The Engine of Widening Participation in the Drive for Social Mobility

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Acknowledgements

I dedicate this thesis to Khaleb Khanyiso, Elijah Thando, and Miah Ntsikelelo – the Light, the Love, the Blessing – my three magic stars…

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Abstract

In examining the policy and practice of widening participation (WP) within universities in England since the 1960s, this thesis considers the ways in which the *purpose* of higher education becomes politicised to reinforce the long-standing socio-economic inequalities of British society.

Using policy and discourse analysis to detail the creation and growth of WP at a macro-level, it shows how ideas of individual success that correlate learning with labour become bound within narratives of social mobility that are underpinned by an ideology of 'neoliberal meritocracy'. Analysis of the Access and Participation Plans of two ‘elite’ universities and two universities situated within ‘social mobility coldspots’ offers a meso-level investigation which is then considered alongside a micro-level analysis which examines the work of university outreach activities. Together, these findings suggest that WP's dependence on ‘disadvantaged’ students results in the creation of systems of measurement that operate in uniform and ambiguous ways to act as a 'homogenising knowledge regime' that generates a ‘class’ of student that can be monitored and measured.

Littler’s (2017) work on 'meritocracy' provides structure for discussion that consolidates findings from the macro, meso and micro-level analyses, to propose that the failure of WP to address the social and economic inequalities of British society results in a 'legitimation crisis' (Habermas, 1988 [1973]) for the narrative of social mobility. In turn, a 'political spectacle' (Edelman, 1988) becomes manifested through the Augar Review (2019), which directs blame towards higher education in a double-move that re-legitimises the political narrative of social mobility through the re-shaping of higher education, with this process working to distort the education of ‘disadvantaged’ students by redirecting their learning away from pedagogy that fosters democratic citizenship (Dewey,1963) [1916]).

Key words: Widening participation, Social mobility, Meritocracy, Class, Inequality, Hegemony

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Introduction

Why Universities?

A campus university is a fascinating field of study for sociologists. They are villages, where some people travel in as an employee for many years and others re-locate to live in on-site accommodation for a period of their education before moving into nearby estates, towns, or cities in their second year of study, becoming part of, and shaping the local community in which the university is based, before moving on to 'change the world'. The institution itself reflects the broader structures of society, with a variety of job roles on campus, each being assigned its own level of status and subsequent renumeration. The ways in which the different sections and departments of the university become managed by governance structures informed by positions of hierarchy are in no way unique to campus universities, nor are the ways in which these different components become linked through avenues of communication which connect them all to become part of one organisation driven by a unified objective. Symbols and rituals bind the university community together, as all staff members prepare for the new year starting in September, and all students and staff work both collectively and independently towards the achievement of qualification which marks the completion of studies, which becomes formalised through ceremony.

Sociologists looking to conduct a research project about campus universities have an endless list of options to explore. For example, they can consider the ways in which academic research relates with teaching, and the role that the scholar's research plays in the process of education; they can investigate the experiences of manual workers on campus, looking at the role that they play in supporting the education of students and how this often goes unseen; they can even choose to explore how technological changes within broader society influence

life on campus, such as with the closing of banks and post offices. This thesis is the result of seventeen years of research, albeit not all in an official sense. My study of universities was born from a desire that was shaped by my experiences of being a member of staff at a campus university for over ten years. I had initially joined working as a Patrol Officer for the Security Department in the Estate Management Section before leaving after six years to start an undergraduate degree in Sociology with Social Anthropology. I continued to work on campus throughout my BA and MA, doing many different jobs on campus and working across different departments, one of which included living in university accommodation as a Community Assistant. Experiencing the university from various perspectives created an intrigue in me to understand, through academic insight, the processes that influence and shape the place that has been my home for nearly two decades.

Sociology teaches us the importance of history. The campus university which I am based at was built in the 1960s as one of a new wave of institutions that came to be known as the Plateglass universities (Beloff, 1970 [1968]). I knew that to really understand my university I had to understand its place in history which would enable me to determine its contemporary position in the world. My study then, was not to become a micro-level analysis of my own institution, but an investigation that seeks to understand how macro-level structures interplay with sociological phenomena at a micro-level. By focusing attention away from my own university and analysing the theatre in which it acts I come to understand what forces shape its character as an actor. My starting point was to ask myself, what is it that I want to know? Broadly speaking, I am asking: what is the purpose of a university? I want to understand, what generates this institution that operates on such a scale for it to be a major employer of my local town (which recently became a city!)? What is it that drives the continuous cycle of incoming and outgoing students that means that my community is forever changing and my

friendship circle continuously expanding with the wonderful people that I meet year after year? How can I explain some of the changes that I've witnessed during my time as an employee, including green spaces being replaced with buildings, increasing numbers of students year on year, and a widespread demoralisation of the workforce that has led to many long-serving staff members leaving and a growing number of others expressing discontent with unmanageable workloads and reduced feelings of personhood?

Higher Education and Social Mobility

I began by reading widely around the topic of a university's purpose, including classic texts (Newman, 1912) and more contemporary dialogues (Collini, 2012), and considered the influence that philosophy of education (Dewey, 1963 [1916]; Freire, 2014) has had and continues to have on determining the purpose of a university. Beyond traditional academic texts I sought meaning through reading memoirs to consider alternative ways of viewing education (L'Amour, 1989) so that I could critique the purpose of a university with the aim of producing work that contributes to efforts to decolonise universities (Bhambra et al., 2018). I signed myself up to the mailing lists of various media sources reporting on universities and organisations working to shape the policy and practice of universities, until gradually, overtime, I began to accrue a reasonable level of knowledge about what I have come to know as 'the sector of higher education'.

It soon became clear that my university is part of an international network rooted in colonial expansion. This network, stretching back to the mid-nineteenth century, was an instrumental tool of Empire, with the British academic world playing a central role in the transmission of people, power, and ideas, as institutions of learning worked to set the benchmarks for universal standards of knowledge (Pietsch, 2013). Institutions of higher education have

shaped the world using markers of intelligence and status. And what was once the preserve of privilege, has over centuries and continents, diversified. The establishment of large numbers of liberal arts colleges in America during the mid-twentieth century was an attempt to bring the teaching of democratic citizenship to the masses under the guise of equality and upward mobility (Brown, 2015), and these ideas and methods have, in return, spread across the globe as nations competed and collaborated in modernisation projects. My university was established in response to national efforts to expand enrolment in universities with one of the central aims being the nurturing of skills needed for active citizenship (Committee on Higher Education, 1963).

A recurring theme that I noticed when broadly researching the purpose of universities was the idea of 'social mobility'. This became particularly prominent in what I call 'sector talk' by organisations involved in shaping higher education policy and practice. So, I began researching the concept of social mobility and was intrigued to learn more when I read that Marx had proposed the notion that:

> The more a ruling class is able to assimilate the foremost minds of a ruled class, the more stable and dangerous becomes its rule (Marx, 1894, in, Heath, 1981:224).

The more I read about sociological understandings of social mobility (Sorokin, 1927; Blau and Duncan, 1967; Hopper, 1981), the more I realised that the 'social mobility' being discussed in terms of higher education policy was something different. It was a logical step, then, to write my thesis about this relationship between higher education and the narrative of social mobility, with my investigation being based upon researching the policy and practice behind the supposed drive for 'social mobility' – widening participation.

A Study of Widening Participation

This thesis examines universities in the British context. My study focuses on 'widening participation' (WP) in English universities, showing what it is and how it works, to demonstrate the sociological implications that the narrative of social mobility creates for higher education. In detailing how 'social mobility' is promoted by politicians and policy makers as an end goal of higher education I demonstrate how a belief in meritocracy is tied to the narrative and used to shape the ways in which people engage with formal education, through WP. I present research which shows that WP is the engine of what has grown to become a 'sector' of higher education, and that WP is used in instrumental ways by powerholders at macro, meso, and micro-levels.

The idea of 'social mobility' in Britain is tied to understandings of class, with the narrative presenting the case for moving-up the class ladder by 'participating' in higher education. Ironically, however, my research shows how through WP, class is constructed in the form of the 'disadvantaged' student. This provides a target audience for WP, with the targets becoming trackable data producing entities that become measured at different stages of their 'student journey' to produce evidence which legitimises WP and the narrative of social mobility. As the 'disadvantaged' student is manufactured, commodified, and pervasively measured by the regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), systems of logic based upon uniformity and ambiguity are created, which has a profound impact on the role that universities play within society.

The research shows that as the narrative of social mobility enters a 'legitimation crisis' (Habermas, 1988 [1973]), resulting in a loss of confidence about its potential and the role of higher education within that, WP becomes re-orientated to re-legitimise the narrative, which

demonstrates its use as a tool for political manipulation and its power for shaping the 'sector' of higher education.

Thesis Structure

This research is based around a macro, meso, and micro-level analysis of WP, which are discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 1 opens with a discussion about conceptualising WP, and the purpose of universities, while Chapter 2 details images that inform WP, and Chapter 3, the research methods and methodology. Chapter 6 offers a discussion that ties in findings from the macro, meso, and micro-level analyses with ideas discussed in Chapter 2, and the thesis closes with a concluding chapter that addresses the hypothesis that: WP is legitimised by a narrative of social mobility that is underpinned by a belief in meritocracy.

Chapter 1, *Laying the Foundations,* begins with conceptualising WP as a discursive formation, explaining the ways in which it shapes higher education 'providers', and is dependent upon 'disadvantaged' students - a concept which this thesis problematises. The chapter then moves on to discuss the *purpose* of universities, using three main perspectives: democratic citizenship, individual success, and national prosperity. Considering the history of British universities, the chapter sets out the main arguments that: a) the opening up of British universities to people beyond a privileged few over the last one hundred or so years has altered education by moving away from liberal ideals and towards vocational training; b) contemporary ideas of 'student success' that are measured by methodological individualism and positivism and framed by labour-orientated goals distort learning processes; and c) universities are a source of cultural capital that work in the interests of national prosperity.

Chapter 2, *Images that Inform WP,* sets out the hypothesis which the thesis investigates: WP is legitimised by a narrative of social mobility that is underpinned by a belief in meritocracy. It details the three 'configurations' of legitimacy used within the analysis to determine the validity of the hypothesis and to shed light upon the power dynamics of WP, which help to reveal the extent to which WP becomes shaped by, and is dependent upon, hegemonic discourses. The chapter moves on to discuss the politicisation of the term 'social mobility', and its distance in meaning from sociological understandings of the concept. The notion of a *political spectacle* (Edelman, 1988) is introduced as a way of suggesting that an increase in the use of the term 'social mobility' could equate with a lack of upward social mobility in British society and that its prominence in political discourse could be an attempt to avoid a legitimacy crisis of the state (Habermas, 1988 [1973]). The chapter then introduces the work of Littler (2017) to bring in the concept of *neoliberal meritocracy* and details the 'five problems of meritocracy' which I then formulate into five questions which I use throughout the thesis to investigate WP.

Chapter 3, *Research Methods and Methodology,* highlights the work of Ozga (1987; 2021 [2019]) to explain how this thesis aims to contribute to the area of study known as Critical Sociology Policy by using discourse and policy analysis to examine WP on a macro, meso, and micro-level. The chapter sets out the strategy for analysis, detailing the macro-level analysis that charts a political history of WP to demonstrate how WP's emergence and continuation connects with the narrative of social mobility and aligns with an ideology of neoliberal meritocracy through political discourse; the meso-level analysis that interrogates how WP works at an institutional level to draw out common trends of universities, and the examination how of WP becomes *recognised* at a local level to understand how the narrative of social mobility relates with universities; and the micro-level analysis that investigates how

WP is facilitated to highlight the extent to which a partnership approach shapes the aspirations of prospective students. The methodological outline then explains how findings from the macro, meso and micro-level analysis will be used to inform a discussion chapter that addresses the five questions set out within Chapter 2 to determine the role that neoliberal meritocracy plays within the politics of higher education policy.

Chapter 4, *A Political History of WP*, conducts the macro-level analysis by scrutinising key reports and legislation from the 1960s until the present day. It details the ways in which ideas of widening access to universities have underpinned the market-driven growth of the mass system of higher education in England. Revisiting ideas of the *purpose* of higher education documented in Chapter 1, this chapter demonstrates how ideas of meritocracy stretching back to the 1960s have played a central role in creating a perceived purpose for universities within the public imaginary and shows how a disinvestment in these public institutions that occurred through neoliberal policy making of the 1980s and 90s resulted in their expansion being met with a withdrawal of state support and the implementation of a system of management based upon accountability and investment from fee-paying consumers. The chapter argues that as meritocracy became neoliberalised to justify this consumer investment, it generated a collective culture based upon the ideals of individual success, while creating a need for the interests of national prosperity to be met with further increases to the cost of this individualised investment. The analysis positions WP as a strategy that is underpinned by the ideology of neoliberal meritocracy and shows how it has been gathering pace since the introduction of tuition fees in 1998, but really took off after 2010, when announcements of the tripling of fees were made. The examination reveals how empty signifiers of ‘success’, ‘opportunity’, and ‘aspiration’ have become packaged within a narrative of social mobility which works to justify the investment of fee-paying students, and

suggests that with failed economic returns on these investments being costly for the Treasury, the supposed priority of individual success becomes overshadowed by needs to ensure national prosperity, leading to a readjustment of the social mobility narrative and a realignment of loan repayment plans. The analysis explains how the mass system of higher education during the 2020's has seen the principles of marketisation being met with greater centralisation through regulation and suggests that this empowers Government with the ability to steer the direction of its educational institutions in way that maintains order between national prosperity, individual success, and democratic citizenship.

Chapter 5, *The Workings of WP*, conducts the meso and micro-level analysis. The meso-level analysis shows the processes through which the narrative of social mobility becomes legitimised to drive WP, and in turn, how WP further strengthens the narrative of social mobility through its practices. The meso-level analysis is conducted in two parts. Firstly, the workings of WP at an institutional level compares and contrasts the Access and Participation Plans (APP) of four universities, two of which are recognised as 'elite', and two of which are based in 'disadvantaged' areas. Findings suggest a slightly different approach to WP by these two groups of universities, with the 'disadvantaged' universities placing more emphasis upon the notion of 'student success'. However, all universities in the study are bound by a common theme of 'equality of opportunity' and goals of 'raising aspirations' for 'disadvantaged' students, which findings suggest, are shaped by a logic of uniform ambiguity set by the regulator, the Office for Students (OfS) to correlate WP with the narrative of social mobility and a belief in meritocracy. The meso-level analysis continues by examining how the social mobility narrative is *recognised* at a local level, and how its legitimacy perpetuates WP's legitimacy at a micro-level. The analysis interrogates the Opportunity Area Delivery Plans of two 'social mobility coldspots', which are homes to the two 'disadvantaged' universities

featured in my study. The Plans highlight that government ministers link social mobility with education and promote ideas of meritocracy. 'Social mobility' is framed as an individual pursuit geared towards labour market goals, with the success of 'social mobility' being positioned as being dependent upon the professionalisation of teachers and the behaviours of students. A 'partnership' approach is reflected within the Plans, which aligns with findings from the comparative analysis of the APPs; and the two Opportunity Area Plans and three of the APPs feature the work of the Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach (Neaco), which is an OfS funded organisation that facilitates WP. The micro-level analysis, then, explores the work of Neaco to understand how WP is facilitated through the bridge from the meso-level concept of *raising aspirations*, with findings suggesting that prospective students become monitored, tracked and tested as a result of their 'disadvantaged status', the metrics of which feed into what I term as the homogenising knowledge regime of uniform ambiguity.

Chapter 6, *Discussion*, expands on this notion of a homogenising knowledge regime and revisits the hypothesis and the ideas of legitimacy used to test its validity in light of findings from the macro, meso, and micro-level analyses, all of which are discussed in more depth in the conclusion of the thesis. This chapter's central focus is on addressing the questions formulated within Chapter 2 in relation to the five 'problems of meritocracy'. In problematising the concept of the 'disadvantaged' student I consider the ways in which people are still 'left behind' despite the rhetoric of 'equality of opportunity', which I suggest, works in conjunction with individualistic and positivist systems of measurement to instil an ideology of neoliberal meritocracy within popular culture. I show how ideas of 'talent' and 'intellect' are measured and nurtured through WP, highlighting that the notion of 'potential' is viewed in different ways by the 'elite' and 'disadvantaged' universities, and discuss the ways in which privilege is produced through the British schooling system so that ideas of

'talent' and 'intellect' become manipulated markers of hierarchy that work to perpetuate the myth of meritocracy and reinvigorate structures of inequality. I recap on how WP has evolved alongside the narrative of social mobility, explaining that politically aligning WP with the narrative of social mobility equips neoliberal meritocracy with a steady stream of participants, and applying the macro-level analysis, I argue that 'widening participation', even before morphing into WP as a result of neoliberal policy making, had its roots in ideas of meritocracy, and that this worked to distort the class-based distinctions and plutocratic ruling of British society that is perpetuated in contemporary society by aligning WP with ideas of individual success. I discuss the role that WP plays in fostering notions of professional status, arguing that university structures are based upon hierarchical structures of development and that the status associated with a university qualification has altered with the increase in the number of people going to university, which I suggest, positions educators as being held accountable for mitigating the effects of civic stratification within society, while at the same time WP is being redirected towards skills-based learning that creates a two-tier system of higher education that brings class-based pedagogical disruption. I explore the question if WP works to obscure and extend economic and social inequalities using findings from my meso and micro-level analyses to argue that inequalities become obscured by WP through the creation of the belief in 'equality of opportunity' which legitimises a belief in meritocracy and diverts attention away from structural inequality; I suggest that a legitimacy crisis (Habermas, 1988 [1973]) for the narrative of social mobility results in a political spectacle (Edelman, 1988) that assumes the failure of the 'sector', which is in turn used as a method by policy makers to reinvigorate the narrative of social mobility.

The *Conclusion* chapter of the thesis addresses the hypothesis by exploring the ways in which legitimacy operates across and between a belief in meritocracy, the narrative of social

mobility, and practices of WP. I use three 'configurations' of legitimacy (Suddaby et al., 2017) to shine light on the power dynamics of hegemonic discourses that not only shape practices of WP but equip universities with the ability to carry out their assigned task of promoting a culture of individual success to the masses. I conclude that a) the legitimacy of the belief in meritocracy and the narrative of social mobility are mutually inter-dependent, operating between the macro and micro levels, and that WP works as part of the 'set of collective processes' to re-affirm the narrative of social mobility and strengthen the belief in meritocracy; b) this multi-level social construction works to align the narrative of social mobility with WP through the notion of 'equality of opportunity', which reaffirms the belief in meritocracy; and c) the OfS logic of uniform ambiguity creates systems of measurement that legitimise WP and shift the ideology underpinning university expansion to a neoliberal meritocracy (Littler, 2017). The chapter moves on to discuss the 'legitimation crisis' (Habermas, 1988 [1973]) of the narrative of social mobility and the 'political spectacle' (Edelman, 1988) generated by the Augar Review (2019), which I suggest works to re-legitimise the narrative of social mobility through a re-orientation of WP that becomes possible because of the defaults of meritocracy and the narrative of social mobility – individual failure and ambiguity of meaning. The conclusion then moves into theorising how neoliberalism creates the framework for the hegemonic knowledge regime of uniform ambiguity, detailing how it constructs and commodifies the 'disadvantaged' student' as a method for producing a steady stream of human beings ready to become 'formulated' in terms of capital investment and appreciation (Brown, 2015: 176). I argue that neoliberal meritocracy (Littler, 2017) plays a fundamental role within this process and that its binding with the narrative of social mobility informs discourses of individual success that dominate higher education to cause pedagogical manipulation that works in the interest of national prosperity by reinforcing class trajectories. The chapter's final section considers the

sociological implications that the narrative of social mobility has for higher education and proposes that it enables the neoliberal takeover of universities, that through the expansion of enrolment in higher education, the ideology of neoliberal meritocracy is empowered to colonise the minds of the masses to reduce the capacity for common betterment through the reinforcement of hierarchy.

