

VIEWPOINT

Reflections on evaluation of widening participation initiatives in England: The emergence and development of NERUPI

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For this special issue of 'ACCESS' looking at the evaluation of equity and widening participation in higher education, my focus is developments in NERUPI (the Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions). NERUPI set out to provide a collaborative space for colleagues involved in planning and evaluation of widening participation and equity (WP) initiatives. The NERUPI Framework (Hayton & Bengry-Howell 2016), which underpins the Network, is now 10 years old and was developed to address some of the dilemmas that were confronting evaluation of WP in higher education. This paper describes how a network such as NERUPI can combine understandings from educational theory along with insights from practice while continuing to take account of policy and reporting requirements. In this paper I outline the context for the creation of the Network and the NERUPI Framework, considering the impact of some recent changes in research, practice and policy on its development. Rather than exploring particular evaluation approaches and methods, I focus on how we aim to create a collaborative and reflexive environment for innovative evaluation. Policy changes described here relate mainly to England, where the majority of our members are based, and where WP activities of higher education institutions (HEIs) are regulated by the Office for Students (OfS).

Keywords: NERUPI; praxis; Bourdieu; equity; higher education; evaluation

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Background

It is 25 years since the first national initiatives specifically designed to widen participation through active intervention were introduced in the UK. Despite expansion of the sector, undergraduate entitlement to free education and non-repayable maintenance grants from 1962 and the proportion of students from lower income families had not increased thirty years later. The New Labour Government of 1997 recognised that removing the economic factors underpinning social and economic exclusion alone had limited impact. A range of public policy initiatives were developed to support progressive cultural change such as the early years programme ‘Sure Start’. Along with a commitment to social justice was the ambition to develop a workforce with the capacity to grow a high skills economy. This powerful combination justified considerable investment from central government resulting in a number of WP initiatives, including the flagship national Aimhigher programme designed specifically to widen access, which are well-documented elsewhere (Burke 2012; Whitty, Hayton & Tang 2015; McCaig 2025)

Measuring the success of these WP initiatives was regarded as important from their inception. Understandably, there was a strong focus on monitoring the amount of activity and accounting for expenditure to the funding council and ultimately the treasury. Although HEIs satisfactorily completed and returned all the information requested, and there was a steady increase in numbers of underrepresented groups, the evidence was never quite sufficient to make the case that the initiatives were worthwhile. Mainstream education is also evaluated and regulated, yet the focus there is on improving quality and ensuring proper use of public funds. In contrast, evaluation for access and success initiatives seems tasked with providing proof as to whether expenditure on the initiatives overall is worthwhile.

Practitioners also conducted evaluations but, like schools and teachers, they were more interested in the short-term success and benefits of specific activities. These concerns can be regarded as unimportant in the broader context of whether to continue funding WP activities on a national or organisational scale. However, it is practitioners who are charged with addressing centuries of structural inequality through creating and delivering successful activities, not policy makers. For practitioners, evaluation which informs development and delivery of successful activity is important and represents a challenge which was and remains underestimated. The evaluation approaches and methods which provide the types of information they need are often dismissed as unimportant and regarded as ‘lacking rigour’ (Gorard & Smith 2006). While many of the early practitioner evaluations undoubtedly could have been improved it seems that the real issue was a lack of clarity on the purposes of evaluation.

A body of research and scholarship was also developing around the reasons for differences in participation rates between socio-economic groups but this was largely descriptive, rarely offering practical strategies for change and with entirely different concerns to those of the funding council and regulator.

In 2019 the Office for Students (OfS) introduced Standards of Evidence to guide HEIs and strengthen their evaluation findings. An earlier report had produced a hierarchy of methods positioning experimental methods, including Randomised Control Trials (RCTs), as the most rigorous (Crawford et al. 2017). Following a lengthy debate, the final guidance listed three ‘types’ of allowable evidence (OfS 2019). Nevertheless, the sense that RCTs were the gold standard of

evaluation persisted, reinforced by the establishment of the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO) in 2019, a consortium comprising the Government Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team, King's College London and Nottingham Trent University. At that time TASO had a strong commitment to the superiority of experimental methods in assessing the impact of WP activities. While experimental methods can be of value in certain contexts, their grounding in a positivist, medical model can all too easily situate students as problems who need a particular 'dosage' of a certain 'treatment' to be changed or 'cured'. Quite apart from ethical issues with some experimental methods, they are notoriously difficult to administer successfully in complex social settings, as efforts in other sectors such as health and international development have demonstrated (Hayton & Stevenson 2018).

