how complex discourses interact and map onto one another to create a blended space which contains elements of both of input spaces, but also emergent characteristics which are unique to the blended space. Discursive interaction is broken down into several elements, all of which are useful for understanding different components of discursive change: Generic Space, Cross-Space Mapping, Partial Mapping, Blend. The DICA framework is heavily mediated by the powerful forces of ideology within society which influence it at each point. In the specific context of this thesis, DICA was used to explain how scientific and widening participation discourses interact to reshape the way that scientific concepts are applied in the blended space of widening participation, in particular in relation to how success is reported and measured by practitioners.

It is important to note, though, that the framework has broad applicability beyond the confines of widening participation and even beyond just education; it can be applied in almost any instance of discourse. This includes many disparate domains, including: healthcare; political communications; public attitudes; environmental policy etc. DICA can be used in any of these cases. A chief benefit is that the framework accounts for the pervasive effects of ideology on every aspect of the social world, and the dynamic and underdetermined nature of social concepts. Two examples of its use in other domains could include:

a. Global warming policy
    a. Input 1 = scientific evidence
    b. Input 2 = political ideologies
    c. Blend = global warming policy decisions
b. Opinions of vaccinations
    a. Input 1 = political views on individual rights / autonomy
    b. Input 2 = scientific evidence of effectiveness
    c. Blend = public opinions on vaccinations

These two examples from disparate domains illustrate the many uses of DICA across such different fields: it is a lens through which to understand *discourse* and *discursive formation and change*. Furthermore, the framework aligns with the principles of the Strong Programme outlined earlier in the thesis, but reproduced here:

1. "…concerned with the conditions which bring about belief or states of knowledge. Naturally there will be other types of causes apart from social ones which will cooperate in bringing about belief."
2. "It would be impartial with respect to truth and falsity, rationality or irrationality, success or failure. Both sides of these dichotomies will require explanation."
3. "It would be symmetrical in its style of explanation. The same types of cause would explain, say, true and false beliefs."
4. "It would be reflexive. In principle its patterns of explanation would have to be applicable to sociology itself. Like the requirement of symmetry this is a response to the need to seek for general explanations. It is an obvious requirement of principle

because otherwise sociology would be a standing refutation of its own theories" (Bloor, 1976: 7).

Chapter Nine: Conclusion

Introduction

The key aim of this thesis was to provide insights into widening participation discourses from multiple perspectives including an historical *and* a contemporary account. The primary questions posed were: 1. How is 'widening participation' discursively constructed by higher education institutions in England? 2. How do institutional differences influence institutional level widening participation discourses? 3. How do practitioners understand the discursive construction of widening participation? 4. What are the consequences for practitioners of widening participation discourses?

As is now evident, these questions concern different levels at which widening participation discourse takes place, ranging from macro level to micro level (sector level through to practitioner level). Insights into the nature of these different levels of discourse were enabled by innovative research methods and the creation and analysis of a novel corpus: the Access Corpus. The use of the technique of topic modelling within this thesis enabled a more substantively representative and sector wide understanding of discourse within the widening participation sector to be produced. The subsequent analysis foregrounded the key widening participation terms and concepts of *all* higher education institutions operating within England (excluding specialist institutions) over a 20-year time period. The sector-wide understandings achieved through machine learning analysis of the Access Corpus in turn informed the framing of semi-structured interviews with widening participation practitioners selected from a range of institutions across England; interviews were each around an hour in length and topics ranged from discussions relating to regulation policies in England to conversations about the character of the position which evaluators hold within the sector – established at a point on a continuum with practitioner at one end and researcher at the other. Thus, the first two research questions were addressed through

analysis of the Access Corpus, whereas the second two research questions were explored using a process of interviews with practitioners. In addition to addressing the key research questions stated at the outset, this thesis also developed a novel conceptual framework seeking to more fully describe and understand the nature of discursive shifts that occur in a variety of domains. The contribution of this framework will be more fully evaluated later on in this final concluding chapter.

Contributions

This thesis adopted a somewhat unorthodox approach in its attempt to seek a deeper understanding of widening participation discourses through: utilising novel methods (within the context of the field); creating and analysing a numerically significant corpus; developing a wide ranging and non-domain specific conceptual framework that seeks to understand situated *discourse* more broadly; producing knowledge that emanates from a philosophical position involving consideration of issues raised by continental philosophy and also from the philosophy of science. Perhaps given this unique configuration of methodological, conceptual, and philosophical approaches, the contributions of this thesis can be characterised as wide-ranging and include substantive, theoretical, methodological, and conceptual domains. These are each described in further detail below.

Substantive

Despite a clear methodological division of labour concerning the methods chosen to answer the different research questions of this thesis, there are noticeable substantive themes which run throughout the thesis. These themes include: conceptual change, science and scientism, regulatory pressure, prescriptive approaches to evaluation. The substantive findings can be readily identified in both the quantitative and qualitative components of the thesis and

together provide an original contribution to the literature on widening participation issues in England. A further substantive contribution can be found through the creation of the Access Corpus which has rich potential for use in understanding the changes that have occurred in widening participation discourse over the past 20 years ; the Access Corpus facilitates a deeper sector wide understanding of widening participation discourse which, previously, had not been evident.

Theoretical

The theoretical underpinnings of this thesis have the potential to be utilised by others within the wider field of studies in education, and this is particularly the case with respect to the Strong Programme and its approach to sociological inquiry which is a perspective permeating this thesis and summarised below:

1. "…concerned with the conditions which bring about belief or states of knowledge. Naturally there will be other types of causes apart from social ones which will cooperate in bringing about belief."
2. "It would be impartial with respect to truth and falsity, rationality or irrationality, success or failure. Both sides of these dichotomies will require explanation."
3. "It would be symmetrical in its style of explanation. The same types of cause would explain, say, true and false beliefs."
4. "It would be reflexive. In principle its patterns of explanation would have to be applicable to sociology itself. Like the requirement of symmetry this is a response to the need to seek for general explanations. It is an obvious requirement of principle because otherwise sociology would be a standing refutation of its own theories" (Bloor, 1976: 7).