Chapter 1: Laying the Foundations

Conceptualising Widening Participation

This thesis conceptualises Widening Participation [hereafter WP] as a discursive formation (Foucault, 2013 [1969]) that shapes higher education policy and practice in England. Simply put, WP is about increasing the number of non-traditional/under-represented/disadvantaged students studying at higher education providers. WP is reflected in the policy and practice of institutions of higher education and works to connect them with broader society through 'Outreach'. The regulator of higher education in England, the Office for Students [hereafter OfS], plays a deciding role in determining who is considered a non-traditional/under-represented/disadvantaged student (OfS, 2023 [1]), and as such, this thesis focuses on English higher education. However, the analysis interchangeably considers the British/UK context where appropriate, and similarly, while often referring to 'universities', the analysis accepts these institutions as being under the umbrella of 'higher education providers' - a commonly used term which symbolises what has come to be known as, the 'sector' of higher education (QAA, 2023).

The creation of the 'sector' of higher education within England, which I refer to throughout the thesis using inverted commas, represents the shift in higher education policy that arose through neoliberal policy making of the late 1980s. This thesis details in the macro-level analysis of the Political History of WP in Chapter 4 how increasing managerialism within universities since this time has changed the ways in which universities operate and how they are presented, with linguistical shifts that position institutions of learning as 'providers'. These linguistical shifts politicise and instrumentalise education, and findings demonstrate

how the creation of the ‘sector’ aligns with the introduction and increase of tuition fees and the subsequent student loan system for ‘home’ students. Chapter 5, which uses a meso-level and micro-level analysis to reveal the processes through which WP is orchestrated, highlights the ways in which higher education in England has become both dependent upon and powered by WP.

As initiatives of WP are primarily orientated towards encouraging and supporting undergraduate ‘home’ students to participate in higher education, the research remains focused on this area. However, WP is also bound-up within an ‘internationalisation nexus’ (Gayton, 2019) which positions higher education in England as being a microcosm of a ‘methodological globalism’ (Marginson, 2022) that sets a precedent for higher education across different nations. This precedent plays an important role for the UK economy as British universities compete with their international counterparts to recruit high fee-paying international students that boost UK GDP through economic growth. As such, the growth of the English higher education cannot be attributed to WP alone. Nonetheless, WP’s importance for this growth is clear when considering that there were approximately 35,000 students studying at forty-six universities in the UK in 1990, where-as in 2017 this number had risen to roughly two million students across 140 universities (Collini, 2017:1); coupled with the fact that in 2022 the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) reported record numbers of ‘disadvantaged students’ being accepted onto higher education courses (UCAS, 2022). By problematising the category of the ‘disadvantaged student’, this thesis highlights the uniqueness of English higher education and the role that WP plays within it.

The increasing numbers of ‘disadvantaged students’, as represented by the UCAS figures above, are not a true indication of the growth of WP. These figures do not account for WP

from the perspective of postgraduate enrolment, which since the introduction of the Postgraduate Master's Loan (GOV.UK, [1] 2023) in 2016, and the Postgraduate Doctoral Loan (GOV.UK, [2] 2023) in 2018, has coincided with increasing emphasis from higher education providers of the need to develop WP strategies at postgraduate level. In 2019, a report entitled *Widening Participation in the South East Network of Social Sciences Doctoral Training Partnership (SeNSS DTP)* found that there was little published research about WP in postgraduate education, and that there was a lack of consensus around what the objectives and targets should be, what the indicators should be, and what the demographic groups of interest should be (Reinhardt, 2019). Unlike WP at undergraduate level, which has been developing steadily since the late 1990s, WP at postgraduate level is not overseen by the regulator OfS – the postgraduate element of WP then, with its lack of uniformity, is not a main focus of the research. However, the growing importance of WP for postgraduate students is still relevant to the analysis as it offers insight to the centrality of WP within higher education policy and practice, it highlights the adaptable nature of WP, and it shines light upon the functional role that OfS plays within the orchestration of WP.

The Purpose of Higher Education

The discursive formation of WP is related to the character of higher education. The macro-analysis of Chapter 4, which presents an in-depth political history of WP, demonstrates how WP was born from changes to the ways in which higher education is imagined, and how it has grown to reshape how higher education becomes imagined. Chapter 5 focuses-in further to understand how this imagined *purpose* of higher education by the state, students and staff of universities, prospective students and their families, and the wider populace, both influences and is influenced by, policies and practices of WP that mould and drive higher education.

The framing of the *purpose* of higher education can be imagined from three main perspectives: a) democratic citizenship; b) individual success; and c) national prosperity. Arguably, these perspectives do intersect, but by unpacking each one, it becomes possible to learn about the power dynamics between them, and in turn open up space to consider how they relate to WP.

Democratic Citizenship

When contemplating the purpose of higher education, we must consider its relationship with the education model in its broader sense. Education has long been the focus of philosophical discussion and debate, with Plato's *Republic* arguably offering the first 'theory' of education, with concepts such as 'morality', 'play', and 'discovery-learning' continuing in the minds of educational thinkers centuries later (Barrow, 1976). Perhaps one of the most influential philosophers of education in more recent times is the American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, John Dewey. In 1916 Dewey published his classic text *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1916), within which he builds on these early Platonian concepts to argue that the differences of immaturity and maturity among group members, that is, society, requires a pragmatic approach to ensure both survival and progression. Recognising education as being the interlocutor between civil society and the ideals of democratic citizenship, Dewey promoted education as serving a function – to both promote and nurture the skills of democracy. The classroom, Dewey argued, was not a means to an end, but an end in itself, where democracy could be lived in the moment, harnessed through the relationships being built between student and teacher, with learning occurring for all involved. The purpose of education for Dewey, was to create an environment where practical skills could be learned alongside the art of thinking and communication, with the idea being

that these experiences would then go on to shape wider society through democratic participation (Dewey, 1916).

These ideas of democracy and education discussed by Dewey are applicable beyond the school setting for younger learners and have relevance beyond the US to which his writing was referring. When Collini (2012) encourages us to ruminate about *What are Universities For?*, notions of a 'public good', achievable in large part by the study of humanities subjects, are threads that interweave his manifesto that champions a certain approach to learning. And for Dewey himself, it is the *Idea of a University* (Newman, 1912), as brought to the fore by John Henry Newman in 1852, that offers much inspiration to his philosophy of education. It has been suggested that:

> Dewey appears to be genuinely impressed with 'Cardinal Newman's' *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education* which he describes as 'one of the few educational books of the world which are neither priggish nor impractical.' The educationalist Malcolm Skilbeck goes further when he suggests that Newman's model of university education may have shaped Dewey's thinking (Pratt Morris-Chapman, 2016).

For Collini, however, there is a level of scepticism when weighing-up the relevance of Newman's classic text for analyses of contemporary universities, arguing that 'even when it was published in the mid-nineteenth century, [it was] presuming certain features that had already passed away with early nineteenth-century Oxford' (Collini, 2017: Ch.3 Pt.1).

Ideas of outdatedness are similarly recognised by Tierney (2015) who questions the relevance of Newman's *Idea* within a contemporary international context, arguing that it fails to offer solutions for tackling periods of significant change within higher education. Nonetheless, despite the reservations, Tierney acknowledges that Newman's work was a source of inspiration for a diverse range of authors, including the Irish novelist, poet, and literary critic

James Joyce, and the Palestinian-American public intellectual and founder of postcolonial studies, Edward Said. Although 'Newman never wrote directly about the poor, or the role of the university as a social agent for change' (Tierney, 2015: 5-16), his *Idea* and the ideas within it did lay a foundation for following thinkers to build upon; it constructed a framework within which academic freedom and intellectual rigour could be celebrated:

> Said recognised the ultimate focus of Newman's university. Ideas change. Men -and women- change their thinking, and the university's role is to help that change occur, not by violence, not by indoctrination, not by only vocational training, but by intense intellectual engagement with one another (Tierney, 2015: 5-16).

This perspective, which visualises the university as an institution that helps facilitate societal changes through academic debate and dialogue holds much weight theoretically speaking. The philosophy of John Dewey was crafted through centuries of intellectual pursuit that was handed down through generations and across borders, being adapted accordingly in response to the lived experiences and research of teachers and learners – knowledge, seen as a public good that can be shared and contributed towards by any active participant.

Yet, this vision had and continues to have its restrictions. Becoming an active participant is not always 'available on equal and easy terms' as Dewey suggests (Dewey, 1963:87-88). While in the US institutions of higher learning have historically been widespread, the same cannot be said for England. In 1880, for example, the state of Ohio, with a population of 3 million people offered 37 institutions of higher education, whereas in England during the same period there were only four universities for a population of 23 million (Trow, 1988). Since this time the university systems of the US and the UK have continued to evolve in very different ways, with a 2023 comparison suggesting that variety is an important factor - with less than 200 universities in the UK, and around 2,500 colleges in the US, the US has a large

middle ground of colleges, while the UK has less variety and a hierarchical university system (Unifrog, 2023).

This hierarchy of UK higher education dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, during which time in Britain, ideological struggles about the purpose of universities were gathering pace. On the one hand were the advocates campaigning for universities to have stronger ties with industry, led largely by the sociologist and anthropologist Herbert Spencer, and the Biologist T.H. Huxley (Sanderson, 1972). This scientific approach to knowledge lay at odds with the liberal approach to learning proposed by Newman and supported by J.S. Mill. In his inaugural speech as Rector of St. Andrews in 1867, Mill reinforced his belief that:

> universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining a livelihood. Their object is not to make skilful lawyers and physicians or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings (Sanderson, 1972: 5).

Yet the established model of liberal learning favoured by Newman and Mill became further challenged through campaigns to improve inclusivity for women and the working classes within university education. Universities in Britain during the 19th century held strict entrance requirements for males of privileged backgrounds, meaning that universities were exclusionary spaces, and during the 1870's, the British Idealists, headed by T.H. Green, worked to establish what became known as the University Extension Movement (Vincent, 2013). This movement saw universities delivering lectures beyond the confines of their colleges, taking education out to the community in a fashion described in 1981 as being the 'ancestor of the extramural departments of today' (Marriot, 1981). Interestingly, the movement 'justified itself as offering liberal education' (Marriot, 1981), yet it was not long

before the movement itself led to a reimagining of the values of education, with a more training orientated education being needed to ensure the movement's continuation:

> The opportunity to attract schoolteachers was there from the beginning, and it was always taken for granted within the movement that they were an important means of influence over the cultural condition of the country and yet were themselves a culturally deprived group. Then, about 1890, when extension felt it had proved itself – but was still refused any effective recognition – the urge to infiltrate teacher training became very marked. To elevate the teachers was of national importance; it was also the case that teachers and their apprentices promised to be attendance-builders (Marriot, 1981).

In contrast to the beliefs being championed by J.S. Mill during his inaugural speech at St. Andrews (Sanderson, 1972:5), the University Extension Movement, aided by its justification of promoting a liberal education, had inadvertently redirected university education away from being solely about learning to be 'capable and cultivated human beings', and pushed it more towards training for a 'special mode of gaining a livelihood'. Furthermore, the emphasis on pursuing the 'national importance' of improving the 'cultural condition of the country' (Marriot, 1981), through university education, meant a direct challenge to the exclusivity previously enjoyed within the gated communities of British university colleges.

The decades that followed led to the creation of more universities, and greater participation in higher education for Britain's populace. These changes ran in parallel with adapting perspectives of the purpose of higher education, as this thesis moves on to discuss. The University Extension Movement, with its ambitions of making higher education more inclusive, can be seen as an early model of WP; it is an early example of how opening up university education to students from less privileged backgrounds can influence a reimagining of a university's purpose.

Individual Success

Understanding the purpose of higher education, and more specifically, its relationship with the notion of individual success can be aided by contemplating the work of Hannah Arendt. The classic text, *The Human Condition*, encourages us to imagine the different arenas within which success can become manifested. The public, private, and social realms are spaces for 'activities', which Arendt refers to as 'vita activa'. These spaces offer room for the activities to operate, and the activities are conceptualised using three main concepts: labour, work, and action (Arendt, 2018). These spaces can be seen as the landscape within which the choices of the prospective university student are made: whether or not to enrol, where to enrol, what to study, whether to continue studying etc. These choices, before they are finalised, constitute what Arendt refers to as 'vita contemplativa' (contemplative life). The choices will be shaped by various factors, unique to each decision maker, and will work in communication with the activities mentioned previously. The point at which 'vita contemplativa' shifts to 'vita activa', or reverts back again, and whether the activity of pursuing an education can be considered as labour, work, or action, will again, be unique for each individual. Similarly, how success is understood is also a matter of personal judgement. The conceptualisation becomes shaped by an expanse of psychological, physiological and sociological factors, and is more often than not, influenced by personal experience and perception.

However, when the student enters into a relationship with an education provider, the institution's own values of success come to influence how the student's notion of success is conceptualised, thereby positioning the institution as an influencer of the human condition. And as this thesis goes on to demonstrate, institutional ideas of success are not unique, but are part of the broader make-up of the 'sector'. When scrutinising the 'buzz phraze' of 'student success' within an international higher education context, Custer questions: *is*

student success academia's failure? (Custer, 2023). Custer's article considers how the 'age-old tensions between academics and administrators' dance around the debate of 'student success' as its conceptualisation becomes a tug of war between institutions competing within league tables (Hazelkorn, 2011), and academics who believe that 'real student success is synonymous with learning – but the current system doesn't allow academics to cultivate learning communities' (Custer, 2023).

Notions of 'student success' become shaped by organisations such as Advance HE - a member-led, sector-owned charity that works with institutions of higher education across the world to advise and help shape policy and practice for higher education in the UK. Setting a benchmark for what constitutes student 'success' is part of their work. They suggest that ''success' recognises that students benefit from HE study in a wide range of ways, including personal development and progression into work and career or further learning' (Advance HE, 2023).

I suggest that there are four main reasons why the work of Advance HE is important for understanding individual success in relation to the purpose of higher education:

1. It is a figurehead of the commercialised organisation of higher education. It helps to cement within policy and practice the belief that higher education is primarily about individual success.
2. By conceptualising 'success', systems of measurement are introduced, which go on to shape the ways in which higher education institutions operate.
3. Although it recognises that 'students benefit from HE study in a wide range of ways', it narrows these benefits into measurable components, namely, 'personal development

and progression into work and career or further learning'. Within this process, individual judgements of success, which are shaped by personal experience and perception, become overlooked by the imposed value system.

4. In cementing the belief that higher education is primarily about individual success, it helps to lay a foundation for WP to be developed under the guise of neoliberal meritocracy (Littler, 2017).

The narrative of individual success shaped by organisations such as Advance HE is an imposition of methodological individualism and positivism that reduces education to measurable objects while ignoring the immeasurable and longer-term benefits of education. It works to delegitimise education that is geared towards promoting and enhancing democratic citizenship, which as the previous section has shown, is based upon relationships, and striving for a public good. While individualising success does not necessarily stand at odds with democratic ideals, it is through the process of negating individual judgements, while simultaneously imposing an institutionalised value system that promotes competition, that the delegitimization occurs. Arendt demonstrates how this process can work when using Greek mythology to discuss *The Frailty of Human Affairs:*

> In the case of the successful ruler, he may claim for himself what actually is the achievement of many – something that Agamemnon, who was a king but no ruler, would never have been permitted. Through this claim, the ruler monopolizes, so to speak, the strength of those without whose help he would never be able to achieve anything. Thus, the delusion of extraordinary strength arises and with it the fallacy of the strong man because he is alone (Arendt, 2018: 190).

With a designed and defined ideology of individual success dominating higher education, claims of individual achievement work to undermine the importance of democratic thinking, and at the same time, the liberal arts approach to education that can support it becomes

devalued (Nussbaum, 2012); the delusion of success legitimizes the monopolization of the individual by delegitimizing the collective.

Casting doubt on the integrity of the methods used to measure individual success can illustrate this process. For example, *Graduate Outcomes* is the biggest UK annual social survey that records the perspectives and the current status of graduates 15 months after leaving higher education. The survey aims to produce data that can be shared with Government, charities, journalists, researchers, and others to 'understand the higher education sector and the state of the graduate labour market' (Graduate Outcomes, 2023 [1]). Findings from the 2019/20 survey results suggest that: from a response of 403,835 graduates 89% were in some form of work or further study, with 76% of those working in high skilled occupations e.g. managers and professionals. The median salary of full-time first-degree graduates in full-time employment 15 months after finishing higher education is recorded as being £25,000 (Graduate Outcomes, 2023 [2]).

Statistics such as these present what can be seen as a positive picture of higher education and the graduate labour market. They work to legitimise higher education: a high percentage of respondents were working in highly skilled jobs when completing the survey, and an even higher percentage were earning enough money to start paying back their student loans (Student Loans Company, 2023). Higher education is seen, through these statistics, to be fulfilling the purpose of providing the labour market with a qualified workforce. This is reflected by the fact that 71% of respondents agreed that they were using what they learnt while studying, with 77% agreeing that their current activity fitted in with their future plans. What's more, 86% felt their current activity to be meaningful, with 74% stating that they were satisfied with life. These statistics help to produce a narrative that positions higher

education as a pathway to work. They facilitate a cognitive correlation that supposes fulfilment in life can be achieved through participation within the labour market. These statistics and the questions asked frame success in individualistic terms and base it upon the amount of money being earnt.

However, as this thesis will go on to demonstrate through its interrogation of WP, this narrative is open to scrutiny. These statistics, for example, do not offer a realistic portrayal of the lived experiences of graduates: only 52% of eligible graduates opted to fill out the survey (HESA, 2022), and with the survey recording 6% of respondents as being unemployed and another 5% as doing another activity like travelling, caring for someone, or being retired, this 11% could in real terms, potentially be much higher. Similarly, the median earning of £25,000, while supposedly signalling success in terms of earnings, when considered alongside student loan deductions and the increasing cost of living, this salary does not equate with a comfortable existence in economic terms. Even for those whose education led them to highly skilled occupations, this median of £25,000 remains for women earners, and for men, it is only a little higher at £27,000 (Graduate Outcomes, 2023 [2]). Neither do the statistics take into account those who enrol in higher education but do not go on to graduate. In sector talk, this is termed 'non-continuation', with its antidote, 'retention', working in parallel with 'success' (Advance HE, 2023). In 2019/20, across the UK, 5.3% of UK domiciled full-time entrants completed more than 50 days of higher education, but did not return for their second year (HESA, 2023 [1]). Again, these figures do not capture the full picture, as they do not account for part-time students, or those who may leave in subsequent years, but they do provide insight to yet another shortfall in the ability of the *Graduate Outcomes* survey to fully represent the lived reality of graduates. Furthermore, the terminology used within the survey to capture the perspectives of students is open-ended. Asking whether someone 'used what they learnt while studying', could mean anything,

including Microsoft Word, accessing a library, or drinking shots in the bar. The broadness and deliberate vagueness of the questions enables the results to be shaped to fit the objective of the narrative and produce the necessary figures; for example, being 'satisfied with life' can change over time and can be influenced by many things beyond the education received 15 months previously, but to capture a positive survey result and claim it as a correlation is misleading.

