

CASE STUDY

Evaluation for equity and justice in higher education: The Political, the Relational, and the Transformational

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Universities have a long history of “widening participation”, attempting to advance social equity and social mobility through access and success within higher education. In England, evaluation has been central to the widening participation agenda for over twenty years, so much so that it has become systematised within higher education providers and is intertwined with the development and delivery of programmes and activities. In this system, normalised evaluation of practice valuing technical expertise, linear thinking, and rationality is dominant. These systems typically focus on questions such as “Did this intervention work?” However, socio-political influences prevail, particularly in systems driven by policy agendas, which can contribute to symbolic and non-use of evaluation that maintains the status quo, inhibiting our ability to advance social equity. In these contexts, it is important to make explicit the value judgments decision-makers hold that affect how higher education providers enact WP policy and its evaluation in practice, so that we can begin to consider alternative perspectives and strategies for change. This paper builds a conceptual framework drawing from political science, organisational theory, and systems thinking to develop our understanding of the widening participation system, including evaluation within the system. Then, guided by the conceptual framework and the English higher education sector as a case study, we illustrate how the use of Critical Systems Heuristics as a critical systems thinking approach can guide practitioners to transition from enacting widening participation policy and its evaluation from a normalised to a normative practice, asking questions including “What makes this the right thing to do?” to embrace complexity, relationality, and practice toward transformation.

Keywords: evaluation; equity; higher education; evidence-based policy; critical systems heuristics

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Introduction

Universities have a long history of “widening participation” (WP), attempting to advance social equity and social mobility through access and success within higher education. While the purpose and motivation for WP in England is continuously debated, the dominant view holds that WP exists to increase social mobility and equality of opportunity to higher education for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups (Burke 2016). Alongside debates about how WP policy should be enacted, evaluation has dominated the WP agenda for over twenty years, becoming systematised within higher education providers (HEPs) (Kelly 2024). Throughout this paper, we refer to this as the WP system and argue that the development of the WP system over time means that evaluation has become an organisational functional entity in that system (Dahler-Larsen 2012). In other words, evaluation is part of WP policy enactment and is routinised within higher education providers as they develop and deliver their programs and activities. Driven by the regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), evaluation practices valuing technical expertise, linear thinking, and rationality are dominant and normalised (OfS 2019). Due to this focus on evaluation as a technical and rational science, these systems typically focus on questions of “What works?” which prevents actors from reflecting on the normative basis for their decisions: “How do we know this is the right thing to do?”

As the literature on the influences of evaluation within systems has developed, the effects of socio-political factors on evaluation and policy enactment processes have become increasingly apparent. For example, evaluation is prone to capture within organisations and bureaucracies, producing overly positive results and reducing the ability for the evaluation process and findings to speak truth to power (Raimondo & Leeuw, 2021). Captured evaluation can also lead actors to change their practice to fit the expectations of an evaluation, seeking to prove the impact of programs rather than to test whether impact has been achieved, and for whom (Andersen & Pattyn 2025; Dahler-Larsen 2015). In WP, longstanding debates acknowledge the socio-political nature of enacting WP policy, including whether WP should be justice-oriented or mobility-oriented, and driven by practitioner insight and expertise (Burke 2018; Ingram & Gamsu 2022). Existing evaluation literature within WP tends to debate choices of methods for determining the impact and success of WP programmes and activities (Clements & Short 2020; Harrison & Waller 2017; Younger et al. 2018). While these debates are important, we argue that they do not adequately speak to each other or acknowledge the dynamic nature of WP policy enactment, whereby evaluation influences practice and vice versa.

In this paper, we bridge these debates by adapting an existing conceptual framework describing the WP evaluation system in England by Kelly (2024), referring to it as the ‘WP System’ more generally. We adopt this terminology to reflect evaluations’ central role in WP policy development and its enactment. This conceptual framework illustrates the political dimensions that affect how evaluation influences practice and decision-making within HEPs, with personal values, staff job roles, and responsibilities influencing how they respond to the need to evaluate as part of the WP policy enactment process. We use this conceptual framework as a rationale for the use of Critical Systems Heuristics (CSH) to support people affected by, and involved in, WP to surface and negotiate these implicit values influencing their practice. We argue that by adopting CSH, practitioners can better understand and navigate the political and relational dimensions of their WP practice, in turn, enabling them to realise the normative and transformational potential of both their WP practice and its evaluation. We argue for the adoption of critical systems-thinking approaches (in this case, CSH), which incorporates deliberative and democratic principles as diverse actors