It is suggested that by adopting these guidelines to inform an approach to the sociological analysis of widening participation, several critical shortcomings presently afflicting the field might be reduced in significance or avoided altogether – for example, the growing normativity evident in the literature which restricts the range of methodologies considered to be legitimate within the field of widening participation practice and inquiry.

The current research has promoted the virtues of epistemic pluralism, or "active normative epistemic pluralism" (Chang, 2012: 253). The academic field of widening participation could be described as being in many respects in a state of 'epistemic closure' whereby a reduced number and range of methods are employed and correspondingly fewer theories developed to explain widening participation phenomena. – A state of 'epistemic closure' can be argued to be negative in a number of salient respects for the advancement of widening participation understanding which , as with many other fields of inquiry, is more likely to benefit from multiple avenues of investigation and diverse theories utilised as a basis for the interpretation and understanding of what is happening in the field of widening participation practice.

Methodological

One of the primary methods used in this thesis is novel in its application to this particular domain: LDA topic modelling. This technique allows for vast amounts of linguistic data to be analysed through Bayesian statistical methods and in a fairly time-efficient manner (for those familiar with the relevant statistical programming languages). The use of LDA topic modelling in this thesis was confined to the Access Corpus. The technique helped to develop an understanding of *what* was being discussed by higher education institutions in

England in the ~12 million words that they had written into their Access Agreements and Access and Participation Plans over the past 20 years. It also demonstrated *how* topics were discussed differently and varied by institutional *types*. The possibilities for using this method within the field of education policy are very significant. LDA topic modelling could be applied to, for example, a dataset of OfS policy documents, government briefings, speeches made by significant actors over a defined period of time. As part of this thesis topic modelling was used as a precursor to the conduct of semi-structured interviews, and this helped to frame a number of key themes for exploration. However, its use as a standalone method is also intrinsically desirable as it allows for the analysis of large amounts of linguistic data which would not otherwise be possible to process.

Conceptual

Another key contribution this thesis has made to understanding developments in the area of widening participation, and, arguably, the contribution which could have the most potential impact, is the adoption and articulation of the Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus. This new framework seeks to explain *how* discourses change over time and also to describe how acute discursive shifts take place through an understanding of the synthesis of different discourses which they encapsulate; indeed, the name of the framework in itself points to an important aspect of its function. A key quality of the framework is its ability to integrate distinct discourses into one frame which, in turn, produces a novel discursive space containing within it a number of components of prior discourses. However, it is important to note that the novel discursive space is not merely the sum of previous inputs, but, instead, has an emergent character with emergent and distinct properties. The applicability of this framework is wide-ranging and DICA has the

potential to be used wherever discourses operate and, therefore, wherever active construction of meanings occur. As a meta-theoretical framework, it operates at the level above discourse itself and as a consequence has the ability to enable us to understand how discourses are structured, created, and transformed.

Implications for Practice

There are several important implications that arise from the findings of this thesis that are applicable to the sector as a whole and are informed by different strands of the research undertaken. The mixed methods approach and innovative methods utilised means that these implications are multifaceted and also, to an extent, novel. Here for purposes of clarity they are divided into 4 key topics: 1. Training for evaluators; 2. Precision in language use; 3. Epistemic pluralism; 4. Sector wide insights for policy makers and practitioners.

Training for Evaluators

This research supports a call for an increase in the amount of training that is required for practitioners when they embark on a role in widening participation, and this is particularly the case in respect of tasks necessary for the evaluation of widening participation activities and programmes. There is a clear need for training where practitioners are required to grapple with complex methodologies and methods. This includes those more commonly found in the social sciences as well as the incorporation of techniques from the natural sciences. Regression discontinuity design and randomised control trials are examples of research methods that are inherently complex and technical and where it would be naïve

to expect those who are unfamiliar and untrained to be able to operationalise them with any realistic expectation of success or confidence in the resultant findings. It would not be realistic to expect widening participation practitioners to become experts in these complex designs though 'on the job' experience and without further guidance. However, even prior to a programme of training being implemented, it would be necessary as well as desirable for such practitioners to understand the prerequisites and philosophical underpinnings of complex research methods – it would be insufficient to teach methods without a firm grounding in *why* they are appropriate since this may lead to circumstances of abstracted empiricism whereby data is collected and analysed , but without an appropriate theoretical framework to provide meaning to the data.

Precision of Language Use

A key finding of this research is the frequency of (mis)use of specific and specialised language. Words which are highly specific and technical are often used by practitioners and the OfS in ways which do not accord with their traditional usages. This can be seen in the increased use of 'scientific' language where this may not be wholly appropriate or meaningful, for example, in the increasingly common usage of the concepts 'robust' and 'rigorous'. This was discovered both in the quantitative and qualitative findings of this thesis. As a consequence, one of the recommendations of this research concerns the need for explicit operationalisation and definition of specific terms that are now more widely used within the field of widening participation. Clear consensus by widening participation practitioners on the meanings of technical terms used in undertaking this work would be helpful to creating common understandings and promoting more effective discussions within the field. This point applies with even stronger force to the circumstances of those

who are charged with undertaking evaluation of widening participation where precision in the use of terminology and a grounding in methods appropriate to these tasks are indispensable for good practice in research.

Epistemic Pluralism

This thesis has outlined the many potential benefits of epistemic pluralism for the field of widening participation, both through forms of philosophical argumentation and also exemplified in the research underpinning of the thesis itself; this thesis has actively resisted more traditional methods used within the field of widening participation, but has produced results which are insightful and useful across the field. It is therefore hoped that this thesis has set a good example of what can be achieved through epistemic pluralism and that further research, whether undertaken by practitioners, academics, or public bodies, will also actively pursue epistemically open practices in their research. Two significant benefits are achieved through research endeavours that are epistemically pluralistic: "Benefits of toleration arise from simply allowing multiple systems simultaneously, which provides insurance against unpredictability, compensation for the limitations of each system and multiple satisfaction of any given aim. Benefits of interaction arise from the integration of different systems for specific purposes, the co-optation of beneficial elements across systems, and the productive competition between systems." (Chang, 2012: 253).