The aim for higher education to deliver 'success', presented through the ubiquitous logic of methodological individualism and positivism represented through surveys such as *Graduate Outcomes*, steps further away from democratically orientated education that strives to serve the public good. As individualised notions of success come to dominate the policies and practices of higher education 'providers', the human condition (Arendt, 2018) becomes institutionalised by the overbearingness of the 'sector's' influence. Custer (2023) correlates the growth of 'student success' with WP, demonstrating how the purpose of higher education changes along with its demographic:

> The crowd of student success campaigns is partly a reflection of the surge in higher education enrolments in the past four decades. More students with more diverse backgrounds, varying levels of prior academic achievement and unique needs are now going to university or college. And institutions are scrambling to adapt (Custer, 2023).

Just like the University Extension Movement of 19th Century Britain discussed in the previous section, universities of the 21st Century explicitly equate widening access with a move towards labour-orientated education. By emphasising the need for action in labour, space for contemplation becomes filled by work (Arendt, 2018). Through the notion of individual success, opportunities for relationship-based learning that celebrate the classroom

as an end in-itself (Dewey, 1916) become inaccessible to the diverse student body of contemporary universities.

National Prosperity

As discussed above, a purpose of higher education that is based upon ideas of individual success can help to produce workers for the labour market. This, in turn, can help to produce national prosperity. As this thesis demonstrates in the macro-analysis of Chapter 4, the notion that national prosperity is achievable through increasing higher education participation rates, has been a running thread of higher education and economic policy in England since the 1960s. And as demonstrated in the meso and micro-analyses of Chapter 5, shifts in the management of higher education that arose from the introduction of tuition fees in the late 1990s has been instrumental in instilling a culture of neoliberal meritocracy that perpetuates the success narrative through ideas of social mobility, where by social mobility for the individual is positioned as being synonymous with social mobility for the nation (Milburn, 2012).

But this idea that national prosperity can be achieved through higher education participation dates back further than the 1960s, and this prosperity is about more than just producing labourers. Sanderson's historical study *The Universities and British Industry: 1850-1970* (Sanderson, 1972), highlights that, at different moments within British history, differing demands for universities to meet the needs of national prosperity were required. While universities did play an important role in providing a skilled workforce to meet society's needs throughout this period, they also proved essential tools for enabling Britain to compete within a modernising world (Sanderson, 1972). For example, during the nineteenth century, as France and Germany were improving their science and innovation, creating large firms,

and increasing specialist skills like accountancy, fear was generated in Britain, prompting the need to align their modernisation strategy. Universities responded by playing a central role in meeting these demands of statecraft by producing graduates of industry and shifting the focus of universities away from 'the old liberal anti-vocational education ideal' (Sanderson, 1972: 395) and towards industry. It was these pressures to compete within a modernising world that Sanderson (1972: 389) suggests 'induced the universities and industry to turn towards each other'.

The periods discussed within Sanderson's work, such as the inter-war years of 1919-39 and the war and post-war years of 1939-59 represent a different time to a contemporary Britain driven by ideas of individual success. In Welch's (2014) study of the use of propaganda in World War One, it is shown how symbols and slogans were used to form ideas of nationalism and patriotism, which worked to unify the country under a common cause. But this unified response altered in Britain during the Second World War, as 'when Britain went to war on 3 September 1939 there was none of the 'flag-waving patriotism' of August 1914. The British people were now resigned to the fact that Hitler had to be stopped by force' (Imperial War Museums, 2023). Despite shifts in the ways that patriotism is displayed, it remains bound with ideas of nationalism, and it was the dominant ideology that united Britain throughout the period of Sanderson's study. The belief in nationalism enabled the universities, with their increasing ties with industry, to work towards national prosperity, and in turn be legitimised within the public imaginary.

The legitimacy of universities within the public imagination resulted from their ties to industry that helped to create a shared sense of purpose based upon ideas of nationhood. Up until the mid-1800's, the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge dominated the public

imaginary about what universities were. With their 'old liberal anti-vocational education ideal' (Sanderson, 1972: 395) they were far removed from the everyday working people of England and were seen as being reserved spaces for the elite. This began to change with the building of new universities and initiatives such as the University Extension Movement during the later part of the nineteenth century (Vincent, 2013), which went hand-in-hand with the growth of industry. Yet Lubenow (2002) discusses how universities of England during this period were not only dependent upon industry in the delivery of national prosperity, but also upon culture, to which universities had an important role to play. Lubenow argues that contrary to popular belief, the study of Classics at places like Oxford and Cambridge did not stifle national economic development through their 'anti-entrepreneurial bias', as some critiques had presumed, but rather this culture helped to drive economic development:

> An indeterminate body of learning in the universities cooperated with indeterminate social values in the professions to produce a new, deliberative liberalism: a kind of cultural capital that embraced a new modernity and gave a new authority to British administration and government in the 20th century (Lubenow, 2002: 217).

Emerging into the twentieth century with a cultural capital that empowered an authoritative administration and government, the British government embraced the new modernity and repositioned its power on the global stage. As part of this modernising strategy, the government set out to reinforce ideas about the purpose of higher education within the mind of the public, which would help instil a sense of pride in nationhood. To do this, they needed to connect universities with industry and people, through understandings of *place*. To meet this need, the turn of the twentieth century saw the birth of the first wave of *civic universities*.

As a pamphlet that was circulated around the factories of Sheffield in 1902 demonstrates, the building of the civic universities was very much about capturing the hearts and minds of

working people. The pamphlet requested a one penny contribution from each worker to help establish a university for Sheffield and for the people of the city. The pamphlet stated (Brink, 2018: 294):

> You should support the university because:
>
> 1. The UNIVERSITY will be for the people.
> 2. The UNIVERSITY will bring the highest education within the reach of the working man.
> 3. The UNIVERSITY will help the local industries.
> 4. The UNIVERSITY will be the centre where the treatment of accidents and diseases will be studied.
> 5. SHEFFIELD is the only large City in England without a University. Sheffield cannot afford to remain in this position.
> 6. The UNIVERSITY will not only benefit this district, it will assist the nation in its trade competition with other nations.

Following this campaign, the University of Sheffield opened in 1905 as one of a growing number of civic universities that worked to strengthen the major industrial cities of England by connecting higher education and industry through the city's people. The building of the civic universities was part of broader modernisation strategy that developed cities in the interest of the nation, allowing it to prosper through trade competition with other nations.

The 'redbrick' universities, as they came to be known, were the first wave of civic universities and included Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, and Sheffield. Prior to these institutions gaining university status through their Royal Charter, they were specialist institutions training in skills such as medicine and engineering. After the First World War, the second wave of civic universities were established in cities such as Reading and Nottingham, with the 1960s being the 'cut-off point' for red brick universities, with universities built thereafter being referred to as 'plate glass' to represent their modern architecture (The Student Room, 2021). The architectural design of the Victorian era 'red

brick' universities when compared to the 'plate glass' universities that were built in the 1960s represents the modernisation of higher education that gathered pace in Britain throughout the twentieth century.

It was after The Second World War that Britain, along with other European nations (a generation later than the US) saw a shift in higher education going from being an elite to a mass system of participation. Emphasis on the importance of science, national planning and social welfare meant that higher education became 'democratised' and largely funded by the state (Anderson, 2016). International competition led to an increase of higher education participation as soon as the war ended and by the 1960s the University Grants Committee (UGC) had made plans to build eight 'campus or plate glass universities', with the first of which, Sussex, opening in 1961 (Anderson, 2016). These plans for expansion and the commitment to a state investment in education laid a solid foundation for the Robbins era, through which the *principle* 'that higher education should be a right, deriving from common citizenship, for all qualified to benefit from it', became 'vital in creating a political consensus which lasted for a generation' (Anderson, 2016).

Chapter 4 of this thesis conducts a macro-analysis which charts the political history of WP. That analysis begins with a scrutiny of the Robbins Report of 1963. For this reason, I will not go into depth about that report here, but it is important to mention that despite its relevance for creating longstanding political consensus around higher education in England (Anderson, 1963), the momentum for expansion had already begun and was inextricably linked with ideas of national prosperity. International competitiveness was undeniably a shaping factor that led to the calling of the report by government. This was reflected in the report's methodology, which included visits to France, the Federal German Republic, the

Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States and the Soviet Union (Committee on Higher Education, 1963:1). What's more, the report openly discusses international competitiveness as being a prime motivator of the reports commissioning:

> the growing realisation of this country's economic dependence upon the education of its population has led to much questioning of the adequacy of present arrangements. Unless higher education is speedily reformed, it is argued, there is little hope of this densely populated island maintaining an adequate position in the fiercely competitive world of the future (Committee on Higher Education, 1963:5).

For higher education to serve the national interests by working towards national prosperity, a commitment to nationalism is needed from the population. The patriotism that nationalism requires may not necessarily be openly displayed (Welch, 2014), but it can still be enhanced and exercised by an authority that uses cultural capital as a strategy within the race for modernity (Lubenow, 2002).

Summary

WP is a discursive formation that is shaped by and shapes the policy and practice of higher education in England. It is primarily about universities and other higher education 'providers' recruiting large numbers of 'disadvantaged students' – a term which this thesis problematises to demonstrate how WP has become the driver of an expanding 'sector' of higher education in England. The evolution of higher education represented by its growth and commercial character prompts enquiry into its *purpose*. Through understanding different ways in which the purpose of higher education can be perceived, the thesis can determine the impact of its evolution.

The purpose of higher education has been explained using three perspectives. The philosophy of John Dewey offers insight to how education can serve a function of building democratic

citizenship through teaching and learning relationships. This discussion of *democratic citizenship* moved on to look at the work of John Henry Newman, detailing how his idea of a liberal university education that enhances the public good comes up against challenge within the hierarchy of class-based British society, before considering how attempts to open-up higher education to people other than upper-class men encouraged a move away from the liberal educational ideals and towards vocational training.

Hannah Arendt's ideas around action and contemplation set the basis for understanding the perspective that higher education serves the purpose of *individual success.* The discussion moved on to detail how 'student success' has grown to be an important feature of the 'sector' of higher education and that it works to instil a methodological individualism and positivism that distorts learning processes. Assisted by ambiguously measured indicators such as those used within the Graduate Outcomes survey, as WP increases, and as the 'sector' of higher education expands, knowledge is directed away from being democratically orientated as it moves towards labour-orientated objectives which reduce the space in which individuals can have room for contemplation.

The final perspective considered in understanding the purpose of higher education is *national prosperity*. The discussion looked at the ties between universities and industry between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth century, exploring how ideas of nationalism were fostered among the British public to assist with the opening of the 'red brick' universities, while considering the ways in which cultural capital harnessed from the ancient universities worked to transition higher education into mass participation following The Second World War. The discussion ended with an introduction to the Robbins Report, recognising this as a key moment from which an investigation into WP can begin, and highlights the power of government

which became harnessed by the cultural capital derived from universities in the quest for a modernity that promises national prosperity.

The enquiry recognised that these three perspectives often overlap throughout the periods in which they are discussed. The thesis seeks to understand how this overlapping has shifted over time and what this means for the purpose of higher education today.

Chapter 2: Images that Inform WP

As Chapter 1 has demonstrated, the *purpose* of higher education can be understood from different perspectives. The perspectives of democratic citizenship, individual success, and national prosperity were discussed to explain the foundations of the expansion of higher education in England that played an important role in its evolution of becoming a 'sector'. As discussed already, and as later chapters will show, WP both results from and fuels the 'sector' of higher education in England. To understand and explain how WP operates on a macro, meso, and micro-level, it is important to recognise the images and social theories that inform it. This chapter sets out those images. It proposes that WP is legitimised by a narrative of social mobility that is underpinned by a belief in meritocracy.

Legitimation

As this thesis is investigating the legitimacy of WP as a resulting feature of, and an influence on commercialised higher education, it is important to consider what legitimacy means in corporate terms. Understanding how legitimacy is conceptualised within the logic of corporate thinking can shine light upon the ways in which legitimacy may go unchallenged, and how it can serve as the basis for a hegemonic narrative (Lea, 2014). Legitimacy has been defined in Management Theory as being a 'generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions' (Suchman, 1995). Although this definition does consider the role that social construction plays in legitimacy's value, it does not offer much room for questioning the power dynamics involved with social construction, which can influence how the 'generalised perception or assumption' is reached. Nor does it offer ways

to consider the impact that legitimation has on other spheres within society or explore how legitimacy can lose its value in such ways as Habermas (1988 [1973]) would frame a 'legitimation crisis', which is when the failure of the state to meet its citizens needs results in a large proportion of the population not supporting the activities of the state.

In studying the ways in which the concept of legitimacy is used within Management Theory Suddaby et.al. (Suddaby et.al., 2017) use thematic analysis to investigate the ways in which legitimacy is understood from the perspective of political scientists, philosophers, and sociologists, proposing three 'distinct configurations of legitimacy', which they term as being legitimacy as property, legitimacy as process, and legitimacy as perception (Suddaby et.al., 2017). Legitimacy as *property* views it a 'thing, a resource, or a capacity of an entity'. Legitimacy as *process* views it 'not as a thing, but as a process'. And legitimacy as *perception* views it as a 'form of sociocognitive perception or evaluation' (Suddaby et.al., 2017: 451).

For the purposes of investigating how legitimacy works in the context of WP; that is, how WP becomes legitimised by a narrative of social mobility that is underpinned by a belief in meritocracy, I suggest that all three configurations of legitimacy discussed by Suddaby et.al are relevant to my analysis. This is because I am looking at legitimacy in a broad sense and across different dimensions – I am exploring:

a) *The legitimacy of WP itself*, which can be explained through the idea of legitimacy as property, whereby 'legitimacy is understood as a commodity that can be possessed or exchanged between organisations' (Suddaby et.al., 2017: 458)

b) *How the narrative of social mobility becomes legitimised and how that in turn shapes the legitimacy of WP*, which can be explained through the idea of legitimacy as process, whereby 'legitimation is understood to be a structured set or sets of formal or emergent activities that describe how an actor acquires affiliation with an existing social order or category' (Suddaby et.al., 2017: 462).

c) *How a belief in meritocracy is legitimised and in turn how this shapes the legitimacy of the narrative of social mobility*, which can be explained through the idea of legitimacy as perception, whereby 'legitimacy is a multilevel social process that extends from perceptions of a legitimacy object by evaluators to their judgements about it and eventually to their actions based on that judgement, which in turn produce macrolevel effects on the object' (Suddaby et.al. 2017: 468).

Exploring how legitimacy works across these three areas (belief in meritocracy, narrative of social mobility, practice of WP) will shine light on power dynamics that will allow the investigation to determine the extent to which hegemonic discourses shape practices of WP.

The Narrative of Social Mobility

Sociologists have long been concerned with social mobility (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Heath, 1981; Hopper, 1981; Sorokin, 1927). Measurable through various indicators such as income, class, and occupation, social mobility is generally analysed from two perspectives: intragenerational mobility, which measures changes within an individual's own lifetime, and intergenerational mobility which measures changes across generations (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 2010). In 2007, the *British Journal of Sociology* published an article from John H. Goldthorpe and Michelle Jackson (2007) which stated that 'In Britain in recent years

social mobility has become a topic of central political concern'. As mentioned in the opening of this section, traditionally speaking, social mobility has primarily been the focus of sociologists seeking to understand societies through ideas such as inequality and social stratification. So, it is important to question why social mobility has become of such political significance in recent years as these authors suggest. One explanation could be what Edelman refers to as the *political spectacle*, where-in political developments are constructed to become 'creations of the publics concerned with them'. Edelman's (1988:2) theory argues that this construction works 'as tactic and as mystification' to perpetuate existing inequalities and power structures. This would suggest that the increasing political concern with social mobility in Britain could equate with a decrease in social mobility and a strengthening of inequality.

A later article from John H. Goldthorpe, again published in the *British Journal of Sociology*, and this time partnering with Robert Erikson states that the 'central political concern' of social mobility is reported as having 'intensified' further by 2010 (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 2010). The authors list documents to demonstrate how the political interest in social mobility transcends party divides, including:

- 2008 Conservative party document: *Through the Glass Ceiling: a Conservative Agenda for Social Mobility*
- 2009 Government White Paper: *New Opportunities: Fair Chances for the Future*
- 2009 report on access to the professions: *Unleashing Aspirations*
- 2009 report from the Liberal Democrat established *Independent Commission on Social Mobility*

The intensified nature of the political interest in social mobility is characterised by the rhetoric that accompanies it. These documents analysed by Erikson and Goldthorpe (2010) are awash with phrases such as 'opportunity' and 'aspiration'. In a government response to

the *Unleashing Aspirations* report in 2010, the Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills, Rt Hon Pat McFadden MP opens the response stating that:

> There is nothing more tragic than someone having the ability or talent, but not the encouragement or opportunity to realise their potential. A high level of social mobility matters because it is the means by which people become what they can be. It is about ensuring ability rather than background is the key determinant of what it takes to get on in modern Britain (McFadden, 2010: 2).

As Edelman (1988:2) suggests, rhetoric such as this can act as 'tactic and mystification' to appease public concern. As this chapter will go on to demonstrate in its discussion on meritocracy, as a signifier of the ideology that drives the practice, rhetoric such as this is crucial to the functioning of WP.

Although the political interest in social mobility has intensified in recent years, political concerns with social mobility are nothing new. Professor of Education, Diane Reay suggests that:

> Social mobility has an iconic place in English political discourse. It appears as if the less mobility there is, the more it becomes a preoccupation of politicians and policymakers (Reay, 2017:101).

This supports Edelman's (1988) theory that the political concern with social mobility has intensified with the lack of mobility. However, the broad brash statement of 'social mobility' brandished in political terms does not align with intricate understandings of this phenomenon from a sociological understanding. As the work of Erikson and Goldthorpe (2010) highlights, the ways in which social mobility is measured alters the perspective of how social mobility is seen. Social mobility can be conceptualised in very specific ways, including downward social mobility across generations (Alm, 2011). It is clear, then, that the vision of social mobility

that is presented though political rhetoric is far removed from sociological understandings of social mobility.

As this thesis details in Chapters 4 and 5, the politicised narrative of social mobility runs in tandem with WP. A centralised and intensified political interest in social mobility has gathered pace during the first decade of the 21st century, as highlighted by Erikson and Goldthorpe in 2010, but since this time it has intensified even further to specifically correlate social mobility with higher education 'participation'. The politicisation of this relationship has been reflected throughout a range of publications coming from Government, charities, thinktanks, and the higher education 'sector' alike.