The NERUPI Framework

The NERUPI Framework set out to challenge concepts of neutrality in evaluation, taking a critical approach that sees structural inequalities, discrimination and misrecognition as the bases of educational inequalities. The Framework provides a theoretically grounded foundation for evaluating initiatives, that also acknowledges the complexity of different contexts. It integrates practice and practitioner insights with theoretical understandings to create a praxis-based space for reflexivity and collaborative learning, allowing interrogation of the context and exploration of strategies for progressive change. (Freire 1970). The Framework uses Bourdieusian concepts to underpin understandings of structural inequalities, combined with other theoretical approaches exploring marginalisation of groups and individuals. It sets out the capabilities that higher education institutions need to foster to widen access and support student success in the form of aims and learning outcomes to underpin planning and evaluation of initiatives. Taking a critical realist approach to evaluation it recommends a range of methods appropriate to the context and purpose of the evaluation. With the capacity to support reporting requirements, it is also of practical value to WP evaluators. To test, develop and sustain the Framework, it was important that it should have a dynamic base, including both practitioners and academics, so a praxis-based Network was launched in 2018. This is now an active organisation with over 60 subscribing members offering resources, supporting working groups, fostering collaborative research and hosting online and in-person events. As a dynamic venture designed to be responsive to context, some changes and developments have taken place on which I will reflect below.

Bourdieu's capitals and field

The use of Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of capitals, habitus and field in the Framework has stood the test of time, making good use of and adapting his 'thinking tools'. Challenging common beliefs and assumptions about the reasons for educational inequalities along with strategies for addressing them is fundamental to the development and delivery of effective policies and activities. Colleagues involved in WP activities are found in a variety of disciplines and roles, and may not have considered the reasons for educational inequalities in any depth (Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek 2017). Some colleagues will draw on so called 'common sense' explanations such as 'intelligence' to explain differences in educational outcomes. Many colleagues will see their role as supporting the 'disadvantaged' into higher education, adopting a 'deficit' model without recognising the cultural bias of higher education in favour of those already participating. Nor might they easily recognise the cultural wealths (Yosso 2012) that students from under-represented and minoritised

groups can bring to the academy. Bourdieu's concepts support analysis of the causes of educational inequality, moving the gaze away from individualistic, neo-liberal ideas that place responsibility for success on individuals rather than organisations and the wider society.

Praxis

A praxis-based approach is fundamental to the way that NERUPI operates. It has perhaps been less immediately obvious to our members as a theoretical underpinning. Praxis is embedded into our working practices guiding how we engage with policy, design our events, support collaborative learning, foster praxis-based research and develop the Framework itself.

Praxis and the NERUPI Framework

Despite the enduring value of the original NERUPI concepts, economic and policy changes have led to some significant change in the Framework. Originally based on five overarching aims related to social and academic capital, cultural and intellectual capital, and habitus, we did not include economic capital. When originally delineating the field of widening participation in relation to the Framework, we excluded financial capital. The student loans and bursary system introduced in 2012 was well established with relatively generous funding. The key actors had limited agency to resist national policy and create change in their practitioner or academic roles. But, over time, the situation changed radically as the student maintenance loan has not increased in line with inflation. The conservative government of 2016 – 2024 chose instead to increase hardship funding to universities (OfS 2023). An unexpected outcome of this punitive policy was the speedy development of a range of innovative practice, quite different from traditional 'hardship' support offered by HEIs in the past. The original five aims of the NERUPI Framework could not encompass these exciting new activities, representing a whole new strand of activity often developed collaboratively with students.

Following consultation with our members, including an in-person workshop, a sixth aim was established relating to economic inequality. As with other NERUPI aims, there is an expectation for action from both organisations and students, and it was finally agreed to use the active learning word 'sustain' which applies to both. While economic capital could have been included in the original Framework aims, it is unlikely that the more detailed capabilities and objectives would have stood the test of time. The change in the policy unexpectedly provided a new space for action, clearly illustrating the importance of developing evaluation approaches with the capacity to respond to changing contexts and to learn from practice.