Sector Wide Insights for Policy Makers and Practitioners

The final implication mentioned in this section acknowledges that this thesis can inform the policy makers and practitioners responsible for sector wide trends. This can be helpful to the field of widening participation in a number of ways: for example, the *evidence* of how institutions differ in their responses and reactions to policies may impact the way in which policies are formulated at the initial stages, and a sector-wide understanding of discursive changes may allow practitioners to better understand the milieu and context in which their work is situated – this is true both for experienced practitioners and particularly so for newer practitioners. For experienced practitioners, an understanding of the discursive landscape can help to contextualise changes, but also to better comprehend and potentially predict the implications (intended and unintended) of any new policy; for newer practitioners, understanding sector-wide changes over the past 20 years provides deeper understanding and appreciation about the background and context of their chosen field, and thus promotes more informed discussions about institutional policy in the *present* .

Directions of Future Research

Future research which seeks to deepen understanding of widening participation discourses and the policy cycle of widening participation can proceed in several useful directions. The OfS still requires institutions to provide Access and Participation Plans, indeed, the latest iteration is already incumbent upon institutions at the time of writing; this latest round of Access and Participation Plans can be usefully added to the Access Corpus in order to gauge changes in contemporary discourses in widening participation; it would be interesting to discern if the trends that have been described in the thesis are continuing along the trajectory described or have started to deviate in any respect.

Further analysis could be conducted on the Access Corpus as it stands, but with a focus on many of the other interesting aspects of widening participation discourse which were not the primary focus within the thesis. Examples of these topics include: discussions relating to ethnicity; issues relating to gender; an increased focus on subjects of study; a focus on specialist institutions (which could be easily added to the Access Corpus). These are just a few examples of a number which could be cited, and it is expected that the reader of this thesis may already have several of their own areas of interest in mind which they could use as a focus when scrutinising the Access Corpus.

A key component of research for the thesis was the development of the Discursive Integration of Conceptual Apparatus framework which can be used to examine and understand discursive shifts. This is, potentially, a heuristic tool which could be applied by future research endeavours to a range of discourses. Future research activity could be tasked with further refinement of the framework itself, or in the application of DICA to other parts of educational discourse, or, indeed, to discourses in a different field. Therefore, the potential applications of DICA are both numerous and diverse with limitations perhaps only being circumscribed by any individual researcher's imagination.

References

Althusser, L., & Brewster, B. (1971). *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. New Left Books.

Andrews, M. (2021). The development of English university tuition fee policy from 1960 with lessons for today. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 25(4), 117-126.

Arribas-Ayllon, M., Walkerdine, V. (2008). Foucauldian discourses analysis. In Willig, C., Stainton-Rogers, W. (Eds.), The Sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology (pp. 91-108). Sage.

Ashwin, P., & Clarke, C. (2022). *The Office for Students, expertise and legitimacy in the regulation of higher education in England*. Higher Education Policy Institute. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/09/04/the-office-for-students-expertise-and-legitimacy-in-the-regulation-of-higher-education-in-england/

Austin, J. L. (1973). *How to do Things with Words*. Oxford University Press.

Bains, L, Gooch, D., & Ng-Knight, T. (2024). Do widening participation interventions change university attitudes in UK school children? A systematic review of the efficacy of UK programmes, and quality of evaluation evidence. *Educational Review*, 76(3), 628-647.

Ball, S. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*. 18 (2): 215-228.

Ball, S., Bowe, R., & Gold, A. (1992). *Reforming education and changing schools: Case studies in policy sociology*. London: Routledge.

Ball, S. (1993). What is policy? Texts, trajectories and toolboxes. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education 13*(2), 10-17.

Ballantyne, N. (2019). Epistemic Trespassing. *Mind*, 128(510), 367-395).

Barnes, B. (1983). Social life as bootstrapped induction. *Sociology*, 17(4): 524-545.

Barnes, B. (1987). Concept Application as Social Activity. *Critica: Revista Hispanoamericana de Filosofia*, 19(5), 19-46.

Barthes, R., & Howard, R. (1977). *Roland Barthes*. London: Macmillan.

Baudrilland, J., & Glaser, S. F. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. University of Michigan Press.

Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Polity Press.

Becker, G. (1964). *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education*. National Bureau of Economic Research.

Belfield, C. (2018). Relative labour market returns to different degrees. (Research Report; RR787).

Bendixen, C., & Jacobsen, J. C. (2017). Nullifying quality. *Quality in Higher Education*, 23(1): 20-34.

Bernstein, B. (1970). Education cannot compensate for society. In *New Society*, (15: 387). New Science Publications.

Biesta, G. (2007). Why "What Works" won't work: evidence-based practice and the democratic deficit in educational research. *Educational Theory*, 57(1), 1-22.

Biesta, G. (2010). Why 'What Works' still won't work: from evidence-based education to value-based education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 29(5): 491-503.

Blamey, A., & Mackenzie, M. (2007). Theories of Change and Realistic Evaluation: Peas in a Pod or Apples and Oranges? *Evaluation*, 13(4): 439-455.

Blei, D. M., Ng, A. Y., & Jordan, M. I. (2003). Latent Dirichlet Allocation. *Journal of Machine Learning Research*, 3: 993-1022.

Bloor, D. (1976). *Knowledge and Social Imagery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Blower, A. (2022). "Why are we still talking about raising aspirations?". *WONKE.* https://wonkhe.com/blogs/why-are-we-still-talking-about-raising-aspiration/

Boliver, V. (2011). Expansion, differentiation, and the persistence of social class inequalities in British higher education. *Higher Education, 61*(3), 229-242.

Boliver, V. (2013). How fair is access to more prestigious UK universities? *British Journal of Sociology, 64*(2), 344-364.