who affect and are affected by the enactment of WP policy are involved in explicitly defining the values and boundaries of the WP system and its evaluation (Gates 2017; House & Howe 2000). Importantly, this means that we do *not* commit to a particular outcome of such deliberative processes. Rather, we seek to open the door for more expansive opportunities for actors who would otherwise be excluded from decision-making to challenge the status quo and critically reflect on whether existing WP strategies and activities are the right things to do. While we believe in the transformative potential of this process, we are also conscious of our own perspective and position as evaluators, representing only one part of the WP system. Indeed, as we will illustrate throughout the paper, this is precisely why CSH is valuable: to ensure that diverse voices are included in the deliberation process.

The paper is structured into three sections. In section one, we use a conceptual framework of the WP system and its evaluation to explore WP policy enactment among staff with different job roles and responsibilities, epistemic and personal values, and how these dynamic organisational and individual characteristics influence how WP practice and its evaluation are affected by socio-political forces. Section two introduces CSH as a tool that organisational actors who affect and are affected by WP policy can use to surface the socio-political dynamics of WP practice and its evaluation, and explicitly define the values and boundary judgments made about how one ought to widen participation and evaluate it. We illustrate the use of CSH within WP, by drawing from our professional experiences, prior research, and analysis of policy documentation to contrast what the existing value and boundary judgements are, and how explicitly incorporating deliberative and democratic principles with CSH can elicit alternative perspectives around what “ought to be” within the WP system, effectively moving the sector beyond questioning “are we doing things right?” to normatively questioning “what makes this the right thing for us to do?” Section three concludes, highlighting the political and relational dimensions of evaluative practice in these contexts, and how, by applying deliberative and democratic principles through CSH, and drawing explicitly from a critical systems thinking lens, organisational actors can begin to ask questions and seek answers from diverse perspectives that open opportunities for transforming the WP system.

Conceptual Framework: The WP System (and its Evaluation), Values, and Job Roles Influencing Internal Evaluation Practices

The Widening Participation System (and its Evaluation)

The conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1 frames WP practices within the context of the wider WP system, of which evaluation is embedded. In the evaluation context, since 2009, the internal evaluation of WP programmes has been mandated as a regulatory requirement of providers as part of their reporting to the regulators, the Office for Fair Access (2004-2018), and since 2018, the OfS. This system has been shaped by the policy legacies of the New Labour Government, which strengthened the use of results and performance-based management. The national standards of evidence developed by the OfS are based on this evaluation paradigm and the notion that the sector can use evaluation to determine “what works” within WP to help disadvantaged students access and succeed in higher education (Crawford et al., 2017; OfS, 2019).

The WP system is manifest in HEPs access and participation plans (APPs), which outline institutions ambitions for change, including concrete APP targets (for example, the commitment to increase the share of students from a specific underrepresented group to enrol in their institution), activities they will carry out, their investment to achieve these targets, and an

evaluation strategy for these activities (OfS, 2023b). The process of developing the plans allows providers to translate national-level policy for their organisational contexts and provides a shared organisational responsibility for HEPs to deliver their established targets (Rainford, 2021). There is permanence within evaluation in the WP system (Leeuw and Furubo, 2008): activities are implemented throughout the academic year and are subject to monitoring by the OfS at least every four years and at most every year (OfS, 2023b).

