EDITORIAL

Connecting Research, Policy and Practice: Praxis-based studies of widening participation in higher education

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In this Issue of *International Studies in Widening Participation* (ISWP) it is my great pleasure to introduce two incoming editors, Dr. Marie-Pierre Moreau and Dr. Nadine Zacharias. They bring with them an impressive range of expertise in both research and practice to enrich the journal's praxis-based philosophy and scholarly exploration of the many different aspects of widening participation (WP) across all stages of student engagement in higher education (HE). 'Praxis'-based approaches highlight the importance of engaging in iterative, reflexive forms of action/reflection. The overarching aim of ISWP is to find ways to challenge and disrupt entrenched historical educational inequalities, especially those powerful forms which are reproduced through discourses that are often insidious and 'hidden' from view, and which therefore often operate through subliminal habits, rather than any overt intention to be limiting and exclusionary.

From our everyday work in WP initiatives and institutional organisation (Zacharias) to access and transition (Bennett), to participation in and progression through HE (Moreau), and with all three of us also researching across the fields and more widely, we share a passion and dedication to supporting equity into, through and beyond WP in HE. Dr. Marie-Pierre Moreau is Reader in Education and Director of *Research in Inequalities, Societies and Education* (RISE) at the University of Roehampton, London. Her expertise is in research on the nexus of education, work and equality issues, particularly gender. Dr. Nadine Zacharias is Senior Research Fellow at the *National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education* (NCSEHE,) Curtin University, Perth, Australia. Her research is focussed on 'boundary crossing', so that the fields of WP policy, theory and practice can better inform one another and work to improve experiences for all participants.

Included as *Invited Contributions* to this Issue, Moreau and Zacharias provide autobiographical, reflexive papers that share their experiences of inhabiting and researching the spaces of WP in HE in the UK, Australia and other European countries. They describe important aspects of their scholarly journeys, as they have moved between research fields and challenged institutional spatialities and assumptions, and artificial divisions between equity 'practice' and 'research', as well as professional and personal expertise and identity. Each highlights the interrelationship between their research interests, expertise and subjectivities, and how they are shaped through personal experiences and socio-political relations of power. Also emphasising the importance of WP professionals (researchers and practitioners) paying careful attention to the intertwined politics of identity and difference by citing Jane Miller's (1997) foundational work on the 'autobiography of the question', Burke (2012) argues that we must interrogate the basis of our

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own interests and investments in the research question(s) we are asking. We must connect this to "the history of more public kinds of attention to it. This becomes a way of historicising the questions [addressed] and of setting [one's life] and educational history within contexts more capacious than [one's] own" (Miller, 1997 cited in Burke, 2012, pp. 77-78). Personal and professional experiences (autobiographies) and socio-political forces both enable and prevent the opportunities and 'choices' we have as researchers (Burke, 2017; Harrison, 2017; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Ball & Vincent, 1998; Reay, 2001; Reay, Davies, David & Ball, 2001; Reay, David & Ball, 2005). Whether we are aware of it or not, this ontology shapes our understandings, theories and concepts (epistemologically), as well as our methodologies, which produce our approaches and analyses.

As Moreau and Zacharias point out, a reflexivity that looks beyond individual researcher/professional self-reflection into the dynamic relationality of our work, enables important rigorous development of it *in relation* to the continuous contextual changes and relationships beyond our own experiences. Indeed, key contemporary theories about education, including principles from traditions described as 'social' and 'scientific', highlight the importance of recognising implication and relationality over time and space (Bennett & Burke, 2017), including in the sense of how discourses and sites of power are productive of differential enlightened *and* repressive positions and inequalities (Foucault, 1996[1977]). Sites of power such as HE (including and especially HE curricula and pedagogies) re/produce complex and differential positions and experiences of empowerment and disempowerment, socially, as well as intra- and inter-personally (Bennett, 2012). Thus, in the definition of 'Access to and Widening Participation in Higher Education' provided in the *Encyclopaedia of International Higher Education Systems and Institutions*, Burke (2017) explains that "widening participation in HE is fraught with dilemmas and tensions, with multiple layers, histories, and forms of inequality running through a range of social and educational contexts and pedagogical relations" (p. 6). The multiple layers, comprised of different histories, forms of inequality, contexts, identities and misrecognitions (Fraser, 2007), are evident in this Issue of ISWP, which is comprised of papers examining different aspects of widening participation.

Most of the articles are about Australian higher education. However, all contributions reveal how their specific insights and findings are important across international contexts. Reflecting the diversity of experiences in HE explored in this Issue, we are pleased to present six pieces expressed through a variety of different types of writing: two *Invited Contributions*, one from each of our incoming editors, Marie-Pierre Moreau and Nadine Zacharias; a *Viewpoint* article from James A. Smith, Kellie Pollard, Kim Robertson and Sue Trinidad; followed by a *Policy Review* by Catherine Street, John Guenther, James A. Smith, Kim Robertson, Shane Motlap, Wendy Ludwig, Kevin Gillan, Tracy Woodroffe, and Robyn Ober; a *Research Paper* by Lisa Andrewartha and Andrew Harvey; and then a *Case Study* by Jenny Stokes. The Issue includes contributions about academic and professional experiences and identities, the experiences of students who are carers and care leavers, and students as digital content producers, as well as two pieces exploring the development and evaluation of Australian Indigenous policies and initiatives over time.