For example, the 2016 White Paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy,* which will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 4, represents the broader narrative that correlates higher education with 'social mobility'. This White Paper speaks directly to the debate about the purpose of higher education discussed in Chapter 1 - it positions higher education as a pathway to individual success, which it suggests can in turn improve national economic prosperity, and it also positions universities as 'powerhouses of intellectual and social capital' that are crucial for open democracy (DBIS, 2016 [1]). As I will show through the macro-level analysis, this White Paper sits at a watershed moment in higher education policy in England. It presents a range of decisions that go on to reform and shape higher education in England, positioning 'social mobility' at the heart of these reforms. The report states:

> We will promote transparency by opening up data held by the sector, informing choice and promoting social mobility, by putting a duty on institutions to publish application, offer, acceptance and progression rates broken down by gender, ethnicity and disadvantage (DBIS, 2016 [1]: 19).

It is reasonable to suggest that the 'social mobility' being 'promoted' here is not intergenerational downward mobility. But there is little explanation within the White Paper about what 'social mobility' is, or what it means. This mystification works as a method for the appropriation of a sociological term that can in turn be used for political propaganda. Furthermore, this 'promotion' legitimises the 'duty' being put onto institutions to produce and publish data about gender, ethnicity, and disadvantage.

This mystifying promotion of 'social mobility' can also be seen as an attempt from Government to avoid a legitimation crisis (Habermas, 1988 [1973]) of the state. Twenty-first century Britain has witnessed an increasing awareness among the public about the impact that inequality has for both society as a whole, and for those who suffer most from its consequences. The book *The Spirit Level* (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2010), which The Equality Trust champions as being widely acclaimed throughout the world, explains that physical health, mental health, drug abuse, education, imprisonment, obesity, social mobility, trust and community life, violence, teenage pregnancies, and child well-being outcomes are all significantly worse in rich countries that are more unequal. And this is particularly pertinent in Britain, which has a long history of civic stratification, a concept originally established by the sociologist David Lockwood to explain how social inequalities shape citizenship entitlements. The concept was later developed by Lydia Morris to be explained as being:

> implicitly concerned with the construction of 'moral standing' in society and explores the relations between possession or absence of rights and access to 'moral and material resources'. Briefly put, the argument is that a regime of rights can both shape and be shaped by the moral standing of a given group in society such that an erosion of standing can undermine the enjoyment of, or claim to rights (civic deficit or civic exclusion), while the denial of rights further erodes moral standing. The converse would also apply, in that the accrual of moral standing in society, perhaps through the intervention of civil activists, can lead to an expansion of rights, or to enhanced enjoyment of a right (civic expansion or civic gain) (Morris, 2016, in, Samson, 2020: 26).

As Samson (2020) highlights in his work on *The Colonialism of Human Rights,* civic stratification often results in:

> vastly different qualities of life and life expectancies, signalling that certain human rights – such as those to adequate standards of living, housing and schooling – are compromised for vast swathes of the British population (Samson, 2020: 26).

He goes on further to explain how the 2018 report on the human rights implications of UK austerity policies, conducted by the UN Rapporteur for Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Philip Alston, was 'brusquely sidestepped' by Theresa May's Home Secretary Amber Rudd, on the basis that it was deemed 'of an 'extraordinary political nature'' (Samson, 2020: 26-27).

But perhaps Theresa May's government had paid more attention to Alston's report than the Home Secretary had let on, or perhaps Rudd's reaction to it (Samson, 2020) was a defensive response grounded in recognition of its truth. The increasing political concern with 'social mobility' that characterises twenty-first century Britain could be seen as an attempt to construct a political spectacle (Edelman, 1988) built upon mystification and denial in order to avoid a legitimation crisis (Habermas, 1988 [1973]). If this were the case, then higher education would have an instrumental role to play, and it would be dependent upon WP.

Meritocracy

In 1958 Michael Young wrote *The Rise of the Meritocracy* and inadvertently coined the term 'meritocracy' (Young, 2008). The book was initially written as a story, which was rejected by publishers, before it was re-worked into more of a sociological satire set in the year 2034. Within this satire, Young proposed a formula: IQ + Effort = Merit, otherwise known as

Meritocracy. The satire sought to add to longstanding political-philosophical debates about the prospect that 'merit' holds in challenging entrenched class-hierarchies, and its ability to act as a pathway to a more egalitarian society. It sought to show how a society built on meritocratic principles, while maybe resulting in success for some, could simultaneously be both sad and fragile for others. He was arguing that those in powerful positions would be able to justify their own advantages with arrogance, while viewing others as undeserving due to their lack of effort and/or intelligence (Young, 2008).

However, Young's satirical intentions were repeatedly misinterpreted. So much so, that in a later edition of *The Rise of Meritocracy*, published in 1994, he includes a new introduction, wherein he discusses how the 'unironic deployment' of the term meritocracy, had, in his view, strengthened social stratification, creating a 'morally naked underclass' in the process (Young, 2008). In 2001, he made his feelings further known in an article for *The Guardian*, within which he requested that Prime Minister Tony Blair refrain from using the term meritocracy due to his confusion about its satirical meaning (Young, 2001).

In 2017 Jo Littler published the seminal book *Against Meritocracy: culture, power and myths of mobility*, within which the meritocracy endorsed by Blair is explained as being an instrumental tool in offering legitimacy for the neoliberal culture of contemporary society (Littler, 2017). This idea of *neoliberal meritocracy* proposed by Littler (2017) is a key focus my investigation of WP. It features throughout my analysis, conceptualised as the ideology which legitimises the narrative of social mobility.

Littler's critique of meritocracy begins by introducing the concept through the visualising image of a ladder, for which Raymond Williams' work offers inspiration:

> as Raymond Williams argued in a book review in 1958, the ladder is a perfect symbol for the bourgeois idea of society, for while it undoubtedly offers the opportunity to climb, 'it is a device that can only be used individually; you go up the ladder alone'. Such an 'alternative to solidarity', pointed out Williams, has dazzled many working-class leaders and is objectionable in two respects: firstly, it weakens community and the task of common betterment; and secondly, it 'sweetens the poison of hierarchy' by offering advancement through merit rather than money or birth, whilst retaining a commitment to the very notion of hierarchy itself (Williams, 1958: 331)
> (Littler, 2017: 3).

The book review which Williams was writing was a 'now-forgotten review of Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy*', which Littler described as being 'whilst very amusing and inventive, was less politically clear in its commitment to comprehensive socialist provision of basic services than Fox or Williams' (Littler, 2018). Williams' review of Young's work in 1958, then, can be seen as an attempt to bring more political clarity to *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. And the political clarity set out by Williams had lasting effect, as it influenced Littler to write sixty years later, that 'This double move is a core characteristic of meritocratic discourse: it promises opportunity whilst producing social division' (Littler, 2017: 3).

Using a transdisciplinary cultural studies approach to critique the concept of meritocracy, Littler (2017:2) intricately and eloquently details the processes through which 'meritocracy has become an alibi for plutocracy and a key ideological term in the reproduction of neoliberal culture'. Building upon Littler's work, then, I apply the idea of *neoliberal meritocracy* to my analysis, considering how it operates as an ideology that distorts power beneath a narrative of social mobility. *Neoliberal meritocracy's* capabilities of 'seizing the idea, practice and discourse of greater social equality', and by 'marketizing identity politics' (Littler, 2017:2), positions it as a key target for scrutiny in the investigation of WP.

The dominant meaning of meritocracy within contemporary society is broadly understood to be 'a potent blend of an essentialised and exclusionary notion of 'talent', competitive individualism and the need for social mobility', while *neoliberal meritocracy* 'promotes the idea of individualistic, competitive success, symbolised by the ladder of opportunity' (Littler, 2017: 8). Littler's critique of meritocracy reveals it to have five key problems (2017: 3-7):

1) The contemporary meaning of meritocracy endorses a competitive, linear, hierarchical system in which by definition certain people must be left behind.
2) The contemporary logic of meritocracy frequently (although not always) assumes that talent and intelligence are innate: it depends on an essentialised conception of intellect and aptitude.
3) The contemporary idea of meritocracy ignores the fact that climbing the ladder is simply much harder for some people than others.
4) The contemporary ideology of meritocracy is its uncritical valorisation of particular forms of status, in the hierarchical ranking of professions and status it endorses.
5) The contemporary ideology of meritocracy functions as an ideological myth to obscure and extend economic and social inequalities.

Using these five key problems as a basis for investigation into WP, I have formulated five questions in response, which this thesis seeks to address:

i) Does WP aim to address the problem of the 'left behind', and if so, is the problem addressed or altered?

ii) How does WP measure talent and intellect in prospective students and how does it aim to nurture it within universities?

iii) How does the concept of the 'disadvantaged student' relate to climbing the ladder of success?

iv) In what ways are ideas of professional status formulated within universities, and what role does WP play?

v) Does WP work to obscure and extend economic and social inequalities. If so, how?

Summary

This chapter lays out the images that inform WP, which the thesis uses to investigate the hypothesis that: WP is legitimised by a narrative of social mobility that is underpinned by a belief in meritocracy.

Legitimacy will be explored throughout the analysis using three 'configurations': legitimacy as property, which seeks to explore the legitimacy of WP; legitimacy as process, which seeks to explore legitimacy is relation to the narrative of social mobility; and legitimacy as perception, which seeks to explore legitimacy in relation to a belief in meritocracy. Understanding legitimacy across these three areas will shed light upon the power dynamics around WP, revealing the extent to which it becomes shaped by, and is dependent upon, hegemonic discourses.

The narrative of social mobility has been introduced in this chapter by reporting an increased political interest in the term 'social mobility'. The discussion highlights that this political use of the term sits at odds with sociological understandings of what social mobility *means*, proposing that Edelman's (1988) idea of a *political spectacle* can be used to suggest that the politicisation of the term 'social mobility' could equate with a lack of upward mobility in Britain. The discussion goes on to suggest that the increasing use of the term in a political sense, could be an attempt to avoid a legitimation crisis of the state (Habermas, 1988). The discussion also highlights how the use of the term 'social mobility' has become increasingly prominent in discourse around higher education, and that its usage has been instrumental in bringing about changes within higher education. The thesis aims to explore these ideas further.

Littler's (2017) critique of meritocracy provides a key concept for scrutiny: *neoliberal meritocracy*. The discussion on meritocracy begins with detailing the idea's inception, explaining how Michael Young's satirical introduction to the term in 1958 became misinterpreted to such extent that it has become attributed as being a causal factor of social inequality in contemporary Britain. Yet, as Littler's work shows through the work of Raymond Williams, the concept of meritocracy has also given theorists a model to explain how inequality can operate on an ideological level. Littler (2017) lists five 'problems' with meritocracy, which I have formulated into five questions for the thesis to explore, based upon WP's relationship with neoliberal meritocracy.

Chapter 3: Research Methods & Methodology

This chapter sets out the research methods and research methodology of the thesis. It begins by introducing the reader to the field of studies that my research aims to contribute to – Critical Policy Sociology. It will then move on to discuss the methods used within my analysis, before explaining what my research will be analysing and why.

Critical Policy Sociology: as an approach

In 1987 Jenny Ozga defined *policy sociology* as being 'rooted in the social science tradition, historically informed and drawing on qualitative and illuminative techniques' (Ozga, 1987: 144). Responding to political challenges towards the Sociology of Education in Britain during the 1980s (Ozga, 2021), this approach inspired the creation of an emerging field that came to be known as *critical policy sociology* (Savage et.al., 2021). Gathering pace from the late 1980s onwards, *critical policy sociology* connects scholars conducting critical research into political changes that determine the nature of academic labour (Savage et.al., 2021).

One such example can be seen in the work of Michael Tomlinson, who, in 2017 published a paper titled *Student Engagement: Towards a critical policy sociology* (Tomlinson, 2017). Tomlinson's critique of practices known as 'student engagement' within higher education examines the activity across different 'levels': on a macro-level, the marketisation of HE; on a meso-level, the instituted policies; and on a micro-level, the student's formal learning experiences.

Tomlinson explains the marketisation of HE on macro-level as being:

> underpinned by neoliberal ideological policy framework and New Public Management policy levers intended to enhance the economic value and outputs of contemporary universities (Tomlinson, 2017: 35-52).

On a meso-level, student engagement is recognised as being:

> largely instituted by policies and practices evaluated by a range of performance measures that purportedly capture the efficacy of engagement practices (Tomlinson, 2017: 35-52).

And, at a micro-level, student engagement is seen to be:

> intimately connected to continued discussions of students' relationship with institutions and shifting identity positions in a mass marketised HE context (Tomlinson, 2017: 35-52).

This approach conducted by Tomlinson informs the structure of my research into WP. The macro, meso, and micro-level analyses allow me to show the ways in which broader socio-political influences and ideologies shape policy processes within institutions, which in turn impacts upon experiences within those institutions. This 'analytical approach' to 'policy sociology' will allow me to contribute to the body of knowledge laid down by writers such as Stephen Ball (Ball, 1997; 1999) and Fazal Rizvi and Bob Lingard (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). However, as Ozga (2021) points out, this 'analytical approach' should itself be open to scrutiny. For *policy sociology* to be truly *critical*, the 'approach' itself must be critiqued to distinguish its use as a methodology to investigate a topic, from its theoretical nature as an 'idea'. Theoretically speaking, *critical policy sociology*:

> conveys the importance of challenging received wisdom and asking fundamental questions about institutions, and social and power relations, in combination with an approach to theory that interrogates its standpoint in space and time (Ozga, 2021).

The *critical* role of *policy sociology,* Ozga argues, is to shine light upon 'the politics of education policy', which is:

> the context of power, social structures and relationships and discourses around education in national and global contexts. Policy as politics focuses on how state policy in its design and attempted delivery involves politics, through interests, conflicts, power and control-so that politics is an essential element of policy (Ozga, 2021).

This thesis aims to contribute to this 'approach' of *critical policy sociology* by investigating the politics of widening participation policy. Like Tomlinson's (2017) study of student engagement, it recognises the differing levels at which power operates and considers the ways in which it is mediated through social structures, relationships, and discourses (Ozga, 2021).

Critical Policy Sociology: as a research method

Before moving on to discuss what the research will be analysing and why, I begin with an explanation of the research method, which explains how the research will be conducted. But, in order to derive understanding from an analysis, we need to first *understand* what we are analysing (Weber, in, Runciman 1978). As detailed above, this thesis uses *critical policy sociology* as a research method to investigate the politics of widening participation policy. Ball (1993) suggests that this approach requires a 'toolbox' with which to analyse policy and speaks of the 'conceptual problems' of policy research, noting the common failure of researchers to define what policy actually 'is'. He navigates his own 'theoretical uncertainties

about the meaning of policy' by conceptualising policy *as text* and policy *as discourse* (Ball, 1993).

Policy as text refers to 'representations' which become 'encoded' and 'decoded' by actors navigating 'compromises at various stages', such as points of initial influence, legislative formation, parliamentary process, and interest group articulation (Ball, 1993). This thesis assesses the representations of WP on a macro-level in Chapter 4, which documents and scrutinises *A Political History of WP* through a range of texts: the Robbins Report (1963), Further and Higher Education Act (1992), Dearing Report (1997), Browne Report (2010), Higher Education and Research Act (2017), and Augar Review (2019). The representations of WP are analysed further on a meso-level in Chapter 5, which looks at *The Workings of WP* through the scrutiny of Access and Participation Plans (APPs) from four universities: Cambridge, East Anglia, Oxford, and Suffolk, and the Opportunity Area Delivery Plans from two 'social mobility hotspots': Ipswich and Norwich. The micro-level analysis within this same chapter analyses the website of Neaco, an organisation that promotes and facilitates WP, with the chapter detailing how the micro and meso-levels intersect and connect with the macro. The analysis seeks to understand the relationships between these different levels (Tomlinson, 2017) and their temporal relevance (Lingard, 2021), in an effort to shine light upon the politics of widening participation policy (Ozga, 2021).

The analysis is deepened using Ball's (1993) notion of *policy as discourse*, which reframes *policy as text*, and recognises it to be an 'ideology of agency' which supposes the presence of 'truth' and 'knowledge', with this ideology working to position policy as something which *is*, or something that can be *done.* Understanding *policy as discourse* can help to unearth the power dynamics that make up the politics of policy:

> Discourses are about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority. Discourses embody the meaning and use of propositions and words. Thus, certain possibilities for thought are constructed. Words are ordered and combined in particular ways and other combinations are displaced or excluded (Ball, 1993:10-17).

In analysing *policy as text*, this thesis examines the narrative of social mobility within the texts to understand the articulations and extrapolations that arise from it. By also considering *policy as discourse*, the investigation probes the narrative's underpinning ideological discourse (Fairclough, 1992); that of neoliberal meritocracy.

Discourse Analysis of Widening Participation Policy

Isabela and Norman Fairclough (2012) view political discourse as 'practical argumentation'. To conduct *Political Discourse Analysis*, they suggest that 'analysis should focus on how discourses, as ways of representing, provide agents with reasons for action' (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012: 1). This thesis, therefore, considers the ways in which neoliberal meritocracy, and its narrative of social mobility, encourages action towards WP, via the medium of policy, in the form of argumentation.

For argumentation to occur, *practical reasoning* is required. To understand the structure and representation of practical reasoning, it is important to consider how values and concerns shape an agent's goals, and how this relates with institutional socially constructed facts (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012: 1). This thesis demonstrates the role that the narrative of social mobility plays in shaping prospective student goals of higher education participation, and the ways in which this correlates with institutional notions of 'success'.

For argumentation to be *logical*, there must be an option for default:

> The presumption that by performing an action a certain effect (goal) will be achieved may have to be reassessed if there is a strong probability that action will backfire and achieve undesirable effects, or if emerging consequences throw into doubt the wisdom of the action. Practical arguments are often advanced with great certainty but by nature they can only be put forward tentatively and provisionally and are inherently subject to defeat, due to human fallibility and other limitations (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012: 77).

The ideology of neoliberal meritocracy, which as Littler (2017:8) explains, 'promotes the idea of individualistic, competitive success, symbolised by the ladder of opportunity', makes the argument that going to university results in social mobility, logical. This can involve manipulating the definition of social mobility to make the goal appear achievable, but the argument also has a default: failure to meet the desired goal can be explained in terms of individual shortcomings i.e. the student was not clever enough or did not work hard enough, or there was shortcomings on the part of teachers. This thesis demonstrates the political nature of policy by highlighting the ways in which policy interacts with this default.

For argumentation to be *legitimate*, justification must occur:

> Legitimation is a type of argumentative justification, public justification, in which an action can be justified in terms of reasons and those reasons can themselves be justified as collectively accepted and recognised (as 'worthy of being recognised'[Habermas, 1996]) (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012: 112).

This thesis considers the dominance of the of the key tenets of the ideology of neoliberal meritocracy, which Littler (2017:8) describes as 'a potent blend of an essentialised and exclusionary notion of 'talent', competitive individualism and the need for social mobility', within public discourse, seeking to understand how this ideology works to legitimise the narrative of social mobility. It analyses the role that WP plays as a form of justification for that legitimacy, showing how processes of delegitimization can occur and the ways in which

narratives become reshaped in acts of re-legitimization that ensure that the dominance of ideological discourse continues intact.