Boliver, V. (2015). Are there distinctive clusters of higher and lower status universities in the UK? *Oxford Review of Education*, 41(5), 608-627.

Botha, C. (2008). From Destruktion to Deconstruction: A Response to Moran. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 27(1), 52-68.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). In other words: essays towards a reflexive sociology. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1998). Practical Reason. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bowers-Brown, T., Ingram, N., & Burke, C. (2019). Higher education and aspiration. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 28(3-4), 207-214.

Breakwell, C. (2021). "Why are we still talking about raising aspirations?", *King's College London Blog*. https://www.kcl.ac.uk/raising-aspirations

British Educational Research Association. (2017). Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018-online

British Sociological Association. (2017). Statement of Ethical Practice. https://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice.pdf

Brown, R., & Carasso, H. (2013). *Everything for sale?: The marketisation of UK higher education* Research into higher education (SRHE). London: Routledge.

Burgess, A. P., Horton, M. S., Moores, E. (2021). *Optimising the impact of a multi-intervention outreach programme on progression to higher education: recommendations for future practice and research.* Heliyon, 7(7).

Büchsenschütz, B. (1868). *Traum und Traumdeutung im Alterthume*. California: S. Calvary.

Cairney, P. (2018). Three habits of successful policy entrepreneurs, *Policy & Politics,* 46(2): 199-215.

Cairney, P., & Kwiatkowski, R. (2017). How to communicate effectively with policymakers: combine insights from psychology and policy studies, *Palgrave Communications,* 3(37).

Callender, C. (2010). Bursaries and institutional aid in higher education in England: do they safeguard and promote fair access? *Oxford Review of Education*, 36(1): 45-62.

Callender, C., & Wilkinson, D. (2013). Student perceptions of the impact of bursaries and institutional aid on their higher education choices and the implications for the national scholarship programme in England. *Journal of Social Policy*, 42(2): 281-308.

Caputo, J. (2018). *Hermeneutics: Facts and interpretation in the age of information*.

Carabine, J. (2001). Unmarried motherhood 1830-1990: A genealogical analysis. In M. Wetherell, S. Taylor and S. J. Yates (eds), Discourse as Data: A Guide for Analysis. London: Open University Press.

Carusi, F. (2021). The ontological rhetorics of education policy: A non-instrumental theory. *Journal of Education Policy, 36*(2): 232-252.

Casella, G., & George, E. I. (1992). Explaining the Gibbs Sampler. *The American Statistician*, 46:3: 167-174.

Chang, H. (2012). *Is water H20?: Evidence, pluralism and realism* (Boston studies in the philosophy of science; v. 293). Dordrecht: Springer.

Chang, J., Boyd-Graber, J., Gerrish, S., Wang, C., & Blei, D. (2009). Reading Tea Leaves: How Humans Interpret Topic Models. *Neural Information Processing Systems*, 32: 288-296.

Chowdry, H., Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Goodman, A., & Vignoles, A. (2013). Widening participation in higher education: analysis using linked administrative data. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)*, 176(2): 431-457.

Codd, J. (1988). "The Construction and Deconstruction of educational policy documents", *Journal of Educational Policy*, 3(5): 235-48.

Connell-Smith, A., & Hubble, S. (2018). *Widening participation strategy in higher education in England* (Briefing Paper Number 8204). https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8204/

Cook, T., Scriven, M., Coryn, C., & Evergreen, S. (2010). Contemporary thinking about causation in evaluation: a dialogue with Tom Cook and Michael Scriven. *The American Journal of Evaluation, 31*(1): 105-117.

Crawford, C. (2019). The one-in-ten: Quantitative Critical Race Theory and the education of the 'new (white) oppressed'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 34(3): 423-444.

Creswell, John W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Crockford, J., Baker, Z., Brown, G., Hordosy, R., Linskill, S., and Miller, M. (2017). '5 years of WPREU: Critical reflections on evaluation, policy and practice in widening participation and student success". https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.783971!/file/5_Years_of_WPREU.pdf

Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20(1): 43-63.

De Lima, Jorge Ávila. (2007). Teachers' professional development in departmentalised, loosely coupled organisations: Lessons for school improvement from a case study of two curriculum departments. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 18*(3): 273-301.

Dearing, R. (1997). *Higher education in the learning society: report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Department for Education (2016). *Higher Education and Research Bill*. https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/higher-education-and-research-bill

Department for Education. (2022a). GCSE Results (Attainment 8). https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/gcse-results-attainment-8-for-children-aged-14-to-16-key-stage-4/latest

Department for Education. (2022b). GCSE English and Maths Results. https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-

16-years-old/a-to-c-in-english-and-maths-gcse-attainment-for-children-aged-14-to-16-key-stage-4/latest

Department for Education. (2022c). Students getting 3 A grades or better at A level. https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/a-levels-apprenticeships-further-education/students-aged-16-to-18-achieving-3-a-grades-or-better-at-a-level/latest

Derrida, Jacques. (1994). "To Do Justice to Freud": The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis. *Critical Inquiry, 20*(2): 227-266.

Derrida, J. (1997). Of grammatology. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Derrida, J., & Bass, A. (2001). *Writing and difference*. London: Routledge Classics

Dilnot, C. (2018). The relationship between A-level subject choice and league table score of university attended: the 'facilitating', the 'less suitable', and the counter-intuitive. *Oxford Review of Education*, 44(1): 118-137.

Durkheim, É., & Lukes, S. (1982). *The rules of sociological method: and selected texts on sociology and its method*. Macmillan

Education Statistics Service (2023). School, pupils and their characteristics. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-

characteristics#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20pupils%20eligible,eligible%20for%20free%20school%20meals.

Edmond, N. (2019). Higher education and the marketization of compulsory schooling: English universities and academy sponsorship. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 40(4): 587-604.

Evans, C., Rees, G., Taylor, C., & Wright, C. (2019). 'Widening Access' to higher education: The reproduction of university hierarchies through policy enactment. *Journal of Education Policy, 34*(1): 101-116.