SOCIAL & ACADEMIC CAPITAL		HABITUS	SKILLS CAPITAL	INTELLECTUAL & SUBJECT CAPITAL	ECONOMIC CAPITAL
PROGRESSION CURRICULUM		STUDENT IDENTITIES	SKILLS CURRICULUM	KNOWLEDGE CURRICULUM	ECONOMIC RESOURCES CURRICULUM
KNOW	CHOOSE	BECOME	PRACTISE	UNDERSTAND	SUSTAIN
Develop students' knowledge & awareness of the benefits of higher education & graduate employment	Develop students' capacity to navigate Higher Education sector & make informed choices	Develop students' confidence & resilience to negotiate the challenges of university life	Develop students' study skills & capacity for academic attainment	Develop students' understanding by contextualising subject knowledge	Develop students' capacity for critically informed financial decision making & managing financial resources

Figure 1: The NERUPI Framework Overarching Aims including Economic Capital

NERUPI Events

Praxis informs the design of our events on key issues for WP. These typically include theoretical perspectives, relevant academic research, a policy update, practice examples from our members, and an active session where participants explore strategies for addressing similar issues in their own organisations. Our members consistently report that they appreciate this collegiate and exploratory approach, along with the value that NERUPI places on their work, but they may not recognise this as praxis. Praxis-based pedagogy does call for engagement from all those involved, presenters and participants, academics and practitioners, an ambition which has become increasingly challenging since the pandemic when the majority of our events moved online. The number and accessibility of our events has increased, but there is considerably less engagement with the active elements of the sessions. Also, recent feedback from members revealed that many staff who had not experienced the in-person workshops introducing the Framework itself and its theoretical underpinnings, struggled to apply them to their activities. The connection of everyday practice to theory is fundamental to NERUPI and praxis-based knowledge creation. Addressing the risks associated with online learning is a key area of development for NERUPI and a burgeoning field of research and innovative practice from which we hope to benefit as we seek to increase online interactivity, make good use of opportunities to meet in person.

Collaboration for effective praxis

Praxis-based collaborative activity outside of colleagues' own organisation is important for so many reasons: to share practice, provide mutual support, develop new insights and understandings, and provide fresh perspectives from other contexts. Effective evaluation of WP initiatives remains an evolving and contested area. The in-house model emerging in HEIs has many potential benefits including support for continuous progressive institutional change and reflexivity. The use of external evaluators, or indeed an 'inspection' model of quality assurance, could not offer this ongoing relationship with practice, practitioners and understanding of local context. However, it can lead to accusations of universities 'marking their own homework', confirmation bias, questioning the validity of qualitative methods. More

importantly reflexivity can be restricted if perspectives are limited to colleagues in one team or organisation. In recognition of this, NERUPI developed the Peer Evaluation Course, inspired by the external course examination process, to facilitate scrutiny of in-house evaluation plans, approaches and choice of methods by peers from other HEIs (Hayton & Moore 2024).

Praxis-based research

Developing our approach to collaborative research and evaluation projects in response to members' needs is an important aspect of NERUPI's work. Practitioners and researchers collectively explore areas of interest to NERUPI members with the aim of improving practice and contributing to scholarship. Currently the Student Ambassador and Mentor (SAM) working group is awaiting the results of a collaboratively designed survey to capture employability skills and personal development qualities that students develop in their often misrecognised roles supporting WP activities. NERUPI coordinates the design of the research along with analysis of the findings, supported by an academic adviser, in this case Clare Gartland (2015). Participating members administer the survey locally benefitting from the local and collective findings. Not tied to the requirements of funders, participants can choose areas of interest to them. As well as developing their own understandings and capacities for research, this process opens up opportunities for reflexivity within the group and for individuals.

Our commitment to including perspectives from minoritized groups across NERUPI stems from praxis as much as social justice. The involvement of colleagues from a variety of backgrounds with a range of professional and personal experiences is fundamental to our praxis-based approach. This has been of immense value to NERUPI and resulted in some new areas of endeavour including production of a glossary from the Student and Staff Race and Ethnic Equity (SsREE) working group and an article on language used in race and equity discussions (Daramy, F & Dumangane, Jr C, 2025). In a recent collaborative project arising from the SsREE working group, a 'Culturally Curricula Scales' survey developed by members was administered in six NERUPI member universities. In addition to increasing local organisational knowledge and understanding of the factors creating exclusionary curricula this resulted in an edited collection for Palgrave (Thomas & Quinlan 2024). My own contribution to the volume (Hayton 2024) gave me cause to reflect on my experience as a member of a minoritized community and to further explore the links between Bourdieusian perspectives, praxis and critical race.