Critical Policy Sociology: sociology of education to sociology of knowledge

In its investigation into the politics of WP policy, this thesis examines various points in history that show how the broader political climate within Britain has played an important role in WP's creation, continuation, and expansion. It demonstrates the ways in which the trajectory of WP's existence has been built upon a logic and legitimacy (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012) that works as policy as discourse through policy as text (Ball, 1993). When Ozga (1987) wrote the chapter that went on to serve as the basis for the development of Critical Policy Sociology, the broader political climate at the time had inspired the chapter's direction. In a later reflection of this moment in time, Ozga explains how Critical Policy Sociology was developed*:*

> from concerns about the changing nature of knowledge production in education, linked to changes in the organisation and management of education work-including research (Ozga, 2021: 290-305).

The Thatcher administration's Secretary of State for Education from 1981 to1986, Sir Keith Joseph, commonly known as the architect of Thatcherism, was largely responsible for introducing neoliberal policy making to Britain through his championing of the market economy (Bogdanor, 2013). A key strategy for integrating neoliberalism into the culture of Britain involved attacking the episteme which he saw as a threat to his project. Joseph took a particular dislike to the Education Faculty of the Open University where Ozga was based, which was at the time was directly funded by government and worked to largely shape educational professional development and practice throughout the UK. The Education Faculty, which rooted it's teaching in Psychology, Curriculum, Sociology, and

Policy/Politics, was viewed by its Conservative critics as a 'conduit for Marxist thought into the mainstream' (Ozga, 2021: 290-305).

Politicised challenges to Sociology of Education courses led to the self-censorship and disenfranchisement of staff. The growth of bureaucratic systems of measurement arising from New Public Management (NPM) that had been gathering pace in the UK since 1979 brought the accountability of Sociology of Education courses into question. Hood (1995) describes NPM as involving techniques of management that aim for:

> the lessening or removing differences between the private and public sector and shifting the emphasis from process accountability towards a greater element of accountability in terms of results (Broadbent and Laughlin, 1997: 488).

These pressures, coupled with a drastic reduction in funding to the OU during the 1980s, resulted in a dominance of Education Management courses, and the disappearance of Sociology within the Education Faculty by the early 1990s.

In charting the life-trajectory of the Sociology of Education - from the 1960s when scholars partnered with policy makers to strive for social justice, through to the 70s when theorists critiqued the concept of schooling with conceptions of power that reproduce social control, and on to the neoliberal takeover of the 1980s that led to the Sociology of Education's demise in the 1990s - Ozga builds a Sociology of Knowledge which promotes the view that:

> in learning better how societies organize their sciences, we will gain resources better to understand how sciences organize societies (Harding, 1996, in, Ozga, 2021: 290-305).

Through my investigation of WP, I aim to join forces with scholars such as Ozga (2021) by conducting research that shows how political power can reshape knowledge. My research is

an attempt to learn about how sciences are organised within British society, with the aim of understanding how sciences organise British society. While academic integrity underpins my research approach, I remain conscious, and somewhat comforted by the fact research will always have an element of subjectivity (Runciman, 1978). With this in mind, I conduct this research in defence of British universities (CDBU, 2023).

Methodological Approach

This research explores two areas of investigation:

1) The Political History of WP
2) The Workings of WP

Across these two areas I analyse the macro, meso and micro levels by examining how higher education policy shapes the nature of WP, and in turn how WP feeds into and plays out within institutions in a practical sense. In analysing these two areas I am able to test the hypothesis discussed in Chapter 2: WP is legitimised by a narrative of social mobility that is underpinned by a belief in meritocracy.

1) A Political History of WP

In Chapter 4 I conduct a macro-level analysis that maps changes to higher education policy over the last sixty years. It begins with documenting a basic timeline of key developments within higher education policy during this time, pinpointing the key moments in WP's history. The timeline does not aim or claim to be exhaustive, and it is not restricted to any specific type of policy implementation. Rather, the timeline serves only to highlight key

moments that have shaped WP. The analysis then focuses inward to critique specific documents of importance, all of which are publicly available on the internet.

This broad policy exploration works as a macro-level analysis, with the following British government documents being investigated for discourse that suggests 'tactic and mystification' (Edelman, 1988):

- The Robbins Report (1963)
- Further and Higher Education Act (1992)
- The Dearing Report (1997)
- The Browne Report (2010)
- Higher Education and Research Act (2017)
- The Augar Review (2019)

Scrutiny of these documents helps to present a picture that explains the conditions from which WP has grown. It demonstrates how WP's emergence and continuation connects with a narrative of social mobility and aligns with an ideology of neoliberal meritocracy through political discourse.

2) The Workings of WP

In Chapter 5 I conduct a meso and micro-level analysis that seeks to understand:

a) how WP works at an institutional level
b) how the need for WP is *recognised* at a local level
c) how WP is facilitated within localities

a) How WP works at an institutional, meso-level:

Data collection analyses the Access and Participation Plans (APPs) of four universities. APPs are submitted by higher education 'providers' to the higher education regulator, the Office for Students (OfS) in demonstration of the institution's commitment to WP. 'Providers' must have an agreed APP to charge higher level tuition fees, and all agreed Plans are publicly available on the OfS website (OfS, 2020 [1]). APPs covering the period of 2020-21 to 2024-5 are analysed, with the universities being selected based on their relationship with the narrative of social mobility:

- University of Oxford
- University of Cambridge
- University of East Anglia
- University of Suffolk

Oxford and Cambridge are recognised as being 'pathways to the elite' (Sutton Trust & Social Mobility Commission, 2019), while East Anglia and Suffolk have campuses based within locations referred to by the Department for Education as being 'disadvantaged areas' (DfE, 2019). While Fenland and East Cambridgeshire are also recognised as 'disadvantaged' areas (DfE, 2017 [1]), the colleges of the University of Cambridge fall outside of this area. Comparative analysis seeks to draw out similarities and differences between the APPs, with common trends being analysed further in relation to the *Images that Inform WP* discussed on Chapter 2. Limiting the comparative analysis to only four universities was motivated by the need to examine depth as opposed to breadth. The APP analysis serves as only one part of the meso-level analysis, and two of the institutions (East Anglia and Suffolk) relate to the second

part of the meso-level analysis. Similarly, three of the institutions (Cambridge, East Anglia, and Suffolk) relate to the micro-level analysis. In situating the meso and micro-level analyses alongside the macro-level analysis, East Anglia was established as a Plateglass university during the Robbins era when the macro-analysis begins, and Suffolk is a 'new' university, established in the spirit of WP; with Oxford and Cambridge being the Ancient universities of England, the choice of these four institutions allows analysis to consider the relevance of reputation and 'class' within the political history of WP. However, it is important to consider that there are findings that may have been missed had the analysis took a broader view. For example, examining Redbrick universities, of which most are prestigious Russell Group institutions located in large cities throughout the country, would have allowed me to interpret the role of history and geography in the analysis. This signals a need for further study that compares and contrasts British universities in a broader sense.

b) <u>How the need for WP is *recognised* at the local, meso level:</u>

Data collection analyses the Opportunity Area Delivery Plans of Ipswich and Norwich (DfE, 2017[2] [3]). Both locations are recognised by the Department for Education as being 'disadvantaged areas', and they are homes to the universities of Suffolk and East Anglia, respectively. The analysis interrogates the Delivery Plans of 2017-20 (which are publicly available on the GOV.UK website). The analysis seeks to understand how the narrative of social mobility relates with the local university in terms of WP.

c) <u>How WP is facilitated within localities, at a micro level:</u>

The Office for Students (OfS) oversees and funds a national collaborative approach to WP called *Uni Connect* (OfS, 2023 [2]). Made up of twenty-nine regional partnerships, there is

one organisation that connects the universities of Cambridge, East Anglia, and Suffolk - the Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach (Neaco), otherwise known as *Take Your Place* (Neaco, 2023 [1]), which also partners with the East Anglian Opportunity Areas, which include Norwich and Ipswich. Data collection analyses the website of *Take Your Place* (which is publicly accessible) with the aim of shedding light on how this partnership approach within localities facilitates WP by shaping the aspirations of prospective students.

Correlation of Findings

Combining the collection and analysis of data at a macro-level through *A Political History of WP* with data collected and analysed at meso and micro-levels through *The Workings of WP* allows me to test the hypothesis that: WP is legitimised by a narrative of social mobility that is underpinned by a belief in meritocracy.

I correlate these findings within a discussion in Chapter 6 considering how legitimacy works across the three configurations discussed in Chapter 2: WP as property, social mobility as process, and meritocracy as perception, to determine how the narrative of social mobility interacts with both the broader political climate and the 'sector' of higher education. Testing the hypothesis also allows me to address the five questions formulated in response to Littler's (2017) 'problems with meritocracy', which serve as a mechanism to determine how WP relates with neoliberal meritocracy.

Ethical Considerations

All research is desk-based and does not involve data collection from participants. All documents that are analysed are publicly available. Despite this approach offering relative

ease for adhering to ethical standards, the research remains conscious of the BSA Statement of Ethical Practice (2017) and keeps professional integrity at its heart.

Summary

Through a Critical Sociology Policy approach this thesis uses discourse analysis as a research method to analyse WP on a macro, meso, and micro-level. In charting A Political History of WP, the analysis demonstrates how WP's emergence and continuation connects with the narrative of social mobility and aligns with an ideology of neoliberal meritocracy through political discourse. The Workings of WP interrogates how WP works at an institutional level to draw out common trends of universities; it examines how WP becomes recognised at a local level to understand how the narrative of social mobility relates with universities; and it investigates how WP is facilitated within localities to highlight the extent to which a partnership approach shapes the aspirations of prospective students.

In testing the hypothesis that WP is legitimised by a narrative of social mobility that is underpinned by a belief in meritocracy, the thesis discusses how legitimacy operates within the narrative of social mobility's interaction with both the broader political climate and the 'sector' of higher education, determining the role that neoliberal meritocracy plays within the politics of higher education policy.

Chapter 4: A Political History of WP

This chapter offers a macro-level analysis of higher education policy within England, charting the rise and growth of WP within universities. While this political history is not exhaustive, key moments within the last sixty-years have been chosen to demonstrate how efforts of improving access to universities have morphed into commitments of WP that have become inextricably linked with the charging of tuition fees. The political history timeline shows that the needs of the state have directed WP since its inception, and that this need alters how knowledge within universities, particularly that aimed towards WP target groups, becomes valued and re-valued.

This simple timeline, which highlights defining moments signifies these points:

1963	***Robbins Report***	Highlights the need for improving access to universities to meet growing demands
1992	***Further and Higher Education Act***	Polytechnics became universities. HEFCE created
1997	***Dearing Report***	Increasing participation in higher education is set out as an objective of national policy for the next twenty years
1998		Tuition Fees Introduced (£1000)
2006		Tuition Fees Rise (£3000)
2010	***Browne Report***	Recommends tuition fee and financial support policy in response to increasing number of 'disadvantaged' students

2012		Tuition Fees Rise (£9000)
2017	***Higher Education and Research Act***	Reshaping of the high education system to enable competition and choice under the guise of social mobility, productivity, and value for money
2017		Tuition Fees Rise (£9250)
2018		Office for Students created
2019	***Augar Review***	Questions the relationship between higher education and social mobility and promotes further education, vocational and skills-based learning

Fig.1

The emboldened and italicised reviews, reports, and acts within this timeline set the structure of the chapter, with each being analysed to collectively tell the story of WP and its relationship with the narrative of social mobility.

Robbins Report

The Committee on Higher Education's *Higher Education Report* was presented by the Prime Minister to Parliament in October 1963 (Committee on Higher Education, 1963). The committee was led by Lord Robbins between 1961 and 1963, with the report having since commonly been referred to as *The Robbins Report.*

In his social epistemological study of higher education, Steve Fuller argues that 'the Robbins Report was very much grounded in market-based thinking' and that this approach became a 'prototype for latter-day neoliberalism' (Fuller, 2016: 10-11). WP was central to Robbins' approach. As Fuller (2016:10-11) explains, he [Robbins] 'was in favour of increasing access

to higher education to previously marginalized sectors of society as well as increasing the choice of universities at their disposal'.

As the section about National Prosperity within the discussion of The Purpose of Higher Education in Chapter 1 of this thesis highlights, in Britain following The Second World War, higher education experienced a shift from 'elite' to 'mass' participation (Anderson, 2016). State interests in science, social welfare and national planning during this period helped to drive this shift, which became further galvanised through international competition resulting from the Cold War (Anderson, 2016). By the time of the Robbins Report in 1963, expansion was well underway. Indeed, it has been noted that:

> Post-war expansion is popularly associated with the Robbins Report of 1963, but though the report was vital in creating a political consensus that lasted for a generation, it only endorsed what was already happening (Anderson, 2016).

In creating this long-lasting political consensus, Robbins argues for a 'system' of higher education, which he claims, is in part, a response to the Education Act of 1944, which itself worked to democratise education by opening it up to more of the population. The Report highlights that it is this opening-up of education that has increased demand for higher education, there by generating a need for a 'system' approach:

> the extension of educational opportunity in the schools and the widening of the desire for higher education on the part of young people have greatly increased the demand for places (Committee on Higher Education, 1963: 4-5).

The rising demand for higher education symbolises a cultural shift within Britain during the 1960s. This cultural shift aligns with the objectives of the state, as education is increasingly recognised as being a key component of competitiveness for geopolitics. As Robbins asserts:

> unless higher education is speedily reformed, it is argued, there is little hope of this densely populated island maintaining an adequate position in the fiercely competitive world of the future (Committee on Higher Education, 1963: 5).

The Report lists four *Aims of Higher Education* (Committee on Higher Education, 1963: 6-7):

(i) instruction in skills
(ii) promote general powers of the mind
(iii) advancement of learning
(iv) the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship

John Holmwood (2018) argues that these four principles represent the 'public benefit' that symbolise the 'democratic underpinnings' of the Robbins reforms, as the system worked to abolish existing fees and implement means-tested subsistence grants, thereby introducing an approach that was 'both meritocratic in orientation and equalising in its consequences' (Holmwood, 2018: 41).

Considering this 'meritocratic orientation' highlighted by Holmwood (2018), alongside assertions made by Fuller (2016) that the Report helped to lay the foundation for the neoliberal governance of universities that followed years later, reveals an interesting insight to the role that WP plays in facilitating the *neoliberal meritocracy* spelled out by Littler (2017).

The synonymity of WP with the expansion that characterises contemporary higher education policy was similarly a defining feature of the Robbins Report:

> the aim was to expand student numbers in higher education from 216,000 full-time students in 1963-64 to 560,000 in 1980-81, and this was nearly achieved (Moser, 1988: 5-20).

And beneath this commitment to expansion lays the principle of WP, itself underpinned by a belief in meritocracy:

> Our investigations have suggested the existence of large reservoirs of untapped ability in the population, especially among girls: they have also shown a most significant increase in the number of young people coming forward year by year from the schools (Committee on Higher Education, 1963: 268).

The Robbins Report paved the way for the creation of new universities and colleges, as the plans for expansion became reality. Holmwood (2018: 42) highlights the fact that the Report has 'no discussion of ethnic minority disadvantage and no mention of race', suggesting that the Robbins reforms were 'in-part, a 'race-blind' project of modernisation'. This modernisation project was a publicly funded investment to create and sustain a system of higher education based on the principles of greater inclusion for women and those from working class backgrounds. Ideas of individual success, democratic citizenship, and national prosperity became entwined through the reforms of higher education, signalled by Robbins' ambitions of systemic change:

> We hope and believe that such a revaluation of national priorities will be made. Not only is it a probable condition for the maintenance of our material position in the world, but, much more, it is an essential condition for the realisation in the modern age of the ideals of a free and democratic society (Committee on Higher Education, 1963: 267).

And through these systemic commitments to expansion, a culture was created that worked to embed a belief in meritocracy within the social imaginary. With the four *Aims of Higher Education,* as discussed above, striving to create democratic citizenship built upon ideas of individual success and national prosperity, this quote below, taken from the conclusion of the

Report, shows how culture becomes formulated through the relationship between individual and collective merit:

> At this stage in the history of British higher education, it is a mistake to regard the claims of quantity and quality as being in conflict. Regard for the former is a safeguard against waste of talent; regard for the latter is a guarantee of the worth and merit of the whole (Committee on Higher Education, 1963: 266).

Further and Higher Education Act 1992

The political consensus that began with Robbins - that the state has a responsibility to invest in higher education - continued fairly smoothly up until the 1980s. Anderson's (2016) *University Fees in Historical Perspective* explains how the tides changed for universities when market ideology entered British politics:

> Dependence on state funding made them vulnerable to periodic economic crises and the resulting attempts of governments to cut public expenditure. A first crisis of this kind came in 1973, a more serious one in 1981. Following the advent to power of Margaret Thatcher, this became more than a matter of cuts, as market ideology and the imperative of lower taxes became political orthodoxy (Anderson, 2016).

In 1992, the Further and Higher Education Act removed further education and sixth form colleges from local education authority (LEA) control and established Further Education Funding Councils. It opened the way for polytechnics to apply for university status and unified the funding of higher education under the Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFC's), thereby introducing competition for funding between institutions while abolishing the Council for National Academic Award (Further and Higher Education Act 1992).

In his critical policy analysis of the marketisation of English Higher Education, Colin McCaig (2018: 25) scrutinises the three major White Papers and two Acts of Parliament of the early twenty-first century, while recognising that 'the intellectual roots of marketisation

can be traced back to the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s'. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 emerges from what he refers to as the 'accountability and efficiency stage' of the late 1980s and goes on to inform what is termed the 'diversity as good' stage between 1992 to 2000 (McCaig, 2018: 25). These first and second stages of marketisation straddle the abolition of the binary divide between universities and polytechnics, with the 1992 Act creating a unitary system of HE (which was initially proposed by Robbins). Simultaneously, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) was set up with the aim to:

> Promote the quality and quantity of learning and research in higher education institutions, cost-effectively and with regard to national needs (McCaig, 2018: 36).

McCaig's (2018) analysis, which highlights higher education's role to meet 'national needs' during this period, echoes the approach laid down by Robbins, albeit with a renewed zeal of accountability and efficiency. Likewise, the commitment to WP kickstarted by Robbins becomes reinforced through the establishment of HEFCE, which binds WP to the funding of institutions through its objectives to:

> Encourage diversity in the provision of higher education, a widening of access and greater opportunities;…the promotion of the provision of quality higher education which is distinctive in emphasising personal development in relation to the world of work and the community (HEFCE, 1994, in, McCaig, 2018: 37).

Giving polytechnics university status massively expanded higher education provision in England. This new unified system resulted in a level of autonomy for institutions as they were given freedom to compete for students and funding, while at the same time remaining systemically bound with the politicised ideals laid out by Government that supposed that the meeting of national needs could be achieved by expansion through widening access. More

prestigious institutions could, in theory, use their autonomy not to commit to widening access to the same extent as institutions with less reputational clout, meaning that expansion through widening access became a feature of institutions competing within the market logic.