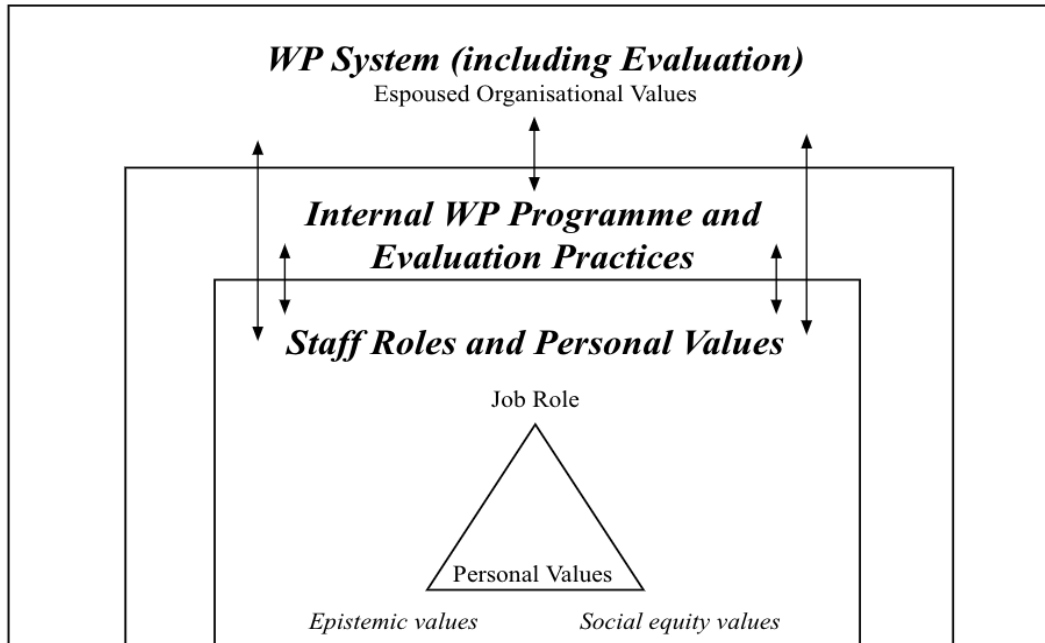


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Illustrating the Influences of Organisational Values, Personal Values, and Job Roles on Internal Evaluation Practices (Adapted from Kelly, 2024)

Since evaluation for the enactment of WP policy has become systematised, it is an “organisational functional entity”, and thus the responsibility of staff within and across the organisation (Dahler-Larsen 2012 p. 36). One cannot neatly separate the organisation (the higher education provider) and its enactment of WP policy from its evaluation. Weiss (1973) notably called out the politics of evaluation because social programs are themselves political; therefore, the act of evaluating social programmes is also part of the political process, and likely to affect how decision-makers are influenced by evaluation. Indeed, micro-politics plays out within evaluation processes, as intricate power dynamics are negotiated amongst different partners who affect and are affected by instigating, planning, implementing, and using evaluation (Schwandt 2015). In Figure 1, power dynamics inevitably play out within the arrows that connect each aspect of the system.

Staff Roles and Personal Values

Practitioners’ identities, positionality, and values shape how they interpret, make sense of, and choose to enact policy in practice (Maguire et al. 2015; Weick et al. 2005). This process is complex, with each practitioner operating with different values and ways of perceiving policy and resources to achieve their aims (Cunningham & Hermans 2018). For example, in a WP context, Rainford (2021) distinguishes between compliant and transgressive practitioners. Compliant

practitioners have fewer resources, less experience, and less agency in their job roles and are more likely to comply with institutional policy. Transgressive practitioners have more experience in understanding the complexities of their work and are more confident in delivering activities in a way that may not fully align with the espoused organisational values. How practitioners operate within their job roles thus affects how they make sense of, interpret, and enact WP policy to achieve their responsibilities and values (Kelly 2024; Stevenson et al. 2010). In England, because evaluation has become systematised within WP and part of the policy enactment process, practitioners are often inhabiting dual roles. They are implementing WP programmes while also acting as evaluators, attempting to assess the process and impact of their practice. How staff navigate these roles involves negotiating power dynamics, including relational power in how staff relate to one another, and in particular, how staff with more agency and resources in their positions include or exclude the values and perspectives of staff with less agency and fewer resources (Stickl Haugen & Chouinard 2019).

Personal values represent an individual's identity, affecting their attitudes and behaviours (Sagiv et al. 2017). Here, we are concerned with epistemic and social equity values as important factors influencing which evaluation approaches are pursued. For example, practitioners and organisations that espouse social mobility as the main aim of WP may be more likely to place the focus of change and thus the criteria for programme success on the individual student (Spohrer et al. 2018). Practitioners and organisations who value achieving social justice by widening participation believe the system should change to accommodate students from disadvantaged backgrounds, changing the unit of measurement to the practices of the institution and the overall evaluation approach (Wisker & Masika 2017). Political power plays out in these processes as certain agendas and beliefs are likely to be more valued over others, such as the OfS epistemic values as described in their standards of evidence (Stickl Haugen & Chouinard 2019), which situate experimental and quasi-experimental approaches as the most rigorous (OfS 2019).