Policy and praxis

A significant shift in policy coming from the OfS increased the focus on organisational change. This had become a regular subject of discussion in our working groups and events, perhaps best reflected in the increased use of the term 'underserved' groups which emerged from the health sector. In 2023 the OfS (2023) launched an Equal Opportunities Risk Register along with an analysis of groups with particular 'characteristics' least likely to access and succeed in higher education. When producing their Access and Participation Plans HEIs are now required to identify the specific risks to equality of opportunity posed by their HEI to students from these groups. To mitigate the risks they are tasked with developing action-focused Intervention Strategies along with evaluation plans to measure their effectiveness. This regulatory change called for a whole institutional approach prompting a burst of activity to form planning groups and committees if they did not already exist. The new requirements

also impacted on the role of in-house evaluators who are increasingly engaged in planning Intervention Strategies, developing the evaluation approach and supporting colleagues to undertake aspects of evaluation. NERUPI had always actively promoted communities of praxis (Burke 2012) and praxis teams (Hayton 2018). Now their value as effective and equitable organisational structures for planning, delivering and evaluating WP became clearer to our members as they drew together a range of expertise and experience from across their organisations.

Organisational change

As we have seen, the NERUPI Framework is based on a set of capabilities designed for easy adaptation into active learning outcomes that organisations need to enable responsive services, active pedagogies and progressive curricula. Although we positioned individual student transformation as fundamental to the higher education experience, it would be impossible to successfully meet the NERUPI aims without the corresponding institutional transformation. Nevertheless, as organisational change is embedded and implicit in the original Framework, it can be overlooked. Also, in the absence of explicit markers for organisational change, the original aims and objectives can initially appear merely as a list of skills and qualities that students lack, reinforcing a deficit model. On reflection, we should have been more explicit about the level of organisational change required, particularly given the ubiquitous neo-liberal climate with its focus on individual responsibility. This has been compounded by approaches to evaluation that focus on measuring changes in students rather than questioning the higher education environment in which they find themselves. To address this gap in perception, we deconstructed the Framework identifying five areas of focus for organisational change: culture and structures; staffing; curricula and pedagogy; student support; and economic capital. We tested these with practitioners using them to consider the changes required to create an enabling environment for specific groups of students, for example, mature students, care experienced students, minoritized ethnic groups or students from low-income families.

Culture, structures, policies & procedures	Staffing (incl. student staff members)	Curricula & Pedagogy	Mechanisms for student support	Economic capital
ENACT	ACTIVATE	EMPOWER	ENABLE	SUSTAIN
Embed a culture and ethos, backed up by policies, procedures, & resource mechanisms internally, which promote inclusivity, supportive values & behaviour, and promote participation and engagement for all	Embed staffing & professional development arrangements, support & rewards, which build the capacity, awareness & skills of staff members to support & promote equity	Support and extend approaches to curricula & pedagogy which ensure inclusivity, & promote innovation, co-creation & partnership arrangements	Identify & operationalise types and mechanisms of financial, academic & pastoral student support to enable full participation & engagement of diverse student groups & individuals	Include equity considerations into organizational decision-making & management of financial resources

Figure 2: NERUPI Framework for Organisational Change

Theoretical development

We had also started to explore Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory which was useful in several ways including unravelling the wider context for widening participation and organisational change. Following consultation with our members and discussions with colleagues (Miri 2023) we adapted Bronfenbrenner's model to further explore the context of WP, incorporating both NERUPI aims and areas for organisational change.