This competition is reflected in the league tables of universities, which *The Complete University Guide* suggests are generally used to steer potential applicants and their mentors towards the most suited course and institution, while also being used to inform, and often determine, the work of university administrators, heads of departments and admissions tutors, UK and foreign governments and politicians, recruiters of graduates, academics planning to move, scholarship awarding bodies and researchers (The Complete University Guide, 2023). Ellen Hazelkorn's study of global higher education league table rankings shows how they have become a fundamental process within the *Reshaping of Higher Education* (Hazelkorn, 2011). It is no coincidence that 'University rankings have their origins in the US but were first introduced into the UK in 1993' (The Complete University Guide,2023), the year after the Further and Higher Education Act. These instruments of competition, bolstered by an expansion of choice and an increase in consumers, worked to cement the neoliberal ideologies of Reaganomics and Thatcherism firmly into the institutions of higher education. With universities having become increasingly infiltrated by New Public Management styles of governance, accountability measured using systems of metrification (Broadbent and Laughlin, 1997) held academics individually accountable for institutional success, which posed a direct challenge to collegial styles of working and methods of learning that are not easily measured. The job role of the academic became re-written, with the main objective being to ensure the success of the institution within the competition. To understand how this ideology of neoliberalism seeps into education, the work of David Harvey (2005: 2) illuminates how markets within education become generated:

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices…if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary.

With the state having created a market in higher education that supposedly offered autonomy for universities to compete with one another, the league tables do not reflect the vision of fair competition. Rather, they have been dominated by the old power of the Oxbridge colleges, which through a different kind of autonomy, bring the relevance of league tables into question:

> They are not like anywhere except each other, and that is the reason for their stunning performance in the sciences and the humanities. Uniquely self-governing, containing a great variety of autonomous colleges, they possess secrets of success that mean they always stand at the top of the admittedly dubious international league tables (Abulafia, 2022).

Despite this dominance of elite institutions within the league tables, the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 reflects a crucial moment within an era that birthed a mass system of higher education in Britain. In *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education* Peter Scott (1995) highlights two important reminders about what he refers to as the shift from elite to mass higher education: firstly, 'higher education systems in all developed countries are being transformed by the same pressures and in similar ways', and secondly, 'the development of mass higher education is only one of several modernizations under way in late twentieth-century society' (Scott, 1995: ix). For nation states keen to be seen by the electorate to be developing, progressing and modernising, universities can play a crucial role in the creation of culture conducive to these ends. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992, by reshaping

the landscape of higher education in Britain, assigns a role for universities within global competition and creates structures that can influence the ways in which people perceive the purpose of higher education. For universities to fulfil this task of culture creation, the enrolment and graduation of students is fundamental.

Writing in the 1950's in the US, C. Wright Mills analyses the emergence of the middle classes, detailing how the bureaucracy within which the *White Collar* worker becomes bound, transcends corporations, organisations, and institutions of learning, including universities. In fact, Mills (2002 [1951]:161) argues that universities play an important role in fashioning knowledge production towards capitalist goals that enable the trends of bureaucracy of flourish, with students in turn being trained to sell themselves in the competition to obtain success. In contemporary Britain these same ideas of individual success and salesmanship-of-self become manifested through the mass system of higher education, perpetuated by hierarchies that suggest social mobility can be achieved through merit.

Dearing Report

Higher education's role in meeting the demands of development and modernisation through mass expansion became galvanised further through recommendations presented in the Dearing Report of 1997: *High Education in the Learning Society* (The Dearing Report, 1997). Dearing's hyperbolised 'vision' of a 'Learning Society' was one in which 'all are committed, through effective education and training, to lifelong learning' (The Dearing Report, 1997: 7). The Report aligns the economic success of the nation with an investment in education. It keeps WP at its core by stating that the need for institutions to operate within an international market for education is dependent, in part, on the imperative to:

> encourage and enable all students – whether they demonstrate the highest intellectual potential or whether they have struggled to reach the threshold of higher education – to achieve beyond their expectations (The Dearing Report, 1997: 7).

There is no explanation about what students will 'achieve' in relation to their expectations. Is Dearing's 'vision' talking about achieving a first-class degree with honours, or achieving a medal for playing in a sports team at university? Perhaps the achievement is in relation to securing a permanent well-paid job; but if the student's expectations are to be earning a six-figure salary, then 'to achieve beyond their expectations' would be a remarkable achievement. And what if the student's expectation was to apply their education to bring about economic and social change for building egalitarian societies; would they be encouraged and enabled to achieve beyond their expectations?

The Report is saturated with imprecise and indirect language, as discussed above. This can be seen as a strategy to set an agenda for the reader's imagination. For example, when laying out the aim to create 'a diverse range of autonomous, well-managed institutions with a commitment to excellence in the achievement of their distinctive missions' (The Dearing Report, 1997: 8), there is little explanation about what this actually means, but the principles of neoliberalism are reflected in the emphasis on management-centred competitive institutions striving for 'excellence' – a term which in itself assumes education to be primarily based upon satisfying systems of measurement. Interestingly, the Report also suggests that the vision of a Learning Society, is in itself, a response to neoliberal policy making:

> Higher education has responded fully over the last decade to the national need for greater participation. It has managed this in the face of much reduced public funding per student (The Dearing Report, 2007: 11).

The imprecise and indirect language that makes up much of the Dearing Report uses rhetoric and empty signifiers as a technique to obscure the pressing issues that the Report was commissioned to address. In his critique of the Dearing Report in1998, Peter Scott (1998:5) explains that:

> The whole point of the Dearing exercise has been to fill the funding gap in higher education – more than £500m a year by the year 2000 and rising eventually to £2 billion according to the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principles.

The disinvestment in higher education that occurred alongside its expansion positioned the Dearing committee with the responsibility 'to get higher education moving again' (Scott, 1998). Published only a year after Dearing's release, and perhaps rather prophetically, Scott's critique of the Report suggests that:

> Dearing is not going to be remembered as the 'Access' report; nor the Learning report. It will stand or fall on its solution to higher education's funding crisis (Scott, 1998: 4).

The 'solution' that Scott (1998:4) is referring to is the introduction of tuition fees. The Report frames this in terms of being a 'contribution':

> We recognise the need for new sources of finance for higher education to respond to these problems and to provide for growth. We therefore recommend that students enter into an obligation to make contributions to the cost of their higher education once they are in work (The Dearing Report, 1997: 2).

As the macro analysis of this chapter will go on to demonstrate, this recommendation of a 'contribution' from students proposed by Dearing has gone on to influence how higher education has come to be perceived in the minds of prospective students as both consumers and insurers (Harrison, 2019), and in the workings of institutions, as actors (Baltaru, 2019). When Dearing (1997:7) states that 'we must invest in education', it is not obvious at first

glance that this investment is expected to come from the students themselves. By framing tuition fees as a 'contribution', the 'investment' in higher education can be claimed as property of the state, while the financial contribution that students make becomes an individual pursuit far removed from the collective 'we' signalled in the terminology. Furthermore, the investment that students make to higher education in terms of their time and emotional labour is not featured within higher education policy. Without these investments the system of higher education would not operate. To not compensate students financially for their time and emotional labour is one thing, but to expect them to contribute financially for it, is quite another and explains why investment in these terms are not discussed.

The Dearing Report is a central moment within the political history of WP, and one which at the time, created apprehension about the impact that the 'obligation to make contributions' (The Dearing Report, 1997: 2) would have for the increasing emphasis on the importance of widening access to universities, with a 'fear that charging students for tuition will roll back, not roll forward, wider access' (Scott, 1998: 4). Yet, what the report does, with a sleight of hand, is to justify the implementation of fees using ideas of meritocracy that appear to support widening access:

> We believe that a standard contribution should be charged, regardless of subject of study. The risk otherwise is that students, particularly perhaps those from poorer families, would choose cheaper subjects, rather than those that met their, or the nation's needs…our preferred approach would assure that access to prestigious or popular programmes continued to be determined by academic merit, and not by ability to pay (The Dearing Report, 1997: 323).

The need to fill a growing number of available places within an expanding system with fee paying consumers can be achieved by instilling a belief within the consumer that they deserve their place because of their ability, and that their ability is worth investing in, with time,

effort, and money. Recommendation 1 of the Report calls for a lifting of the student number cap (The Dearing Report, 1997: 100), which opens-up a whole new market of consumers through the notion of *Widening Participation*, which has its own designated Chapter (7). The Report does not mention the term *social mobility*, but it lays the ground work for what follows through its:

> objective of reducing the disparities in participation in higher education between groups and ensuring that higher education is responsive to the aspirations and distinctive abilities of individuals (The Dearing Report 1997: 101).

As this thesis demonstrates in Chapter 5, the strategy of 'raising aspirations' through reinforcing an individual's belief in their own ability is a key component of how WP works at a micro-level. But this strategy directs a parochial view of 'aspiration' that is geared towards 'success' within the labour market. Dearing was the foundation for this approach and offered fertile ground for the seeds of the narrative of social mobility to be sown.

Browne Report

The Dearing Report of 1997, with its commitment to WP, its proposed introduction of tuition fees, and its emphasis on meritocracy and aspiration, coincided with the election of the Blair government. In 1998, under this New Labour government, tuition fees of £1000 per year were introduced in England, before being raised to £3000 in 2006 (UK Parliament, 2018). It was in 2001 that Prime Minister Blair made his famous education speech, within which he hammered home his ambition for widening access to universities, setting out his plans to increase participation to 50% of young people:

> We believe there is no greater ambition for Britain than to see a steadily rising proportion gain the huge benefits of a university education as school standards rise, meeting our goal of 50% of young adults progressing to higher education by 2010. An ambitious goal because we are ambitious for Britain (Blair, 2001).

This speech is clearly concerned with demonstrating the 'ambitious' nature of the Blair regime. But there is little explanation of what the 'huge benefits of a university education' are, or what that 'ambition' consists of beyond increasing student numbers. Yet, by 2010, at the time of the Browne Report, Blair's ambitions of increasing participation in higher education to 50% was more or less achieved, with 45% of people aged 18 to 30 entering a HEI (Browne Report, 2010). Lord Browne of Madingley led the independent panel of the Report tasked to:

> review the funding of higher education and make recommendations to ensure that teaching at our HEIs is sustainably financed, that the quality of teaching is world class and that our HEIs remain accessible to anyone who has the talent to succeed (Browne Report, 2010: 2).

In many ways, the Browne Report is a reflection of Dearing. It is about funding, accountability, competitiveness, and growth. The notion of being 'world class' could really mean anything, and tropes of meritocracy bind these objectives together, creating a unified approach for 'higher education' that operates as a 'mass' system (Scott, 1995). Yet the neoliberal character of diverse, autonomous, and competitive institutions within a mass system became a hyperbolised rehash under Browne:

> In the current system, institutions are funded by HEFCE on the basis of a notional annual allocation of undergraduate places, which does not change significantly year on year…there are insufficient numbers of student places in the present system to accommodate demand. The combination of these factors means that year on year institutions are secure in knowing that they can fill their own student places no matter the competition from other institutions; and obtain guaranteed HEFCE funding as well as charge the maximum fee to all students. Growth within successful institutions is stifled; less successful institutions are insulated from competition; and students do not

> have the opportunity to choose between institutions on the basis of price and value for money. In our proposals, the higher education system will expand to accommodate demand from qualified applicants who have the potential to succeed. It is difficult to put a precise number on how many additional student places will be needed. Some estimates suggest that there are up to 30,000 qualified applicants who were unable to secure a place in the last academic year. To give them an opportunity to benefit from higher education will require increasing the number of student places by roughly 10%...All students who meet the standard will have an entitlement to Student Finance and can take that entitlement to any institution that decides to offer them a place. Institutions will face no restrictions from the Government on how many students they can admit. This will allow relevant institutions to grow; and others will need to raise their game to respond (Browne Report, 2010: 32-33).

For Browne, the 2006 tuition fee rise had not gone far enough to offer financial sustainability for an expanding system of higher education - it had not facilitated enough competition between institutions or instilled a consumer imagination (Philips, 2017) within prospective students. The first of Browne's six principles states that:

> HEIs must persuade students that they should 'pay more' in order to 'get more'. The money will follow the student (Browne Report, 2010: 4).

This approach became problematic on a number of fronts, primarily because the assumption that competitive institutions would lower their prices below the maximum in order to attract students as part of a 'student choice' model did not become a reality. With tuition fees due to rise to a maximum of £9000 in 2012 (UK Parliament, 2018), by March 2011 increasing numbers of institutions had announced their intentions to charge this maximum amount (Shepherd, 2011). This positioned institutions with the challenge of proving 'value for money', with lower ranking universities charging similar or the same rates as their more prestigious competitors. Similarly, institutions competing for fee paying students needed something to offer students in return for their investment beyond just an education; they needed a narrative.

Browne helps to set the narrative of social mobility, aligning it with student investment. However, the term *social mobility* only appears three times in the report: once in the list of contents, once in the summary of Chapter 1, and once in the *Principles for Reform* section. And when stating that: 'Higher education provides a major opportunity for creating social mobility' (Browne Report, 2010: 26), it is unclear what this actually means. Is the term referring to destabilising the entrenched class structures of British society, or providing the individual with the prospect of 'success'? Perhaps it is both – the Report proposes that 'only if they are successful' (Browne Report, 2010: 2) will students repay their student loan. But again, there is ambiguity around what the term 'student success' (Custer, 2023) actually means, although the Browne Report positions it in economic terms through its reworking of higher education funding and student finance.

The idea being promoted by Browne (2010: 2) is that students who invest financially in higher education can earn more money, based on their 'talent to succeed' – this is the narrative of social mobility, with the empty signifiers of 'talent' and 'success' serving as rhetoric that champions the ideology of neoliberal meritocracy (Littler, 2017). The expansion of the system of higher education through its growth of both institutions and available places became dependent upon so called 'non-traditional' students, many of which were the first in their family to enter into higher education, and to who the narrative of social mobility was aimed. Through widening access, the dream of social mobility could be sold to a plethora of consumers looking to invest in their future. So much so did Browne's model depend on this target audience, that a commitment to widening access became bound with an institution's ability to charge higher fees:

> Scrutiny of Access Commitments by the HE Council will be tougher for institutions with higher charges, especially those seeking to charge above £7,000 per year (which is roughly equivalent to what institutions will have to charge to maintain investment at

> current levels based on our assumptions about the reduction in HEFCE funding) (Browne Report, 2010: 49).

In 2012, the same year that tuition fees in England rose to the £9000 maximum, Rt. Hon. Alan Milburn released his report as an independent reviewer on social mobility and child poverty: *University Challenge: How Higher Education Can Advance Social Mobility* (Milburn, 2012). The report positions education as being a 'leveller of opportunity' (Milburn, 2012: 12) and although it conceptualises the value of higher education using three main 'benefits': benefits to the individuals who attend, benefits to the overall economy, and benefits to wider society, universities are marketed as 'the gatekeeper of opportunity and the main pathway into careers within the professions' (Milburn, 2012: 12), thereby signalling an individualised understanding of what social mobility means, which is explained further by its definition of 'being about…equal opportunity to get on in life' (Milburn, 2012: 12). Ideas and practices that work towards 'widening participation and fair access' (Milburn, 2012: 2) to university act as signifiers of social mobility through their ability to offer the 'opportunity' that a university education provides. This individualised notion of opportunity legitimises the financial investment in higher education.

The post-Browne funding model held universities accountable by their access targets. However, as *University Challenge* highlights:

> the new fees regime has induced widespread concern. For the first time since 2006 the proportion of young people applying to university has fallen. Around one young applicant in 20 who would have been expected to apply in 2012 did not do so, equating to approximately 15,000 applicants 'missing' from the system. More worryingly still, there was a fall in application rates from young people living in the most disadvantaged areas. By contrast, between 2004 and 2012 application rates from that cohort increased by over 60%. The fall in applications for the least advantaged groups in 2012/13 is disappointing and may suggest a greater deterrent effect from the fees reforms than has been previously thought (Milburn, 2012: 7).

To counter-act the 'fear of debt' that impacted WP after the fee increases of 2012, Milburn calls for 'a sustained communication campaign' (Milburn, 2012: 7). His *University Challenge* is a beacon of that campaign – one that correlates higher education with social mobility. And as Chapter 5 will go on to demonstrate, this communication campaign works through partnerships that connect universities with schools, colleges, and a range of organisations and employers that collectively promote higher education as a means to 'achieve' social mobility.

Higher Education and Research Act 2017

A year before the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, the White Paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility & Student Choice* was presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Jo Johnson MP (Johnson, 2016). The White Paper correlates a university education with skills-based learning that works in the interests of national prosperity. Central to this *Knowledge Economy* is the neoliberal concern for institutional accountability within a mass market-based system, reflected by the markers of 'Teaching Excellence' and 'Student Choice'; the narrative of social mobility is presented as the glue that binds these two markers together. Universities are positioned as the creators of a culture where meritocratic ideals reign supreme:

> Powerhouses of intellectual and social capital, they create the knowledge, capability and expertise that drive competitiveness and nurture the values that sustain our open democracy (Johnson, 2016: 5).

This quote taken from the foreword of the Paper are the words of the then Minister of State for Universities and Science, Jo Johnson MP. Tellingly, the 'values' needed for open

democracy, while mentioned, are not explained. It is unclear how universities are equipped to 'nurture' these values, when there is not even mention of what they are. This foreword, with its unclear and indirect rhetoric swiftly moves on to highlight the key objectives of the White Paper, that is, to expand the system of higher education further by 'making it quicker and easier for new high quality challenger institutions to enter the market and award their own degrees' (Johnson, 2016: 6), and to create tighter regulation through the creation of the Office for Students (OfS), promising increased system of measurement to hold institutions accountable, discussed as 'clear incentives for higher education institutions to deliver value to students and taxpayers', through the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The creation of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) was also unveiled within the White Paper, signalling a reorientation for the research funding councils to 'make possible the strategic approach to future challenges and maximise the value from Government's investment of over £6bn in research and innovation' (Johnson, 2016: 5).

The instrumental and accountable model of higher education detailed by Johnson is based on the principles of competitive expansion and student investment. The narrative of social mobility that justifies this model legitimates the WP on which it depends:

> These proposals will help ensure that everyone with the potential to succeed in higher education, irrespective of their background, can choose from a wide range of high-quality universities, access relevant information to make the right choices, and benefit from excellent teaching that helps prepare them for the future (Johnson, 2016: 6).

In McCaig's policy analysis of the marketisation of English higher education it is highlighted that through the HERA's (Higher Education and Research Act 2017) single regulatory regime, higher education institutions (HEI's) become rebranded as HEP's (higher education providers) (McCaig, 2018: 96). This conceptualisation of a 'provider' cements the transactional relationship with the fee-paying consumer who has freedom of choice and

expects value for money. Education is commodified through this relationship with the 'provider' held accountable through centralisation and increasing systems of measurement and regulatory demands that threaten institutional autonomy and academic freedom:

> The shift from a system lightly regulated by a funding council acting at arms length from government to a system in which both funding and regulatory control (including of quality assurance) exist within a single body - the OfS - can be seen as an act of centralisation that threatens its declared raison d'etre of fostering institutional autonomy and academic freedom (McCaig, 2018: 120).

Part 1 of HERA is about the Office for Students (OfS), and it incorporates WP into regulation fairly early on, with the 'general duties' (2.1.e) section stating:

> the need to promote equality of opportunity in connection with access to and participation in higher education provided by English higher education providers (Higher Education and Research Act, 2017).