Evans, V., & Green, M. (2006). *Cognitive linguistics: an introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Fauconnier, G. (1997). *Mapping in thought and language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Feyerabend, P. (1988). *Against Method*. London: Verso.

Flyvbjerg, Bent. "Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research." *SAGE Qualitative Research Methods* 12.2 (2010): 219-45.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2010). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *SAGE Qualitative Research Methods* 12(2): 219-45.

Foucault, M. (1970). *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences*. London: Tavistock Publications.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, New York: Pantheon.

Foucault, M., & Sheridan, A. (2002). *Archaeology of knowledge* (Routledge classics). London: Routledge.

Freud, S. (1954). *The Interpretation of Dreams*. G. Allen & Unwin: Frome & London.

Fromm, E. (1978). *To have or to be?* Cape.

Gallagher, J. E., Calvert, A., Niven, V., & Cabot, L. (2017). Do tuition fees make a difference? Characteristics of applicants to UK medical and dental schools before and after the introduction of high tuition fees in 2012. *British Dental Journal*, 222(3): 181-190.

Gerring, J. (2004). What is a case study and what is it good for? *The American Political Science Review*, 98(2): 341-354.

Gellner, D. (2018). Sheldon Pollock and Max Weber: Why Pollock is more Weberian than he thinks. *Max Weber Studies, 17*: 212 - 234.

Goffman, E. (2017). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates* (Ebook central). London.

Goldacre, B. (2013). Building Evidence into Education. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7a219140f0b66eab999f4f/Building_evidence_into_education.pdf

Gorard, S., Smith, E., Thomas, L., Adnett, N., & Slack, K. (2006). Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education. Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Grace, G. (1995). *School leadership: Beyond education management an essay in policy scholarship*. London: Falmer.

Grice, H. P. (1957). Meaning. *The Philosophical Review, 66*(3): 377-388.

Griffiths, T. L., & Steyvers, M. (2004). "Finding Scientific Topics" Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America. 101: 5228-5235.

Grün, B., & Hornik, K. (2011). topicmodels: An R Package for Fitting Topic Models. *Journal of Statistical Software*, 40(13): 1-30.

Haack, S. (2012). Six Signs of Scientism. *Logos & Episteme*, 3(1): 75-95.

Hall, S. (1978). *Policing the crisis: Mugging, the state and law and order*. London: Macmillan.

Han, S. (2013). Structure and post-structuralism in Elliott, A. (2014). *Routledge handbook of social and cultural theory* (Routledge international handbooks). Abingdon, Oxon.

Harrison, N., & Hatt, S. (2012). Expensive and failing? The role of student bursaries in widening participation and fair access in England. *Studies in Higher Education*, 37(6): 695-712.

Harrison, N. (2012). The mismeasure of participation: how choosing the 'wrong' statistic helped seal the fate of Aimhigher. *Higher Education Review,* 45(1): 30-61.

Harrison, N., & Waller, R. (2017). Success and Impact in Widening Participation Policy: What Works and How Do We Know? *Higher Education Policy*, 30(2): 141-160.

Harrison, N., & Waller, R. (2018). Challenging discourses of aspiration: The role of expectations and attainment in access to higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(5): 914-938.

Harrison, N. (2018). Using the Lens of 'Possible Selves' to Explore Access to Higher Education: A New Conceptual Model for Practice, Policy, and Research. *Social Sciences, 7*(10): 209.

Harrison, N. & Waller, R. (2017). Evaluating outreach activities: overcoming challenges through a realist "small steps" approach. *Perspectives*, 21(2-3): 81-87.

Hart, B. (2024). "Tremendous pressure": exploring the pressures faced by widening participation evaluators. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 26(2): 230-247.

Hartigan, J. A., & Wong, M. A. (1979). "A K-Means Clustering Algorithm", *Applied Statistics*, 28(1): 100-108.

Hatt, S., Hannah, A., Baxter, A., & Harrison, N. (2005). Opportunity Knocks? The impact of bursary schemes on students from low-income backgrounds. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(4): 373-388

HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England). (2013). *Higher Education in England: Impact of the 2012 Reforms*. Bristol.

Hegel, G. W. F., Pinkard, T. P. (2018). *The phenomenology of spirit*. Cambridge University Press.

HESA (2022. Undergraduate degree results. Available at: https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/higher-education/undergraduate-degree-results/latest

Hinsliff-Smith, K., Gates, P., & Leducq, M. (2012). Persistence, how do they do it? A case study of Access to Higher Education learners on a UK Diploma/BSc Nursing programme. *Nurse Education Today*, 32(1): 27-31.

Hoare, A., & Johnston, R. (2011). Widening participation through admissions policy - a British case study of school and university performance. *Studies in Higher Education*, *36*(1): 21–41.

Holt, A. (2011). Discourse analysis approaches. In Frost, N. (2011). Qualitative research methods in psychology: Combining core approaches. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Hossain Khan, T., & Maceachen, E. (2021). Foucauldian Discourse Analysis: Moving Beyond a Social Constructionist Analytic. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 20*(20).

House of Commons Education Committee. (2021). The forgotten: How White working-class pupils have been let down, and how to change it: First Report of Session 2021-22. Volume 1, Report (House of Commons papers, session 2021/22: HC 85). London.

House of Lords. (2023). *Must do better: The Office for Students and the looming crisis facing higher education (2nd Report of Session 2022-23, HL Paper 246)*. House of Lords.

Hwang, R-C., Li, Z-F., Huang, C-T., Chu, R-X., Fan, X. (2010). Dropping the Brand of Edinburgh School: An Interview with Barry Barnes. *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal*, 4(4): 601-617.

Jain, A. K. (2010). "Data clustering: 50 years beyond k-means", *Pattern Recognition Letters*, 31(8): 651-666.

Jaspers, K., & Earl, W. (1957). Reason and Existenz: Five Lectures. New York: Noonday Press.