Internal WP Programme and Evaluation Practices

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 posits that internal evaluation practices for WP within HEPs are influenced by the wider WP system, espoused organisational values, and the job roles and values of practitioners responsible for enacting the policy. As actors navigate micro-politics and power dynamics throughout this process, divergences in actual and perceived values from the system, organisational, and individual can lead to the fragmentation of evaluation activities. This is because individuals will modify their behaviours and attitudes to achieve their values (Arieli et al. 2020). For example, Kelly (2024) reports cases of WP practitioners collecting one set of data to achieve their values and job roles, to then collect other forms of data they believe better satisfy the OfS and other senior leaders within their institution. This fragmentation is particularly likely when evaluation within these systems focuses on measuring whether and how WP programmes are working, casting evaluation as a means for practitioners to justify and sustain their programmes. This can contribute to the symbolic use of evaluation – that is, the pursuit of evaluation as an end in itself, without meaningful change or decision-making based on findings; or non-use, with evaluation ignored altogether (Alkin & King 2017). In turn, the transformative potential of evaluation is constrained by the need to prove overall organisational and departmental successes, leaving practitioners to make small-scale changes and adaptations to their programmes.

Building on Critical Systems Heuristics to Guide Practitioners from Normalised to Normative WP Practice

The conceptual framework illustrates how internal WP practices (including evaluation) are influenced by the espoused WP system, characteristic of policy legacies, the espoused values of HEPs, and bottom-up, through the attitudes and behaviours of practitioners working towards their personal values and job roles and responsibilities. Moreover, micro-politics play out throughout the evaluation process as staff navigate multiple dimensions of power dynamics that affect whose values are prioritised. Therefore, rather than centring evaluation as a value-neutral and technical-rational scientific activity, this framework presents WP policy enactment and its evaluation as socio-political and value-laden. We also highlight the threat of evaluation being captured, that is, used to promote and support the organisation, independent of findings (Leeuw & Pleger 2023), as well as the threats of symbolic and non-use, where evaluation is used to justify decisions that have already been made (Alkin & King 2017). Consequently, understanding how evaluation influences WP practice, and, more importantly, how it can be used to *transform* policy and practice, requires centring the political and the relational. That is, centring the policy legacies, political forces, personal values, and job roles and responsibilities of the individuals enacting WP policy.

CSH, as developed by Ulrich (1983), presents a powerful tool for this. At its core, CSH offers a framework in which to understand and examine a given system or context. As Ulrich argues, this requires one to understand the assumed facts and values - what is the case, and what ought to be the case. Centrally, however, Ulrich emphasises that examining the facts and values defining a context must necessarily involve a third component: the determination of *which* and *whose* facts and values are considered, known as *boundary judgements*. On this view, any set of facts and values is “inevitably partial (selective) in the dual sense of representing a part rather than the whole of the total universe of conceivable considerations, and of serving some parties better than others – no proposal, no decision, no action can get it equally right for everyone!” (Ulrich 2005 p. 2).

Based on this insight, CSH applies the method of *boundary critique* (Reynolds 2007; Ulrich 2005; Ulrich & Reynolds 2020), the process of critically and systematically reflecting on the boundary judgments operative in a given context. This process requires surfacing and justifying the legitimacy of the facts and values one includes. As Gates summarises, in the evaluation context, therefore, “CSH calls for evaluators to be critical—continuously calling attention to whose and which sociopolitical values are and should be influencing an evaluation and potential consequences of this for other groups and interests” (Gates 2017 p. 211).