There are many things that HERA does not discuss, but which influence the changes it announces. Narrative criminologist Lois Presser (2022) unpacks *harmful silences* to show how they are often used as a method for perpetuating power structures. HERA's omittance of the ways in which elite schooling impacts upon equality of opportunity prior to university application (Koh & Kenway, 2016), could be considered as one such example of this. The *Unsaid* (Presser, 2022) creates space for the ideology of 'opportunity', which acts as a representative of neoliberal meritocracy, to become correlated with practices of WP, through the narrative of social mobility. This process binds 'providers' to this ideology through regulation. Part 1 (29-37) of the Act is dedicated to *Access and participation*, with a commitment to 'equality of opportunity' being demonstratable by providers, through their Access and Participation Plans, which they submit to OfS, and are required to have agreed if wanting to charge maximum tuition fees.

Part 3 of HERA is dedicated to UKRI, which incorporates the research funding councils. The act of centralisation discussed by McCaig (McCaig, 2018: 120) becomes operational through the 'cooperation and information sharing between the OfS and UKRI' discussed in Part 4 of the Act (112). A 2021 report from the Nuffield Foundation, alongside the Kings College London Policy Institute, demonstrates how this 'centralising sector' approach has gone on to shape the staff demographics of universities, with increased numbers of professional services staff and a casualised academic workforce (Wolf & Jenkins, 2021). The report highlights 'substantial growth in staff employed to deal with all aspects of the 'student experience', for instance welfare workers and career advisors' and suggests that 'there has been a growing preoccupation with improving student services in an effort to boost student satisfaction ratings' (Wolf & Jenkins, 2021: 4). The need for services that can move students that were recruited through practices of WP through the process of education, while delivering an experience that can be conceptualised as being good value for money, is the aim of 'providers' operating within the post-HERA centralised system of higher education in England.

In 2017, tuition fees for home students in England rose from £9,000 to £9,250, an amount set by forecast inflation. These changes resulted from the 2016 White Paper, which legitimated the rise by correlating value for money for education with 'teaching excellence, social mobility, and student choice' (Johnson, 2016). This White Paper had laid the groundwork for the restructuring of English higher education that would occur through the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. In a speech delivered on 20th July 2017 at Reform think tank, Jo Johnson highlights the position of 'disadvantaged students' within 'the wider student finance debate':

> Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are going to university at a record rate: attendance has risen from 13.6% of the most disadvantaged in 2009, before the current fee system was introduced, to 19.5% in 2016.
>
> Not only are application rates among 18-year-olds in England at record highs, but drop-out rates for young, mature, disadvantaged and BME students are all lower now than they were when the coalition government came to power in 2010.
>
> So the claim that fees have led to a fall in students from disadvantaged backgrounds accessing or completing higher education is therefore simple nonsense (Johnson, 2017).

Johnson's speech uses the expansion of student numbers to claim that ever-increasing tuition fees are 'value for money'. This economistic and instrumentalist view of education is detached from 'the values that sustain our open democracy' (Johnson, 2016: 5), alluded to in Johnson's opening address. And within this speech, he does not discuss how this growth in numbers is driven by an expansion of professional service staff that work to process these students into, through, and out the other side of the system, while educators have faced increasing pressures, casualisation, and challenges to academic freedom. Nor does he recognise the relationship between students' prior educational experiences with the fact that higher education has historically been reserved for those with more academically demanding school experiences, or address differences in university admission policies based upon selectivity, and the vastly contrasting prior educations of pupils of different social classes in Britain (Koh & Kenway, 2016). And he does not offer any specific examples of the lived experiences of students to demonstrate how engagement with the mass marketised system of English higher education results in the social mobility he proposes.

Augar Review

In 2019 the *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding* report was published (Augar, 2019). With Dr Philip Augar serving as the Chair of the independent panel, the review has been commonly referred to as the *Augar Review*. In February 2022, Nick Hillman (2022) from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) wrote a blog, reminding his readers that:

> it was meant to be just one ingredient of an official government review. Its goal was to articulate the preferences of an independent panel of outsiders, whose views would be fed into the official policymaking sausage machine alongside lots of other views.

The blog highlights the 'Government's dilatory response to the report' by explaining that:

> Reviews are meant to help policymakers make up their minds, and they have a good record of doing so in higher education. The Anderson report (1960), the Robbins report (1963), the Dearing report (1997) and the Browne report (2010), for example, all heavily – and quickly – influenced policy, even if none of them was implemented in full. It seems odd to many people in 2022 that a party in power for over a decade, in coalition or on its own, remains so uncertain over what to do (Hillman, 2022).

But maybe the slow reaction from Government is a reflection of their certainty, rather than uncertainty, about what to do, especially given that the Augar Review appears to challenge to the discourse championed by Jo Johnson in 2017 (Johnson, 2017). Chapter 3 of Augar is dedicated to Higher Education, wherein it recommends changes to the ways in which institutions use their funding, suggesting that they commit to supporting disadvantaged students by ensuring that 'funding is recycled appropriately' (Augar, 2019: 97):

> The proposals outlined above are intended to build more balanced incentives into the funding system and, alongside greater scrutiny of university data, recruiting practices and earnings returns, reduce the volume of low value provision. However, there is still a risk that some HEIs will continue to recruit too many students who will not benefit from a degree and so we have considered harder-edged options. These would undoubtedly be unpopular in the sector, where the connection between going to

> university and achieving social mobility has become something of an unquestioned – although we believe questionable – mantra (Augar, 2019: 99).

Augar is calling out the narrative of social mobility that does little to deliver on its promise, noting how the commercialised sector of higher education is focusing its attention away from education: 'by international standards English universities spend a lower proportion of their total expenditure on teaching staff' (Augar, 2019: 92). In doing so, the Report places blame on the universities while ignoring the fact that the representation of social mobility was originally a communication strategy of politicians and policy makers to justify tuition fee increases. Furthermore, the Report challenges current practices of WP by calling for institutions to incorporate part-time students, mature students and commuter students into their Access and Participation Plans, along with clearly specified intended outcomes. This can be seen as a broader challenge to the current model of higher education. With the average rent of university accommodation estimated to be as much as £7,347 a year, which is more than the standard maintenance loan (Hall, 2021), it is unlikely that part-time and mature students will opt to live in expensive university owned accommodation that provides revenue that many universities have become dependent upon through their expansion. Asking universities to commit to the 'mantra' of social mobility through regulatory frameworks, when believing that mantra is 'questionable', offers a summons to universities to put their money where their mouth is; or rather, to put their money where the words put into their mouths by the state is.

Unlike the Robbins, Dearing, and Browne reports, Augar does not have the term *higher education* in its title. Of its eight chapters, only one of these is specifically dedicated to higher education. The *Post-18 Education* championed by Augar, emphasises the importance of

technical education and apprenticeships (Augar, 2019: 11), with 'the idea of a market in tertiary education' being critiqued:

> The idea of a market in tertiary education has been a defining characteristic of English policy since 1998. We believe that competition between providers has an important role to play in creating choice for students but that on its own it cannot deliver a full spectrum of social, economic and cultural benefits. With no steer from government, the outcome is likely to be haphazard (Augar, 2019: 8).

In contrast to Hillman's (2022) analysis, I suggest that a year after Augar was published, government ministers appeared to have taken note of some of the issues raised within the report and attempted to 'steer' the direction of tertiary education in England using narratives that call for 'true social mobility' (Donelan, 2020). In a speech delivered on July 1st 2020 at an event aiming to widen participation to higher education, Universities Minister Michele Donelan made the bold statement that:

> Quite frankly, our young people have been taken advantage of – particularly those without a family history of going to university. Instead some have been left with the debt of an investment that didn't pay off in any sense (Donelan, 2020).

Like the Augar Review, this statement from Donelan was a direct attack on the university expansion model based upon WP that picked up pace post-Dearing with the introduction of tuition fees and the subsequent strengthening of assertions about social mobility. The solution proposed by Donelan similarly reflects recommendations from Augar, but goes further in suggesting what 'true social mobility' means, albeit equally vague:

> True social mobility is when we put students and their needs and career ambitions first, be that in HE, FE or apprenticeships (Donelan, 2020).

Donelan's averment that HE is not for everyone, and that FE or apprenticeships may be a better option for some people is a sentiment reflected only a week later by Education Secretary Gavin Williamson:

> It exasperates me that there is still an inbuilt snobbishness about higher being somehow better than further, when really, they are both just different paths to fulfilling and skilled employment…We must never forget that the purpose of education is to give people the skills they need to get a good and meaningful job (Williamson, 2020).

The alignment of education with labour and earnings being announced by Donelan and Williamson under the guise of 'true social mobility' is not much different from the model that they claim to reject. The narrative of social mobility continues, as does its underlying principle of meritocracy. When Donelan states: 'But don't get me wrong - higher education should be open to all, all those who are qualified by ability and attainment' (Donelan, 2020), she reinforces the ideology of meritocracy by suggesting that higher education is suited for people with enough 'attainment', while other paths such as FE and apprenticeships are better suited routes to employment for those with less 'ability'. The silence around the topic of the social inequalities that influence ability and attainment can be seen as a method to mask the perpetuation of power structures (Presser, 2022), with this declaration of need for different educational pathways signalling a desire for a class-based system of higher education. For the 'disadvantaged students' who are the feature of WP, this new narrative of social mobility aims to recruit the brightest and the best for HE, while channelling the rest into FE and apprenticeships.

Reshaping the narrative of social mobility to mean different things for different people is a move echoed by Katherine Birbalsingh in her inaugural speech on June 9th 2022 as Chair of the Social Mobility Commission. Claiming to move away from the 'popular narrative about

social mobility', the 'fresh approach' announced conceptualises social mobility in 'small steps' whereby:

> If a child of parents who were long-term unemployed, or who had never worked, gets a job in their local area, isn't that a success worth celebrating? Would we really want to say that it doesn't count as mobility, simply because they are not an accountant or lawyer? (Social Mobility Commission and Katharine Birbalsingh CBE, 2022).

This supposed reframing of what social mobility means comes after consecutive reports from the Social Mobility Commission that have positioned Britain as being at risk from becoming a permanently divided nation (Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2015), as having a 'social mobility problem' entrenched by 'an unfair education system, a two-tier labour market, an imbalanced economy and an unaffordable housing market' (Social Mobility Commission, 2016), as being a 'deeply divided nation' (Social Mobility Commission, 2017), and as being a place where social mobility has 'stagnated' (Social Mobility Commission, 2019).

In 2021 in an Open Letter to the Prime Minister from Social Mobility Commissioners, the departing team, at the end of their term, who three years previously were 'recruited as a different kind of commission – diverse, non-political, first-time public appointees drawn from all walks of life and all areas of the UK', noted the challenges the Commission faced when attempting to measure social mobility (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). Much of the information that informed the reports listed above came from secondary sources such as thinktank's and statistics agencies, with the previous Commissioners attempting to launch a Social Mobility Index in 2017, which has been described as 'at times crude' (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). Nonetheless, it is interesting to consider the attention to detail in these Reports, such as with the Annex notes of the 2016 Report, where it states: 'Attainment at 16 cannot be directly compared between England, Scotland and Wales due to differences in

curricula and exams' (Social Mobility Commission, 2016: 201). The fact that their analysis recognises the inaccuracy involved in comparing things that are different demonstrates a greater understanding of attainment than politicised interpretations, such as from government ministers who present attainment as a standard measurement (Donelan, 2020) without factoring in the reality that there often differences between many private schools and mainstream comprehensives when it comes to curricula and exams.

Despite the challenges associated with measuring social mobility, it is clear that the need to reframe the narrative of social mobility is based upon its failure. But the failure of WP to deliver on its promises of social mobility has not deterred enrolment within universities. In February 2023 the student admissions service UCAS reported the second highest ever number of UK 18-year-olds applying to university or college by the January deadline, with this figure of 314,660 being only slightly down from the highest year, 2022, which stood at 320,420 (UCAS, 2023). Prospective students do not appear to be put off by accruing the 'debt of an investment that didn't pay off in any sense' (Donelan, 2020).

Donelan's declaration suggests, therefore, that universities are continuing to 'take advantage' of students, but it is questionable whether the student is the main interest of Ministers. The introduction of tuition fees which began following Dearing's call for a financial 'contribution' from students led to the creation of a student loan system, which since this time has been accruing a large amount of debt for the Treasury. The idea of the loan system is that a student who signs up has their tuition fees paid directly to the university each term, with a maintenance loan being paid directly to the student's bank account. After studies are completed, if and when the student earns over a specific threshold, the loan repayments are deducted from the student's wages and repaid to the student loans company. This process has been marketed as improving access to university by avoiding the financial barrier of

requesting payment on entry. By tying the repayment amount to the amount being earnt, the loan essentially works as an extra tax for the graduate. This loan system has been an instrumental tool in enabling the expansion of higher education and it operates through the adjustment to the ways in which universities are funded, moving from being invested in by the state to being invested in by student debt. But the inability of many graduates to repay this debt has been a concern for government ministers, and the Augar Review can be seen as a symbol of this political pressure to reduce the amount of outstanding student loan debt. In 2023 this figure stands at over £206 billion, with forecasts of unpaid student loan debt reaching £460 billion by the mid-2040s (Bolton, 2023). Undergraduate students who started their course in 2021/22 are estimated to accrue a debt of £45,800, with only 20% ever being able to repay in full, but this changes for students beginning in 2023/24, who are estimated accrue slightly less, £43,400, but with repayment rates rising to 55% (House of Commons Library, 2022). These changes to the ways in which student loans are to be repaid were announced by Donelan in February 2022, with the lower threshold for repayment being spread over a longer period, 'just as the Augar report recommended' (Donelan, 2022).

In Donelan's response to the Augar review (Donelan, 2022), her statement that 'real social mobility is not achieved by pushing people into university if they are not ready', is followed by repeated emphasis on government commitment to foundation years for helping to improve access to higher education for disadvantaged students. This is a far cry from steering disadvantaged students away from universities that 'take advantage' (Donelan, 2020), expressed only two years previously. Instead, Donelan champions universities that are committed to WP with a reinvigorated passion:

> Remember that last year, 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds were 82% more likely to go to university than in 2010.

> And right now, as I speak, there are more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds studying in higher education than ever before in our history.
>
> This is a government, that believes our higher education system can be world class and inclusive at the same time (Donelan, 2022).

This volte-face by Donelan aligns with reforms to student loan repayments that will see the amount of loans repaid in full more than double (House of Commons Library, 2022), along with the introduction of the new Lifelong Loan Entitlement which is set to begin in 2025 to give 'opportunity to train, retrain and upskill as needed in response to changing skills needs and employment patterns' (Donelan, 2022). These changes to the student loan system present a challenge for universities, many of which will be forced to adapt their learning provision to meet the demands of their funding streams.

Summary

This political history of WP presents a macro level analysis that details how ideas of widening access to universities have underpinned the market-driven growth of the mass system of higher education in England. It demonstrates how ideas of meritocracy stretching back to the 1960s have played a central role in creating a perceived purpose for universities within the public imaginary. This tripartite vision that works between offering democratic citizenship, individual success, and national prosperity, positions universities as powerful institutions that can work in the interests of the state and civil society. Yet disinvestment in these public institutions that occurred through neoliberal policy making of the 1980s and 90s resulted in their expansion being met with a withdrawal of state support and the implementation of a system of management based upon accountability and investment from

fee paying consumers. As meritocracy became neoliberalised to justify this consumer investment, it generated a collective culture based upon the ideals of individual success, while creating a need for the interests of national prosperity to be met with further increases to the cost of this individualised investment.

The strategy of WP, underpinned by the ideology of neoliberal meritocracy had been gathering pace since the introduction of tuition fees in 1998, but really took off after 2010, when announcements of the tripling of fees were made. Signifiers of 'success', 'opportunity', and 'aspiration' became packaged within a narrative of social mobility which worked to justify the investment of fee-paying students. However, with defaults on student loans leading to failed economic returns on these investments being costly for the Treasury, the supposed priority of individual success became overshadowed by needs to ensure national prosperity, leading to a readjustment of the social mobility narrative and a realignment of loan repayment plans. The mass system of higher education during the 2020's has seen the principles of marketisation being met with greater centralisation through regulation, which empowers Government with the ability to steer the direction of its educational institutions in way that maintains order between national prosperity, individual success, and democratic citizenship.

Chapter 5: The Workings of WP

Following from the macro-level analysis of Chapter 4 this chapter offers a meso-level analysis that seeks to understand:

a) how WP works at an institutional level
b) how the need for WP is *recognised* at a local level

It then goes on to conduct a micro-level analysis which explores:

c) how WP is facilitated within localities

Findings from the micro and meso-level analyses of this chapter will be collated with findings from the macro-level analysis of Chapter 4, to explore the hypothesis that WP is legitimised by a narrative of social mobility that is underpinned by a belief in meritocracy, which will be discussed more in Chapter 6.

How WP works at an institutional level

This meso-level analysis scrutinises the policy and practice of WP at an institutional level in an effort to understand how the narrative of social mobility becomes rationalised. In 2018, the Chair of the regulator of English higher education, the OfS, stated:

> Our regulatory framework enables the Director for Fair Access and Participation to develop a bold new approach to supporting social mobility, and equality and diversity, through higher education. The new framework equips us to deploy a powerful set of regulatory levers, not only to improve access to higher education, but also reduce the gaps in continuation, attainment and progression that are currently experienced by different groups of students. The sector has increased opportunity by widening access

> to higher education during the last two decades, but has not achieved equality of opportunity. We will be radical and ambitious to make sure we deliver on the promise of higher education as an engine for social mobility, and a gateway to a better life for those who undertake it (OfS, 2018).

The regulatory framework requires all institutions wanting to charge maximum tuition fees to be registered with OfS, with registration requiring having an Access and Participation Plan (APP) agreed with the Director for Fair Access and Participation (OfS, 2020 [1]).

The APPs of registered institutions are publicly available on the OfS website. I analyse a sample of these APPs to shine light on how WP works at an institutional level, selecting four universities for comparative analysis:

- University of Cambridge
- University of East Anglia
- University of Oxford
- University of Suffolk

These universities are chosen because of their relationship with social mobility. Oxford and Cambridge are recognised as being 'pathways to the elite' (Sutton Trust & Social Mobility Commission, 2019), while East Anglia and Suffolk have campuses based within locations referred to by the Department for Education as being 'disadvantaged areas' (DfE, 2019). While Fenland and East Cambridgeshire are also recognised as 'disadvantaged' areas (DfE, 2017 [1]), the colleges of the University of Cambridge fall outside of this area.

The APPs being analysed are five-year agreements that run from 2020 to 2025, that have been submitted by the university and approved by OfS. The documents are approximately

twenty pages long and based upon an OfS template of titles and subtitles. Within the Plan the institution must detail how it aims to meet WP objectives based around a student lifecycle of *access, success,* and *progression.*

In addition to the main Plan, institutions must also submit a Target and Investment Plan at the end of the APP on Excel templates (OfS, 2020 [1]). My analysis of the Plans begins with a comparative analysis of both the Target and Investment plans, before moving on to thematically analyse the Plans themselves.

APP Target Templates

The Targets template at the end of the APP comprises of three tables designed around the OfS concept of the student lifecycle – *Access, Success,* and *Progression*. Each table is subdivided into the following columns:

- Aim
- Reference Number
- Target Group
- Description
- Is This Target Collaborative?
- Data Source
- Baseline Year
- Baseline Data
- Yearly Milestones (2020-2025)
- Commentary on Milestones and Targets.