The *Viewpoint* article from James Smith and colleagues provides an overview of the evaluation of policies and initiatives that support Indigenous pathways, participation and achievement in HE. These authors argue that although there are multiple recommendations for an Indigenous HE monitoring and evaluation framework emerging in key national reports, there has been minimal engagement in terms of a collaborative governmental (including institutional) response to articulating how this could be developed. As they argue, a community needs-based, research and practitioner-informed, contextualised, collaborative approach is an important basis for developing

a framework. They also point out that:

> …Indigenous methods, concepts and standpoints could potentially re-conceptualise the purpose of monitoring and evaluation in Indigenous higher education. This could include further discussion about what should be monitored and evaluated, when, why, how and by whom. Indigenous standpoints are epistemologically and ontologically different from parallel frameworks current in the broader equity and higher education space, but we argue that they are not necessarily incompatible. Rather, it is important to understand the synergies and differences to examine these intersections more critically. (p. 27)

Also offering insights useful for informing policy studies of Indigenous students in Australia and other contexts, the *Policy Review* contributed by Catherine Street and her co-authors, provides a chronological mapping of Indigenous HE policy in the Northern Territory, Australia. By providing a chronological account of that context, Street et al. show that current policies guiding Indigenous higher education emphasise 'outcomes', whereas over the past 50 years this was not the focus. They trace wider inter/national socio-political discourses to contextualise policy trends, revealing that the current focus on performance and accountability (outcomes) sits within a wider dominant neoliberal governance approach and there remains a large gap in knowledge about HE policy and its impacts on Indigenous students in urban areas. Having developed an overview of policy using a map (p. 43) that also charts trends in wider Australian HE (the move from the 1960s with a focus on assimilation and later on to self-determination, then self-management to consultation to reconciliation to accountability and now to outcomes) they argue that thorough studies of the impact of changing policies, particularly through qualitative forms of analysis, are required. Such detailed overviews and close analyses are important for better informing and influencing historical and political re/actions, which all serve to re/shape the future.

Moving from the political to the institutional context, Lisa Andrewartha and Andrew Harvey explore the strengths of care leavers in Australian HE. Their *Research Paper* provides an important discussion about the experiences into and through HE of this often overlooked group of underrepresented students who have in the majority suffered multiple forms of disadvantage and trauma. Andrewartha and Harvey discuss research from the UK and emphasise that comparatively little is known about the experiences of care leavers in HE in Australia. Andrewartha and Harvey highlight their previous research on how students from out-of-home care often face the "soft bigotry of low expectations" (Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha, & Luckman, 2015, p. 6):

> Those who surround children in out-of-home care, including social workers, teachers, guardians, agency workers, and para-professionals, often hold little belief in the capacity of the children to transition to higher education, and maintain few resources to assist in raising the educational knowledge, aspirations or expectations of those in care. This culture of low expectations impacts upon educational achievement and subsequent access to higher education, and may reinforce existing structural and psychological barriers. (See p. 55)

However, despite these limiting views about future capability and other significant challenges such as dealing with placement instability and disrupted schooling and periods of unemployment and homelessness, Andrewartha and Harvey also discuss how many of the care leavers involved in their research did access and navigate their way through degrees. The paper outlines their approach to conceptualising the students' strengths, and how this could lead to challenging established stereotypes and historical misrecognitions, and to reforming the culture and values

that the academy rewards.

Rethinking and reshaping conventional approaches to teaching and learning through creative collaboration at the course level is the focus of the final paper. Citing Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti, (2005), Jenny Stokes (p. 76) describes collaborating with students and connecting with their "existing 'funds of knowledge'". In her *Case Study* she discusses her development of a digital literacy course, intended to disrupt conventional approaches to designing a curriculum and assessment often identified as disengaging for students. Within the context of an Australian enabling (university access) program, the course was developed to harness students' creativity through asking them to choose a media form that resonated with them to explore their topic of choice. Stokes describes the result as having produced enjoyment, which enabled learning of complex concepts and confidence as creative producers, and developing students' knowledges and proficiencies in the scholarly domains, industries and professional fields associated with their projects. Assessments and evaluations of the course were utilised to understand the impact of the course design. Based on the institution's measures, the course design team was also awarded a *2017 UniSA Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning (Digital Learning)* (see p. 66). This paper highlights how enabling courses are not simply about bridging or foundation knowledge, but can be in and of themselves creative, productive, discipline-based learning environments that set up students for undergraduate studies and other contexts.

From a focus on policy to the experiences of students from different backgrounds, on behalf of our new Editorial Team, Dr. Marie-Pierre Moreau and Dr. Nadine Zacharias, and Journal Manager, Dr. Jo Hanley, we hope you enjoy the variety of papers and paper types included in this Issue.

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