CSH offers three benefits to understanding and acting in the WP system. *First*, as an epistemological framework, CSH re-emphasises the central role of values in defining the WP context, requiring actors to surface and articulate their values. Applying CSH requires considering not just “what works”, but also “what ought to be the case”, which provides space to move beyond a rational understanding of programmes to taking a normative position. *Second*, CSH provides a process to critically examine boundary judgments. The distinction between facts and values *within* the boundaries of systems also applies *across* possible systems: CSH requires reflecting on what the boundary judgments of a given system *are*, and what they *ought* to be. This way, CSH provides a framework to engage with the sociopolitical questions that shape the WP system, allowing actors to imagine and define alternatives. Practically, CSH draws attention to four areas in which

boundary judgments can, and should be, contested: sources of motivations, power, knowledge, and legitimacy (Ulrich & Reynolds 2020). Thus, CSH provides a blueprint in which to understand, criticise, and, in practical terms, transform the WP system and its evaluation. *Lastly*, CSH translates this philosophically rich framework into a practical format. Ulrich's method of boundary critique is summarised in 12 reflective questions that users are asked to discuss (Table 1), presenting an accessible approach.

Table 1: Critical Systems Heuristics Boundary Categories and Guiding Questions (Ulrich & Reynolds, 2020)

Sources of Influence	Social roles (stakeholders)	Role-specific concerns (stakes)	Key problems (stakeholding issues)
Motivation	Beneficiary	Purpose	Measure of Improvement
	Who ought to be/is the beneficiary?	What ought to be/is the purpose?	What ought to be/is the measure of success?
Control	Decision-maker	Resources	Decision environment
	Who ought to be/is in control of the conditions of success?	What conditions ought to be/are under the control of the decision-maker?	What conditions of success ought to be/are outside the control of the decision-maker?
Expertise	Expert	Expertise	Guarantor
	Who ought to be/is providing relevant knowledge and skills?	What ought to be/are relevant knowledge and skills?	What ought to be/are regarded as assurances of successful implementation?
Legitimation	Witness	Emancipation	Worldview
	Who ought to be/is representing the interests of those negatively affected but not involved?	What space ought to be/is available for reconciling differing worldviews among those involved and affected?	What ought to be/are the opportunities for the interests of those negatively affected to have expression and freedom from the dominant worldview?

CSH specifically highlights that any deliberative process is liable to include and benefit some perspectives at the expense of others. As such, CSH makes explicit the questioning of politics and legitimacy in a way that other approaches leave implicit. As a result, CSH complements existing participatory evaluation approaches that seek to create deliberative and democratic evaluation spaces (what Cousins and Whitmore (1998) term ‘transformative participatory approaches’), including Theory of Change (ToC), whereby actors question the assumptions of how and why activities generate their intended outcomes.

Using Critical Systems Heuristics to Understand “What Is” in Widening Participation

To illustrate the value of CSH, we now present a reconstruction of the boundary judgments underpinning the OfS’s approach to WP and its evaluation. The summary of this discussion – drawing on regulatory guidance, relevant literature, and our reflections as evaluators in the WP space – is presented in Table 2. Additionally, we summarise key boundary tensions in the remainder of this section, highlighting how the system can/ought to change.

For this, it is important to note that the WP agenda is itself not unambiguous or free of contradiction. For well over a decade, scholars have noted tensions in the policy and discourses of WP (Stevenson et al. 2010) or derived discussion of who is to ‘blame’ for the lack of progress on persistent challenges (Baker et al. 2006). This tension ultimately underscores the value of CSH as a framework for surfacing the (implicit) boundaries of a necessarily partial system. Therefore, while we label our reconstruction as defining the current “is” of the WP agenda, we recognise that the actual system of WP is more complex, multifaceted, and highly contested in both values and facts.

Table 2: “What Is”: Critical Systems Heuristics from the Perspective of the Office for Students

Sources of Influence	Social roles (stakeholders)	Role-specific concerns (stakes)	Key problems (stakeholding issues)
Motivation	Beneficiary	Purpose	Measure of Improvement
	“Young people from backgrounds commonly underrepresented in HE” (OfS, 2023b: 3)	“Ensure that all students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education.” (OfS, 2023b: 3)	The rate at which young people from underrepresented groups access higher education (OfS, 2024a), complete their degree, and progress into professional or managerial employment (OfS, 2024b)
Control	Decision-maker	Resources	Decision environment

	The Office for Students (via its power to (not) approve provider plans)	Various widening participation activities, <i>intra-institutional</i> structural change, and financial resources (sustaining the above or directly in the form of student financial support)	National and government policy/funding of higher education is out of scope
Expertise	Expert	Expertise	Guarantor
	(External) evaluators, researchers	“Robust” evidence, primarily published and/or generated by methods set out in the ‘Standards of Evidence’	Systematised research and evaluation, in particular, evidence toolkits, evidence reviews, and (published) research
Legitimation	Witness	Emancipation	Worldview
	Ultimately, the UK government, through democratic processes, alongside media and interest groups (e.g., National Students Union, worker unions, Universities UK)	Approval process, student and sector consultations	Independent evaluation and practitioner networks, e.g., Evaluation Collective, Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI) offer contrasting perspectives