Johansson, Rolf (2003). Key note speech at the international conference *"Methodologies in Housing Research*," Royal Institute of Technology in cooperation with the International

Association of People–Environment Studies, Stockholm, September 22-24, 2003, http://www.psyking.net/htmlobj-3839/case_study_methodology-_rolf_johansson_ver_2.pdf

Jones, S. Hordósy, R., Mittelmeier, J., Ouyoum, A., & McCaldin, T. (2022). 'Possible Selves' in practice: how students at Further Education Colleges in England conceptualise university. *Research Papers in Education,* 36(6): 757-772.

Kaarbo, J., Beasley, R. K. (1999). A practical guide to the comparative case study method in political psychology. *Political Psychology,* 20: 369-391.

Kant, I., & Meiklejohn, J. (1872). *Critique of pure reason*. London: Bell & Daldy.

Kaye, N. (2021). Evaluating the role of bursaries in widening participation in higher education: A review of the literature and evidence. *Educational Review*, 73(6): 775-797.

Kendall, G., & Wickham, G. (1999). Using Foucault's methods (Introducing qualitative methods). London: SAGE.

Kingdon, K. (1984). *Agendas, alternatives and public policies*. New York: Harper Collins.

Krauss, A. (2024). Redefining the scientific method: as the use of sophisticated scientific methods that extend out mind. *PNAS Nexus*, 3(4).

Kuhn, T. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kusch, M. (2004). Meaning Finitism and Truth. In: Korta, K., Larrazabal, J. M. (eds) Truth, Rationality, Cognition, and Music. *Philosophical Studies Series*, vol. 102. Springer: Dordrecht.

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing (2nd ed.). Los Angeles; London.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980). Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 77(8), 453-486.

Lapworth, S. (2022). Ministers should not politicise the work of the OfS: discuss. *Office for Students Blog*. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/blog/ministers-should-not-politicise-the-work-of-the-ofs-discuss/

Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.

Lévi- Strauss, C. (1966). *The savage mind*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Luxembourg, R. (1967). *The Junius pamphlet: the crisis in the German social democracy, February-April 1915.* Young Socialist Publication.

Lyotard, J-F. (1984). The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Mackie, J. (1965). Causes and Conditions. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2(4): 245-264.

Malik, S., Ryder, M., Marsden, S., Lawson, R., & Gee, M. (2022). BAME a report on the use of the term and responses to it. BCU.

Mannheim, K. (1960). *Ideology and utopia.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Marginson, S. (2019). Limitations of human capital theory. *Studies in Higher Education, 44*(2): 287-301.

Marginson, S. (2011). Higher education and public good. *Higher Education Quarterly*. 65(4): 411-433.

Marx, K., & De Leon, D. (1898). *The eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishing.

Marx, K. & Dutt, C. P. (1935). *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. International Publishers.

Maurizio Massaro, John Dumay, & Carlo Bagnoli. (2019). Transparency and the rhetorical use of citations to Robert Yin in case study research. *Meditari Accountancy Research,27*(1): 44-71.

Mccanles, M. (1982). The Dialectical Structure of Discourse. *Poetics Today, 3*(4): 21-37.

Merriam, S., & Tisdell, E. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (Fourth ed., Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series). San Francisco, CA.

Molesworth, M., Nixon, E., & Scullion, R. (2009). Having, being and higher education: The marketisation of the university and the transformation of the student into consumer. *Teaching in Higher Education*. 14(3): 277-287.

Mulkay, M. (1979). *Science and the Sociology of Knowledge.* George Allen and Unwin.

Nelson, L. K. (2020). Computation Grounded Theory: A Methodological Framework. *Sociological Methods and Research*. 49(1): 3-42.

Nietzsche, F. W. (1909). *Human, all too human: a book for free spirits*. T. N. Foulis, Edinburgh.

Nietzsche, F., Clark, M., Leiter, B., & Hollingdale, R. (1997). Daybreak: Thoughts on the prejudices of morality (Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Offe, C. (1984). *Contradictions of the Welfare State*, London: Hutchinson

OfS (2018). *Supporting social mobility through higher education access, success and progression*. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1326/bd-2018-jan-41-ofs-approach-to-social-mobility.pdf

OfS (2019). *Standards of Evidence and Evaluation Self-assessment Tool*. http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluation-self-assessment-tool/evaluation-self-assessment-tool/

Ogden, C. K. & Richards, I. A. (1977). *The meaning of meaning*. London.

Papatsiba, V., & Cohen, E. (2020). Institutional hierarchies and research impact: new academic currencies, capital and position-taking in UK higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 41(2): 178-196.

Parliament (2018). *Chapter 6: Office for Students: Regulatory independence and government intervention* [select committee on Education report]. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmeduc/343/34308.htm

Parliament (2021). *Higher education drop-out rates and entry rates*. UK Parliament. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9195/

Parliament (2023). *Written evidence from Independent Higher Education*, IHE (WOS0065). Available at: https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/121147/html/

Passy, R., & Morris, M. (2010). Evaluation of Aimhigher: learner attainment and progression, Slough: NfER.

Patrick, F, Betts, T. A., Carvalho, T., & Pasnak, R. (2013). Neoliberalism, the Knowledge Economy, and the Learner: Challenging the Inevitability of the Commodified Self as an Outcome of Education. *ISRN Education, 2013*, ISRN education.

Pawson, R., & Tilley, N. (1997). *Realistic evaluation*. Sage.

Pickering, N. (2021). Enabling equality of access in higher education for underrepresented groups: a realist "small step" approach to evaluating widening participation. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 26(1): 111-130.

Piekkari, R., Welch, C., & Paavilainen, E. (2009) 'The case study as disciplinary convention: Evidence from international business journals', Organizational Research Methods, 12(3): 567–89.

Pring, R. (2000). The 'False Dualism' of Educational Research. *Journal of Philosophy of Education, 34*(2): 247-260.

QAA (2007). *Guidance for the admissions of students to QAA-recognised Access to HE programmes*. https://web.archive.org/web/20120818164708/http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/AdmissionGuidanceStudents/default.asp

Rainford, J. (2023). Are we still "raising aspirations"? The complex relationship between aspiration and widening participation practices in English higher education institutions. *Educational Review*, 75(3): 411-428.

