

Widening Participation For Profit - Private Providers and WP Policy in England

Graeme Slater

Bloomsbury Institute, London, United Kingdom. University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

This paper explores the emergence of private and for-profit HE institutions in England, with a particular focus on the past decade in which such institutions were encouraged to operate in England as part of the Level Playing-Field policy agenda, which enabled new institutions to operate in England under the same conditions as the incumbent sector, including the requirement to submit Access and Participation Plans (APPs) to the Office for Students.

A brief review of APPs from 13 institutions was conducted, to consider the context and challenges of for-profit PHE providers engaging in Widening Participation (WP) work in England. It was found that typically such providers have underdeveloped technology, few dedicated WP roles and issues with evaluating small cohort sizes. While many providers set out plans in their APP to address such issues, in some cases providers conceded that meeting APP requirements fully would face significant obstacles.

Full paper

Since the election of the Conservative-led coalition government in 2010, a key policy driver in England's higher education (HE) sector has been the Level Playing-field agenda - the idea that any suitable organisation should be able to establish and operate a HE provider and that business and the private sector should be encouraged and

enabled to set up providers of their own. This idea was brought into existence through the 2017 Higher Education & Research Act and the creation of the Office for Students (OfS).

The level playing-field agenda was intended to not only bring existing private HE (PHE) providers in from the but also to enable organisations such as Facebook or Google to establish their own institutes. Any institute wishing to operate in England and access the higher rate tuition fee loans system (under the oversight of the OfS) would be required to meet the same conditions of operation as any university, including creation and submission of an Access and Participation Plan (APP). According to a study by Hunt & Boliver (2019) over 800 PHE institutions were operating within the UK, with a mean average age of 32 years and the oldest nearly 400 years old. It was estimated that around a third of all PHE institutions in the UK were limited companies with 267 identified, a significant number more than the 77 limited companies currently identified on the OfS Register, suggesting that many either failed to meet the conditions of entry or chose not to apply.

The requirement for all PHE providers to engage with these regulatory requirements has resulted in for-profit HE providers being required to work as stakeholders within the Widening Participation (WP) policy space, working to improve access to higher education and outcomes for students from underrepresented or disadvantaged groups, creating the possibility of a tension between the nature of a for-profit business and the ostensibly public-good activities of WP.

This is a relatively unexplored area of WP, previously explored by Evans (2018) but with significant scope for further research.

To understand how PHE developed in England, it is often helpful to place it in the wider context of a global trend toward emergent PHE in different nations over the past century. This paper situates the development of PHE in a broader international context in which PHE institutions enter into a sector to fill a role not presently (or satisfactorily) fulfilled by the existing sector (Geiger, 1986; Levy, 1986) and highlights the case of Brazil as an example of where PHE can significantly affect social mobility outcomes. (McCowan, 2004).

Method

A brief study was conducted into a small sample of for-profit institutions operating in England on the Approved (Fee cap) category of the OfS register . The OfS approved Access and Participation Plan (APP) for each was assessed to establish details in four key thematic areas; the governance mechanisms, division of labour, key plans for the future, and the challenges they face in carrying out WP activities. Each thematic area was then reviewed to try and identify key themes from within each.

Summary findings

The overall results suggested that none of the institutions surveyed had fully developed systems, processes and staff that would normally be required to undertake WP work. In many cases, this was a result of the institution's size - 100% of the providers surveyed expressed difficulties evaluating the outcomes of their WP work due to small cohort sizes, noting that this would either prevent them from reaching any meaningful conclusions about their activities or risk identifying individual students as a result of data publication. In some cases, institutions with no track record of HE delivery had published APPs in which they noted significant obstacles or an inability to produce meaningful targets due to a lack of available data.

Only two of the thirteen institutions had dedicated WP staff employed to carry out activities or undertake monitoring and evaluation, with many providers dividing up WP work between other roles within the institution.

The nature of the APP format was such that many deficiencies in processes and practices were identified as areas for further improvement, but a more detailed exploration of such institutions would be required to further develop an understanding of the tensions and difficulties in enacting WP policy within PHE institutions. The paper concludes with an overview of a planned programme of research into the roles of individual practitioners working in WP within for-profit PHE institutions and an agent-centred approach toward understanding the interactions and tensions between WP and for-profit HE.

References

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