Motivation

In the CSH framework, the first dimension of boundary judgments examines “where [...] a sense of purposefulness and value come from” (Ulrich 2005 p. 9). According to the OfS the purpose of WP is to promote “equality of opportunity” for a variety of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups (OfS 2023b p. 2), with the ultimate measure of success being the rate at which young people from underrepresented groups access higher education, achieve good degree outcomes, and progress into professional or managerial employment afterwards. However, many different groups with stakes in WP are known to be motivated by different means. On the one hand, WP has been viewed as a force for advancing collective social justice and equity, as a way of achieving social mobility for individuals, while also being viewed as an opportunity for HEPs to increase their income (Burke 2016; McCaig 2011).

Questioning this motivation can influence how WP is enacted. If a primary driver for WP is to increase students’ lifetime income, how students are targeted and supported will be different compared to if the primary motivation is social justice (Burke 2016). This motivation will further influence the chosen indicators and targets of success, and the approach to evaluating. For example, a HEP that is motivated by achieving equity of opportunity might choose to change

institutional policy toward contextual admissions, acknowledging the systemic barriers and biases inherent in a grades-based admissions process. A HEP motivated by equality of opportunity may focus on admitting students on ‘academic merit’, trusting in a fair process (Boliver et al. 2022). An evaluation of the first HEP would likely have indicators for success that focus on the institution changing its admissions process, whereas in the latter example, indicators of success would likely focus on individual-level change concerning students’ academic performance.

Control

No matter how many individuals or organisations have different perspectives on what the primary motivation for WP should be, reflecting on who has control over decisions and resources to act on the motivation has further implications for practice. In the current WP system, the core decision-making power rests with the OfS, which can approve or reject providers’ APPs (OfS 2023b). In practice, the approval process involves a phase of negotiations between the OfS and HEPs, allowing institutions to make the case for targets and approaches in their context, diluting this power somewhat. This ‘freedom within a framework’ explains the relative variety of targets and interventions providers use in their APPs (TASO 2022).

The boundary judgment of what constitutes a legitimate problem for HEPs to solve – and what should instead be solved through government intervention – is often a central contention in higher education policy debate. Since the inception of the WP agendas, scholars have lamented the absence of government, challenging where the line between state intervention and individual institutions’ responsibilities should be drawn (Baker et al. 2006). This tension is well illustrated by the OfS’s recent push to require providers to use their APPs to explain “[h]ow they can make meaningful and effective contributions to supporting schools to raise pre-16 attainment for students who do not have equal opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills required for higher education.” (OfS 2023b p. 3). While *post-16* work has been part of WP for some time, the shift in policy focus to *pre-16* schooling has renewed sector discussions about the legitimate bounds of what providers can and ought to be expected to do. This contestation can be considered both between providers and the government, as well as between institutions and practitioners. For the former, the key question is if and to what extent HEPs ought to fund work for such younger ages, given both the interests of their funders – that is, of students paying tuition fees – and the perception that such work ought to be funded by schools or government instead (Anthony 2022). For the latter boundary conflict between individuals and institutions, questions about the skills and expertise WP practitioners require to deliver such work effectively, as well as the ability to achieve the necessary collaboration with schools, present areas of conflicting judgments.

Expertise

The question of who counts as a “competent provider of experience and expertise” (Ulrich, 2005 p. 11) remains a central area for contestation in WP policy and practice, with two areas in particular emerging in the literature and sector discussions.

The first are competing views on the credibility of practitioners as evaluators, highlighting tensions between institutions, individuals, and the wider system. Broadly, advocates of the ‘internal’ approach consider practitioners as the sources of knowledge and expertise. In contrast, those championing an ‘external’ approach hold that only evaluators and researchers, ideally publishing their work and being situated *outside* HEPs, constitute sources of knowledge (Moore et al. 2023).