Rainford, J. (2021) Working with/in institutions: how policy enactment in widening participation is shaped through practitioners' experience, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 42(2): 287-303.

Reay, D. (2004). "It's all becoming a habitus": beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(4): 431-444.

Riseborough, G. (1993). Primary headship, state policy and the challenge of the 1990s. *Journal of Education Policy*, 8: 123-142.

Robinson, D., & Salvestrini, V. (2020). The impact of interventions for widening access to higher education. https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Widening_participation-review_EPI-TASO_2020.pdf.

Rorty, R. (1989). *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rorty, R. (1980). Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Oxford: Blackwell.

Ruphy, S. (2010). Are Stellar Kinds Natural Kinds? A Challenging Newcomer in the Monism/ Pluralism and Realism/ Antirealism Debates. *Philosophy of Science*, 77(5): 1109-1120.

Russell, B. (1912). *The problems of philosophy*. Oxford University Press: London.

Savage, M., Devine, F., Cunningham, N., Taylor, M., Yaojun, L., Hiellbrekke, J., Le Roux, B., Friedman, S., Miles, A. (2013). A New Model of Social Class? Findings from the BBC's Great British Class Survey Experiment. *Sociology*. 47(2): 219-250.

Sanders, C. (2006). 'Tories' £2bn access drive is a 'failure'', Times Higher Education Supplement 28 July 2006. www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26andstorycode=204531

Schopenhauer, A., & Payne, E. (1958). *The world as will and representation*. Indian Hills: Falcon's Wing Press.

Schopenhauer, A. (1967). *The World as Will and Representation, Vol. 2.* (Ebook central). New York.

Scott, P. (2019). Martin Trow's elite-mass-universal triptych: Conceptualising Higher Education development. Higher Education Quarterly, 73(4): 496-506.

Scriven, M. (1991). *Evaluation thesaurus* (4th ed.). Newbury Park; London: Sage.

Smith, A. (1902). *The wealth of nations*. New York: P.F. Collier.

Social Mobility Commission (2021). Social Mobility Barometer – public attitudes to social mobility in the UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-barometer-2021/social-mobility-barometer-public-attitudes-to-social-mobility-in-the-uk

Spivak, G. in Derrida, J. (1997). *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Stake, Robert E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. New York, NY: Guilford.

Stalnaker, R. (1998). On the Representation of Context. *Journal of Logic, Language, and Information*, 7(1): 3-19.

Stewart, Alison (2014). Case study. In Jane Mills & Melanie Birks (Eds.), *Qualitative methodology: A practical guide* (pp.145-159). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Strand, S. (2022). Education and achievement at 15. *Sociology Review*, 31(3): 2-6.

TASO (2021). Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education Homepage.

TASO (2024). About Us. Available at: https://taso.org.uk/about/about-us/

TASO (2024). Out in the Open: The Promise of Open Science. Available at: https://taso.org.uk/news-item/out-in-the-open-the-promise-of-open-science/

Teixeira, P., & Dill, D. (2011). *Public vices, private virtues? Assessing the effects of marketization in higher education* (Issues in higher education). Rotterdam: Sense

Thomas, G. (2021). *How to do your case study* (Third ed.). Los Angeles.

Trow, M. (1974). Problems in the transition from elite to mass higher education, general report on the conference on future structures of post-secondary education (pp. 55–101). Paris, France: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

UCAS (2022). Entry rates into higher education. https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/higher-education/entry-rates-into-higher-education/latest#data-sources

Wallace, M. (1988). Innovation for all: management development in small primary schools, *Sociology*, 15(2): 15-24.

Walton, J. (1992) 'Making the Theoretical Case', in Ragin, Charles C. and Becker, Howard S. (eds), *What is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 121-137.

Wiggins, S., & Riley, S. C. E. (2010). QM1: Discourse Analysis. In M. Forrester (Ed.), Doing Qualitative Research in Psychology: A Practical Guide (pp. 135-153). Sage Publications.

Willer, D. & Willer, J. (1972). Why Sociological Knowledge is not Cumulative: A Reply to Professor Freese. *American Sociological Review*, 37(4): 483-486.

Willetts, D. (2008). Speech in House of Commons debate on the Education and Skills Bill. Hansard: HC Deb, 14 January 2008, c753

Willig, C. (2013). Introducing qualitative research in psychology (3rd ed., Ebook central). Maidenhead, Berkshire, England: Open University Press.

Wittgenstein, L., & Anscombe, G. (1953). *Philosophical investigations*. New York: Macmillan.

Wittgenstein, L. (2009). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L. (1960). *Preliminary studies for the "Philosophical investigations" generally known as the blue and brown books* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L. (1967). *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L. & Anscombe, G. (1968). *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell.

Yin, R. K. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, Calif.; London: Sage, 2003. Print. Applied Social Research Methods Ser.; v. 5.

Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: design and methods*. London: Sage.

Yin, R. K. in Bennett, N., Glatter, R., Levačić, R. (1994). *Improving educational management through research and consultancy*. London: Paul Chapman

Younger, K., Gascoine, L., Menzies, V., & Torgerson, C. (2019). A systematic review of evidence on the effectiveness of interventions and strategies for widening participation in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 43*(6): 742-773.

Appendix A – Information Sheet

Exploration of the Widening Participation Evaluation Policy Process

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: CIA-21-282

You are being asked to take part in this research because you are/have been involved, in some way, with widening participation and/or widening participation evaluation. This research explores how evaluation policies work within the higher education system, with a particular focus on how they are enacted within higher education institutions. Please take time to read the following information carefully to decide whether you wish to take part. If there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like more information, please email me at: Benjamin.hart@education.ox.ac.uk

Why is this research being conducted?