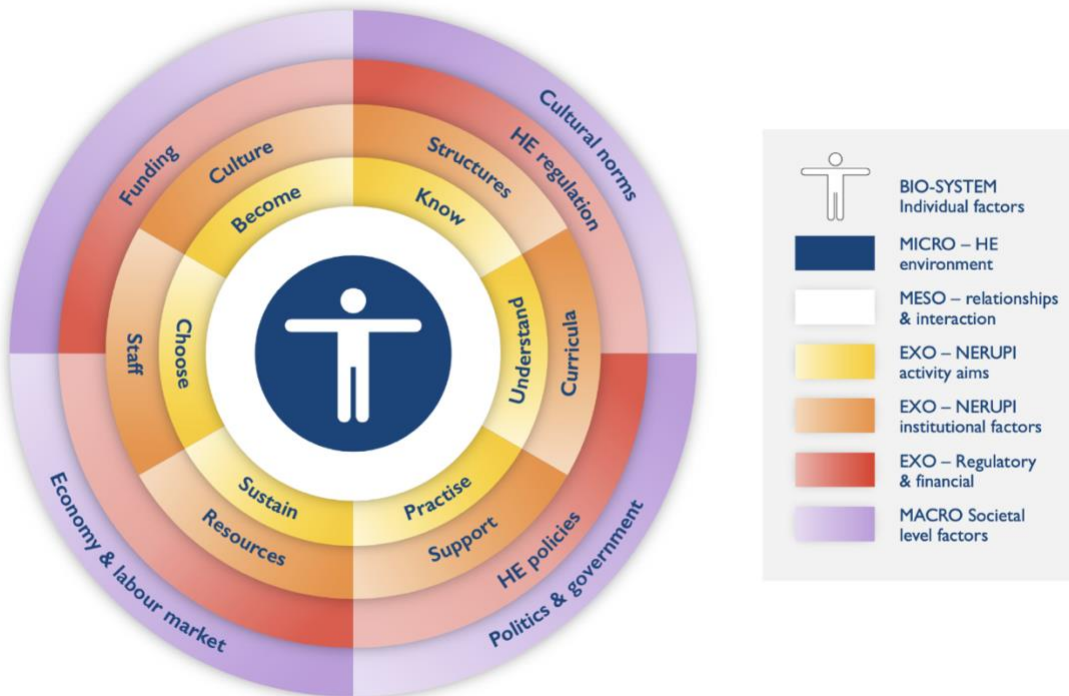


Figure 3: NERUPI Ecological system diagram

Evaluation of organisational change is complex as my colleague Joanne Moore found in our recent project reviewing the OfS Standards of Evidence. Working with seven case HEIs through in-depth discussions, interviews and collective analysis, she found that HEIs are undergoing radical organisational changes to develop more equitable and effective provision. Concerned with addressing issues such as non-completion and degree awarding gaps, HEIs are reconsidering their student support systems and reviewing their curricula, as well as extending their collaborative work to enhance outreach. Understandably, HEIs are keen to evaluate the impact of their innovations, and these potentially radical developments in complex environments require a variety of evaluation approaches and methods to support them. As a result, we have made a number of recommendations to the OfS for broadening and strengthening the Standards of Evidence to encompass evaluation of complex and evolving programmes, identify methodologies appropriate to the context, explore approaches to whole system evaluation and promote and facilitate student involvement.

Conclusion

NERUPI's praxis-based approach and theoretical underpinnings have stood the test of time. The popularity of our events for members continues. The combination of research, practice and policy offers spaces for practitioners and researchers to explore key issues collaboratively creating new insights and understandings of inequalities.

Our membership-based structure enables us to respond collectively to policy and policy-makers, with NERUPI voicing members' concerns to influence policy debates and developments. Our most recent project calling for changes to the OfS Standards of Evidence has triggered a national debate. Our recommendations, based on current imperatives for our members such as new approaches to curriculum and pedagogy and overhauling systems and services. We argue for evaluative approaches that better reflect praxis-based organisational the needs rather than one-off activities.

The theoretical underpinnings of the Framework also remain relevant and important, demonstrating the capacity to respond to our members' innovative practice and adapt to wider policy changes. Along with our praxis-based collaborative research the Framework's theoretical base has been extended. More work is required here, particularly in exploring dilemmas of structure and agency to create progressive change and shaping hopeful futures.

As we have seen in the USA in recent years, it is always possible to undo positive innovations, but only to some extent, as the ideas and values underlying them are not so easily abandoned. Hopes for continuing to develop a more equitable and positive higher education experience need careful nurturing along with resistance to reactionary forces. NERUPI plans to continue its collaborative work with colleagues and play a small part in that process to support progressive change.

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