Despite the regulator initially championing the external approach (*TASO Annual Conference 2022 - Part 1 2022*), the policy ultimately given to HEPs omits reference to *who* is best placed to act as a source of expertise (OfS 2023b). Instead, the guidance has shifted away from people towards methods and methodologies as guarantors of credibility, suggesting that anyone applying the right methods can contribute expertise.

This presents the second main area of contest in current discourses: what counts as good evidence. Central to current OfS regulation are the Standards of Evidence (OfS 2019, 2023a p. 22). Most controversially, the framework maintains that causal impact can only be evidenced by demonstrating that a change took place “relative to an appropriate control or comparison group who did not take part in the intervention” (OfS 2019 p. 8), limiting the strongest evidence ratings to a small number of experimental and quasi-experimental designs. However, as expansive literature both inside and outside of higher education has argued, such evidence hierarchies tend to fail both relative to their standards – that is, declaring methods as a gold standard even though there are important contextual limitations (Befani et al. 2014; Cartwright 2007; Schulte & Aston 2025) – while simultaneously excluding students and practitioners as sources of relevant knowledge and expertise and fundamentally excluding them from any process of policy deliberation (Anjum et al. 2025; Clements & Short 2020).

Legitimation

Lastly, there is the question of who holds legitimacy for representing the interests of those involved and affected, or those who are indeed not involved and may be negatively affected by the system. Perceptions about who holds the most legitimacy in concern for students most affected and in need of support for WP sets boundary assumptions around how the policy is enacted in practice, and its subsequent evaluation, determining who gets to act or speak on behalf of students, parents, teachers, and society. Critically reflecting on this assumption opens space to critique how WP is practised and evaluated, and for whom, and has “particular value as a means for recognizing and countering processes of marginalization” (Schwandt & Gates 2021 p. 77). In Table 2 we highlight several different worldviews related to “what different visions of ‘improvement’ are (should be) considered, and how are they (should they be) reconciled?” (Ulrich 2005 p. 11). We highlight several individuals, organisations and networks who each hold a different worldview and vision for how improvement should be considered within WP. For example, the NERUPI framework is praxis-based, valuing the role of practitioner knowledge and insight for driving forward transformation and change (Hayton & Bengry-Howell p. 2016). NERUPI holds practitioners as having a legitimate stake in serving the interests of students in need of WP support. Other researchers, and particularly those based within HEPs, are also working to provide greater legitimacy to students (Austen 2020).

Failure to critically reflect on these boundary assumptions can contribute to symbolic and non-use of evaluation, maintaining rather than challenging the status quo, and serving the legitimacy of the organisation (Leeuw & Pleger 2023), potentially at the expense of the public it is serving. In a study on the influence of the WP system, Kelly (2024) found that while practitioners valued learning more about the lived experiences of the students they served, they perceived their senior leaders and managers to value “simple statistics”. This led the practitioners to fragment their evaluation practice so that they could serve their senior leaders with simplified quantitative data and gather qualitative data on the lived experiences of their students to help serve their job

responsibilities (Kelly 2024). Although the qualitative data supported them in making small-scale changes to their activities, they mostly produced and supplied positive evidence to the decision-makers up the organisational hierarchy, rarely recognising or questioning if they were doing the right thing in the first place. Opening dialogue amongst people involved and affected by WP around these boundary assumptions and what they view as “what is” and “what ought to be” can thus contribute to improvements and changes to the policy enactment and evaluation process.

Discussion and Conclusion

We have argued that the enactment of WP policy and its subsequent evaluation in England are intertwined and, as such, value-laden and influenced by socio-political factors. Evaluation in the context of WP is thus subject to being captured, legitimising HEPs' WP activity and limiting its ability to challenge the status quo or to critically question the normative basis around whether WP activity in its current form “is the right thing to do”. We present CSH as a practical tool that can be used by people involved and affected by WP policy to critically reflect on boundary judgments that are typically implicit in decision-making around WP practice and its evaluation. Akin to how introducing theory of change within WP in England has challenged how practitioners think about their practice (Kelly 2024), we illustrated that embedding CSH within WP can explicitly surface value-judgements and assumptions that challenge the status quo. This is because engaging in CSH surfaces the selectivity of boundary judgments and requires those involved and affected to transparently question and critique these judgments (Schwandt & Gates 2016; Ulrich 2005). This opens dialogue for alternative options (Ulrich & Reynolds 2020). To transform WP practice, this process requires people to engage with WP and its evaluation system from a political and relational perspective.