This research is part of a DPhil Education at the University of Oxford. One of the key aims of this doctorate is to enhance understanding of the enactment of widening participation evaluation policies in higher education institutions. The evaluation of widening participation programmes is an area that has increased in prominence and impact over the past decade and it currently plays a key role in the wider debates relating to widening participation activities. It is the goal of this research to provide insights into the mechanisms of policy enactment with the intention of informing practice.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part in this research because you are/have been involved with widening participation, and/or widening participation evaluation, and are a staff member at the University.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the study without giving a reason by advising me of this decision – the deadline by which you can withdraw any information you have contributed to the research is 30/10/2022 – this is the point by which data will have been anonymised and the analysis will have begun. If you decide to withdraw, all of your data will be destroyed.

What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

If you agree to take part in this research, you will be asked to participate in an in-person interview; the questions in this interview will relate to your experiences and views about widening participation policy. The interview will be audio recorded (to provide an accurate account of our conversation) and, later, transcribed and analysed. Before the interview you will be asked to read and sign a consent form and you will have the chance to ask any further questions. You can expect the interview to be approximately one hour in length.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

There are no risks or disadvantages involved in taking part in this research and you will be fully anonymised in the research.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

This research will allow you to express and explain your experiences in relation to widening participation and will also help to shape this research which has the ultimate aim of informing the way that policies are enacted within the domain of widening participation evaluation.

What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

The information you provide during the interview from which you can be identified is known as **personal data**.

This data will initially be an audio file which will be kept in a secure encrypted password protected hard-drive and will be destroyed immediately once the audio file has been transcribed. Once the data is transcribed, it will be anonymised – this will be done as soon as possible after the interview and will be anonymised within a month of the interview.

Consent forms will be stored in a secure encrypted password protected hard-drive if completed online, and will be stored in a secure locked cabinet if completed as a hard-copy. These forms will be securely stored for up to 2 years after the interview has taken place and will then be destroyed.
The researcher (Benjamin Hart) will have access to the research data alongside his two supervisors.

Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The findings arising from this research may be written up and used in the following contexts: a DPhil thesis, academic publications and conference presentations. It will not be possible for participants to be identifiable from these outputs. I would like your permission to use direct quotations from the gathered research data – this will again be anonymous and you will not be identified. A copy of my thesis will be deposited both in print and online in the Oxford University Research Archive where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in further research.

Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used within the study. The University will process your personal data for the purposes of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

Who has reviewed this study?

This study has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: CIA-21-282).

Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact Benjamin Hart (Benjamin.hart@education.ox.ac.uk) or his supervisor James Robson (James.robson@education.ox.ac.uk), and we will do our best to answer your query. I/we will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible: The Chair, Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee;

Email: student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk Address: Department of Education, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY.

Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have subsequent questions), please contact:

Benjamin Hart

Department of Education

15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY. Benjamin.hart@education.ox.ac.uk

Appendix B – Consent Form

Consent to participate in: 'An Exploration of the Policy Cycle of Widening Participation Evaluation in English Higher Education'

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: CIA-21-282

Purpose of Study: This research explores how widening participation evaluation policies operate within the higher education system, with a particular focus on how they are enacted within higher education institutions.

	Please initial each box if you agree with the statement
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point [until **30/10/22**], without giving any reason.	
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I understand that I will not be identifiable from any publications.	
I consent to being audio recorded.	
I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs.	
Use of quotations: I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable.	
I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	
I agree to take part.	

_____ dd / mm / yyyy

_____

Name of participant Date Signature

_____ dd / mm / yyyy

_____

Name of person taking Date[2]
Signature
consent

Appendix C – Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

Individual Background

1. What was your route to your current role and what is your academic and work background?
    a. University attended, highest qualification, subject studied
    b. How long have you been at the University?
2. How many staff do you manage and what are their roles?

Widening Participation Involvement

3. Describe how you are involved with outreach activities and WP evaluation?
4. What is successful widening participation?

Institutional Procedures

5. What are the main institutional goals for WP?
6. How are members of senior management involved with WP (if asked, Pro-VC level)
7. I'm interested in the timeline of evaluation policies…
    a. How do you hear about new institutional policies?
    b. How is information disseminated throughout the institution to the relevant actors? Is information passed on *verbatim* or *summarised*?
    c. What about broader WP policies from the OfS? How are they communicated to staff?
    d. Are evaluations shared? With whom?

8. Are staff members trained to undertake evaluation? If yes, how and who by? If no, why not?
9. How can your organisation be confident that WP practitioners are up to date in their knowledge and understanding of institutional and OfS policies relating to WP and WP evaluation?

Changes

10. What significant changes have occurred in WP evaluation policy over your time in the field?
    a. Of these changes, what has had the most effect on practitioners' work?
11. Has there been an increased commitment of resources to undertake evaluation?
12. IF YES, do you think increased evaluation will positively transform practice and improve the impact of widening participation activities?

Key Terms

13. What do you see as the purpose of evaluation?
14. What do the words 'rigorous' and 'robust' mean in terms of evaluation?
15. Do you think that it is possible to demonstrate causation in relation to widening participation initiatives? If yes, please give examples....
16. Do you believe it possible to demonstrate a causal relationship in the context of the evaluation of widening participation initiatives?
    a. Have you tried to demonstrate this? Key challenges?

Practice

17. What would you do if you were asked to implement an evaluation policy you disagreed with?
    a. Are there avenues to challenge policy? What are they? Internal/External?
18. What is your view of the arguments for independent and external evaluation of WP practice?

Questions about specific APP?

19. Has your institution attempted an RCT as part of WP evaluation?
    a. If yes, please describe how it was undertaken and with what success
    b. If no, why?
20. Can you tell me about the [particular institutional programme mentioned in APP]?
21. Could you describe your links with TASO?

Pressures on Evaluators

22. Do practitioners and others experience or perceive pressures to demonstrate positive outcomes from WP initiatives?
23. Do you view the standards of evidence document as a hierarchy of evidence? (i.e. Narrative, Empirical, Causal)?
24. Is there now a drive to evaluate WP practice in a particular way and, if so, what is your view on this?