The Political

The enactment of WP policy and its evaluation are inherently political. From a macro-perspective, it is political because the government of the day defines the bounds and regulatory requirements influencing how the policy can be enacted by staff within HEPs. From a micro-perspective, it is political as a multitude of actors, internal and external to HEPs, with different and sometimes competing values and job roles and responsibilities, are continually making sense of and navigating decisions related to their WP practice and how it is evaluated. Rather than ignore the politics involved in the enactment of WP policy, CSH encourages active participation in democratic and deliberative processes that are inherently political. The discussions to be had within the CSH framework cut across governance of HEPs and their APP development, and within and between HEPs, schools, and other partners who are affected and involved in WP, navigating dimensions of power and perceived expertise.

The Relational

To fully engage in CSH and the benefits it can bring, transforming WP practice from questioning “Did this intervention work?” to “What makes this the right thing to do?” ideally requires the involvement of a diversity of organisational actors operating within HEPs, the OfS, schools, students, and communities. Where this cannot be achieved, it requires those seated at the table engaging in CSH to consider the assumptions and perspectives of people affected but not involved in WP. This makes the practice deeply relational and requires a critical reflection of alternative positions and perspectives.

Comparing the triadic investigation of questions exploring boundary judgements, values, and facts, Schwandt and Gates (2016) compare CSH to several guiding principles of civic studies, including collaboration, humility, and criticising from within. Engaging in these principles requires deliberation and dialogue - an openness amongst partners to intentionally engage in critical reflection. Ulrich explains that “Asking ourselves how the facts that we find relevant, the value considerations we deem adequate, and the context (reference system) that we consider, mutually condition one another is highly relevant for developing a sense of modesty regarding our claims, as well as tolerance regarding those of others who appear to have got their facts and values wrong!” (Ulrich 2005 p. 6). Ulrich is suggesting that by engaging in this critical reflection, our sense of humility and modesty, as well as our tolerance for mistakes, should increase. In other words, CSH provides an opportunity to expand and improve how partners communicate (Ulrich & Reynolds 2020).

The Transformational

In the context of increasing humility and modesty, this, perhaps ironically, brings us to the transformational. We have described how evaluation systems can become captured and help to maintain rather than challenge the status quo (Raimondo & Leeuw 2021). In WP, we illustrate how this can occur when actors fail to explicitly identify and discuss the values underpinning their decisions, and when their values conflict with the espoused organisational values and those of the system defined by regulation. CSH provides a practical solution for making explicit the value and boundary judgements of those involved in and affected by WP. The tool engages actors in critical reflection and dialogue about issues related to motivation, power, expertise and legitimacy, actively pursuing “a new critical competence...[and] an orientation towards emancipation and self-determination” (Ulrich 2005 p. 5). The act of engaging in CSH opens the opportunity for transformation within WP because as a practice it challenges the dominant perspective regarding the purpose, values, and the nature of expertise driving WP policy enactment, and it opens opportunities for considering alternative perspectives.

The current framing of the OfS Standards of Evidence and APP guidance encourages people involved in WP and based within HEPs to define targets, develop solutions through intervention and programmes, and evaluate whether the intervention “worked” to achieve this aim. This perspective places actors involved in WP in a defensive position, holding onto their legitimacy to act in this policy space. Adopting CSH as an additional practice within WP policy enactment would provide a normative basis for WP practice and encourage critical reflection around “How do we know this is the right thing to do?” Thus, we argue, it creates an opportunity for future transformation of WP practice and its evaluation.

We recognise that some of the challenges we identified – tension of values and fragmentation of practice – might not easily be resolved. While CSH calls for dialogue, political realities or power imbalances might prohibit approaches that work for everyone from being adopted. For example, as Schulte and Aston (2025) consider, there might simply be actors who refuse to consider evidence outside the current Standards of Evidence. If these actors have substantial political power (legitimacy), conflicting individual epistemic values would likely be overruled. However, even in that case, we consider that a state where this tension is clearly acknowledged is preferable to the status quo, where tensions often go unacknowledged: at the very least, it allows us to emancipate ourselves from the dominant view, creating a potential for resistance.

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