My analysis focuses on four of these columns across the three tables to build an institutional profile to compare and contrast different approaches to WP:

- Aim
- Target Group
- Description
- Data Source

Below I detail the institutional profile of each selected university based upon these four columns, with bullet pointed information being presented as it appears within the Plan.

Cambridge (OfS, 2020 [2]):

The University of Cambridge has 5 **Aims of *Access***:

- To increase the proportion of students from UK state-sector schools and colleges
- To increase the proportion of students from POLAR4 Q1
- To increase the proportion of students from POLAR4 Q1 and Q2
- To reduce the ratio between students in POLAR4 Q5:Q1
- To increase the proportion of students from regional IMD Q1 and Q2

The University of Cambridge does not list any **Aims for *Success* or *Progression***.

These Aims target the following **groups**:

- Low-participation neighbourhood (LPN)
- Socio-economic
- Other

The **description** of the aims is listed as being the same as the aim.

Data source is listed as:

- HESA T1a - State School (Young, full-time, first degree entrants)
- Other data source

University of East Anglia (OfS, 2020 [3]):

The University of East Anglia has 2 **Aims of *Access:***

- To improve the ration of participation in HE for students from areas of lower higher education participation Q1 V Q5
- To reduce the gap in participation in HE for students from underrepresented groups

5 **Aims of *Success*** based on:

- To reduce the attainment gap for students from areas of lower higher education participation
- To reduce the attainment gap for students from underrepresented groups
- To reduce the non- continuation gap for students from underrepresented group

2 **Aims of *Progression*** based on:

- To reduce the progression gap for students from underrepresented groups

These Aims target the following **groups**:

- Low Participation Neighbourhood (LPN)
- Mature
- Ethnicity

Description of the Aims are as follows:

- Ratio intake to UEA for POLAR4 Q5:Q1 students
- Progression to UEA from Access to HE courses at local FECs (Using data on size of local HE courses provided by FECs and UEA feeder school data)
- Percentage point gap in good honours attainment (1st and 2:1) between POLAR4 Q1 and Q5 students
- Percentage point gap in good honours attainment (1st and 2:1) between white and black students.
- Percentage point gap in non- continuation between white and black students.
- Percentage point gap in non- continuation between young and mature students.
- Percentage point gap in non- continuation between white and mixed ethnicity students.

Data source is listed as:

- The access and participation dataset
- Other data source

<u>Oxford (OfS, 2020 [4]:</u>

The University of Oxford has 4 **Aims of *Access:***

- To reduce the gap in participation rates between ACORN Group 1 and Groups 4 and 5 from 4.9:1 to 3:1
- To reduce the gap in participation rates of under-represented students (POLAR4) between Quintile 5 and Quintile 1 from 15.3:1 to 8:1 by 2024-25
- To eliminate the gap in offer rates for Asian applicants by 2021-22
- To help raise attainment in schools through a programme of student and teacher focused activities in 2019-20

2 **Aims of *Success:***

- To reduce the gap in attainment rates for black students to 6% by 2024-25
- To eliminate the gap in attainment rates for disabled students by 2024-25

The University of Oxford does not list any **Aims for *Progression***.

These Aims target the following **groups**:

- Socio-economic
- Low Participation Neighbourhood (LPN)
- Ethnicity
- Attainment raising
- Disabled

Description of the Aims include:

- Target will measure change in ratio between entry rates for ACORN Groups 1 and Groups 4 and 5
- Target will measure change in ratio between entry rates for POLAR4 quintile 5 and quintile 1 students
- Target will close the unexplained gap in offer rates for Asian students, compared with applicants from other ethnicities by 2021-22
- Percentage difference in degree attainment (1st and 2:1) between black and white students (5 year rolling average).
- Percentage difference in degree attainment (1st and 2:1) between disabled students and non-disabled students (3 year rolling average)

Data source is listed as:

- Other data source
- The access and participation dataset

<u>Suffolk (OfS, 2020 [5]):</u>

The University of Suffolk has 2 **Aims of *Access*:**

- To eliminate the gap in participation in HE for students from underrepresented groups
- To reduce the gap in participation in HE for students from underrepresented groups

6 **Aims of *Success*** including:

- To eliminate the non-continuation gap for students from underrepresented groups
- To reduce the non-continuation gap for students from underrepresented groups
- To reduce the gap in degree outcomes for students from underrepresented groups
- To eliminate the gap in degree outcomes for students from underrepresented groups
- To reduce the gap in degree outcomes for students from underrepresented groups

2 **Aims of *Progression***:

- To eliminate the gap in progression rates for students from underrepresented groups

- To reduce the gap in progression rates for students from underrepresented groups

These Aims target the following **groups**:

- Socio-economic
- Ethnicity
- Low Participation Neighbourhood (LPN)
- Disabled

Description of the Aims are as follows:

- Eliminate the percentage gap between the proportion of IMD Q1 18 year olds at the University of Suffolk compared to the proportion of IMD Q1 18 year olds in the UK population
- Reduce the percentage gap between the proportion of BAME 18 year olds at the University of Suffolk (excluding partner students at London School of Commerce) compared to the proportion of BAME 18 year olds in the UK population
- Eliminate the percentage gap between non-continuation rates of POLAR4 quintile 5 and quintile 1 students
- Reduce the percentage gap between the non-continuation rate of students with a Mental Health Condition and those not known to have a disability
- Reduce the percentage gap between the attainment rates of White and BAME students
- Eliminate the percentage gap between the attainment rates of students known to have a disability and those not known to have a disability
- Reduce the percentage gap between the attainment rates of POLAR4 quintile 5 and quintile 1 students
- Reduce the percentage gap between the attainment rates of IMD quintile 5 and quintile 1 students
- Eliminate the percentage gap between progression rates of White students across the English HE sector and BAME students at the University of Suffolk
- Reduce the percentage gap between progression rates of students known to have a disability at the University of Suffolk compared to students not known to have a disability across the English HE sector

Data source is listed as:

- The access and participation dataset
- Other data source

Comparing and Contrasting APP Target Templates

The institutional profiles shaped by the four columns of the Targets template described above can be presented in table format for the purposes of comparative analysis. See the four tables that I created, based upon this data, below (Fig.2-5).

Aim:

This table (Fig.2) shows the number of Aims that each institution has in their Targets template:

Number of Aims in APP Targets Template

University	Number of Aims
Cambridge	5
East Anglia	9
Oxford	6
Suffolk	10

Source: OfS (2020 [2], [3], [4], [5])

Fig.2

This data shows that East Anglia and Suffolk have set out a higher number of Aims within their APPs, signalling a more varied approach to WP than Cambridge and Oxford, which have around half the number of Aims.

Target Group:

This table (Fig. 3) shows the number of times Target Groups are listed for each 'cycle' within each institution's Targets template:

Number of times target groups are listed across each 'cycle' within each institution's APP Target Template

TARGET GROUPS	ACCESS	SUCCESS	PROGRESSION
CAMBRIDGE			
Attainment Raising			
Disabled			
Ethnicity			
LPN	3		
Mature			
Other	1		
Socio-economic	1		
EAST ANGLIA			
Attainment Raising			
Disabled			2
Ethnicity		3	
LPN	1	1	
Mature	1	1	
Other			
Socio-economic			
OXFORD			
Attainment Raising	1		
Disabled		1	
Ethnicity	1	1	
LPN	1		
Mature			
Other			
Socio-economic	1		
SUFFOLK			
Attainment Raising			
Disabled		2	1
Ethnicity	1	1	1
LPN		2	
Mature			
Other			
Socio-economic	1	1	

Source: OfS (2020 [2], [3], [4], [5])

Fig.3

This data suggests that Cambridge and Oxford's approach to WP is more geared towards ensuring Access to university for the target groups, and unlike East Anglia and Suffolk, are

not focused on Progression from university, or give much emphasis on the importance of Success within university.

Description:

This table (Fig.4) shows the number of times each description of the WP concept is used within Target template, and the number of times the system of measurement with which it is measured is used:

Number of times description of WP concept and system of measurement appear in the Target Template of the APPs

	CAMBRIDGE	EAST ANGLIA	OXFORD	SUFFOLK
DESCRIPTION				
Offers			1	
Participation	5	2	2	2
Degree attainment		2	2	4
Non-continuation		3		2
Progression: graduate level employment/further study		2		2
MEASUREMENT				
Acorn			1	
POLAR4	3	2	1	2
IMD	1			2
Ethnicity		3	2	3
Age		1		2
Ability		2	1	3
Gender				
Educational background	1	1		

Source: OfS (2020 [2], [3], [4], [5])

Fig.4

Again, this data from the Description suggests that Cambridge and Oxford give little emphasis to non-continuation or progression to employment or further study, but that their WP strategy is more focused on giving Access to the Target Groups. POLAR4 as a system of Measurement is used across all four of the sample institutions.

Data Source:

This table (Fig.5) shows the number of times the listed data sources are used to inform the APPs:

Number of times the listed data sources are use within the Target Template of the APPs

UNIVERSITY	OTHER DATA SOURCE	ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION DATA SET	HESA
CAMBRIDGE	4		1
EAST ANGLA	1	8	
OXFORD	3	2	
SUFFOLK	1	9	
Total	9	19	1

Source: OfS (2020 [2], [3], [4], [5])

Fig.5

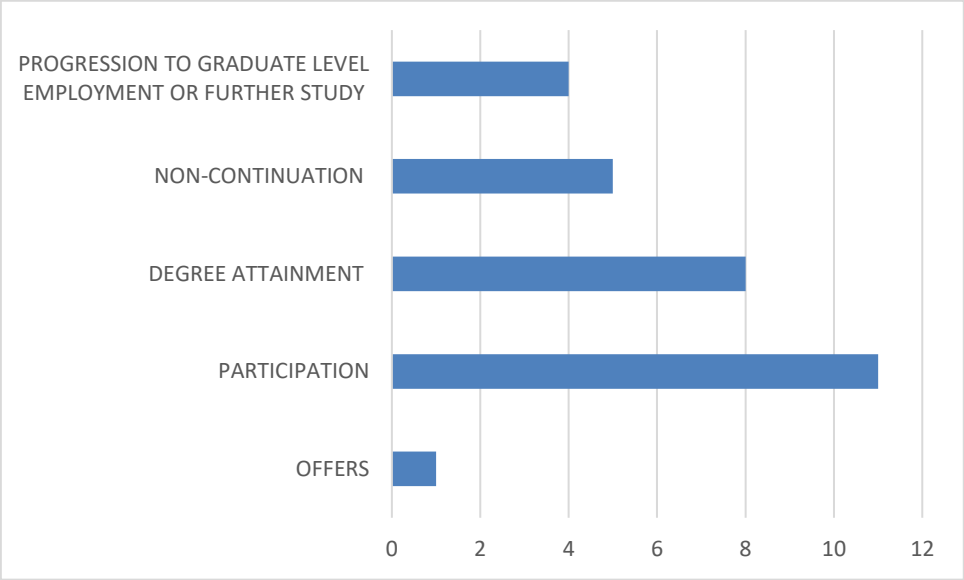
This data shows that the Access and Participation Data Set was the most used source of information by the institutions when compiling their APPs, although Cambridge did not use it, and was the only institution to list HESA as a data source.

Trends found within APP Target Templates

Data from the comparative analysis described within the previous sections reveals a number of trends. To help illuminate these trends, I have turned the data into graph format below to signal i) the ways in which WP is conceptualised; ii) groups that become targeted through WP; iii) how WP is measured; iv) where information about WP comes from.

i) This graph (Fig.6) shows the ways in which WP is conceptualised:

Number of times each of these concepts used to describe WP appear across all four of the APPs



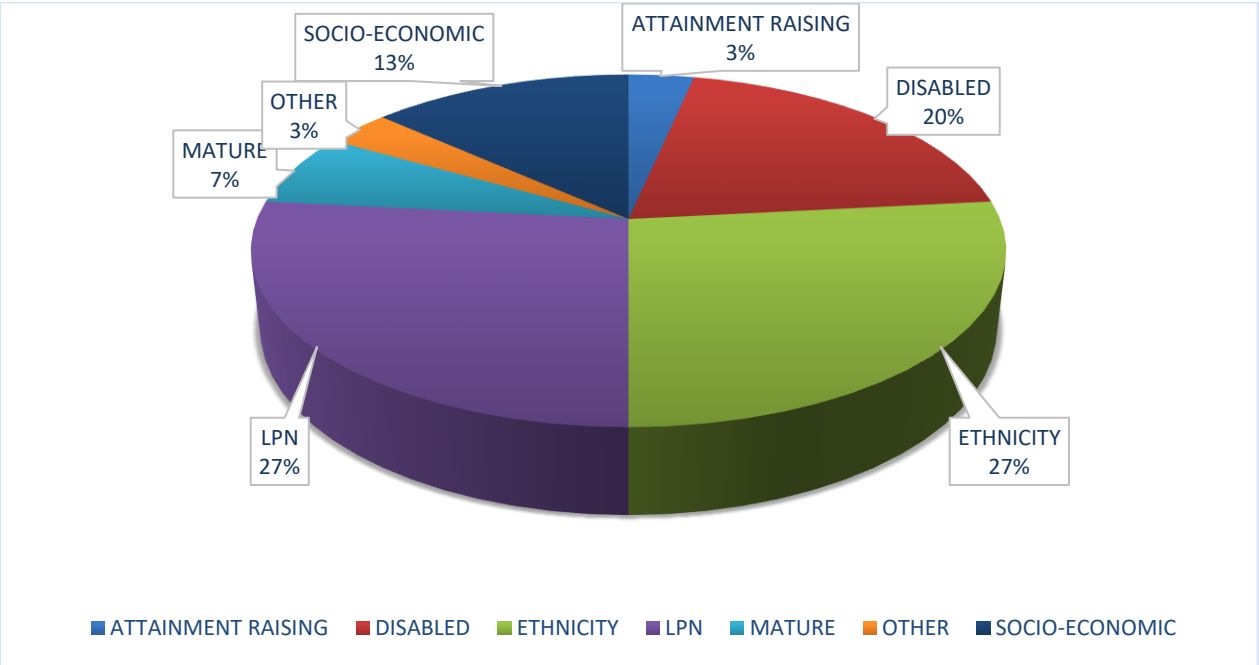
Source: OfS (2020 [2], [3], [4], [5])

Fig.6

This graph highlights that WP is mostly conceptualised in terms of Participation, which represents the idea of *Access.* The *Success* that students obtain from their participation, conceptualised here in terms of Degree Attainment and Non-Continuation, are less of a concern, and lesser still is the idea of *Progression*, conceptualised here in terms of students going on to graduate level employment or further study following their degree. Institutions could, under this conceptualisation, demonstrate a commitment to WP by admitting large numbers of students from the target groups, without focusing on the number of students who drop out, obtain a degree, or benefit from their degree through one of the measurable outcomes proposed by OfS. This approach would not only demonstrate an institutional commitment to WP, but it also keeps focused on the tuition fees paid by students 'participating' in education. Students being offered a place is less of a concern for the way in which WP is conceptualised, perhaps because an offer does not secure tuition fees.

ii) This graph (Fig.7) shows the groups that become targeted by WP:

Groups that are listed as being targeted across the four institutions (% derived from Fig.3 to determine most popular target group)



Source: OfS (2020 [2], [3], [4], [5])

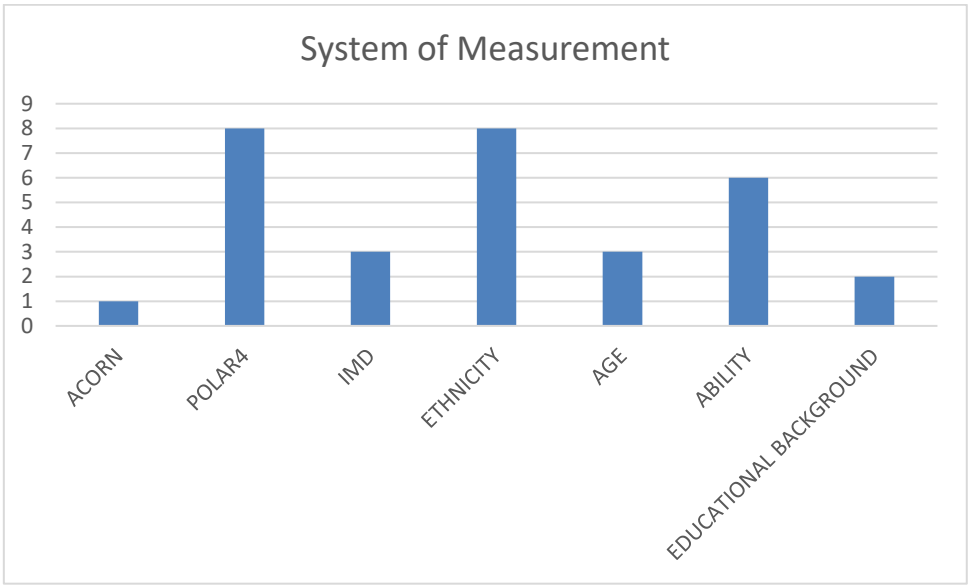
Fig.7

LPN, which is listed within the APPs as detailed throughout this chapter, is a common acronym used within the policy and practice of WP – Low Participation Neighbourhoods. LPNs are generally measured through a system called POLAR, which uses postcodes to map areas that have low participation in higher education. People living in a LPN are considered 'disadvantaged' for the purposes of WP.

This graph highlights that LPN is an equal target group with Ethnicity, and that together, these two target groups make up 54% of the target groups for WP within this sample of APPs.

iii) This graph (Fig.8) shows how WP is most commonly measured by the four universities in my sample:

Number of times these systems of measurement are used within the Target Templates across all four of the APPs



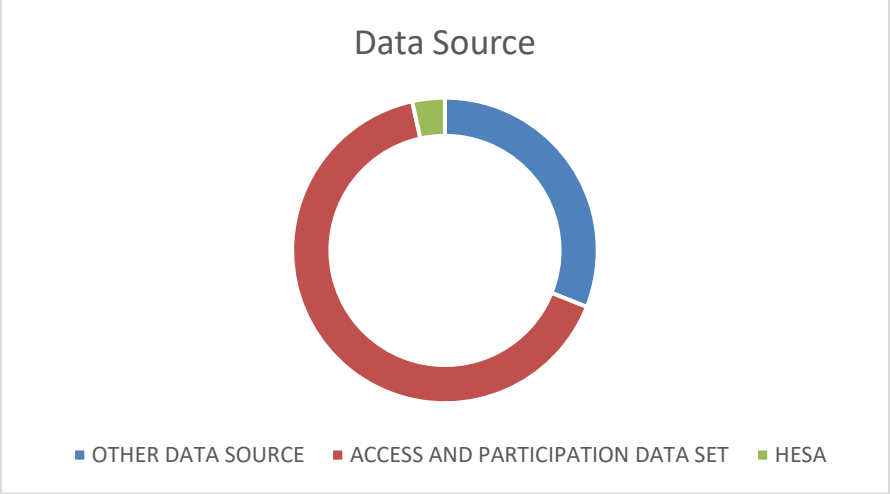
Source: OfS (2020 [2], [3], [4], [5])

Fig.8

Echoing the previous graph's emphasis on targeting LPN and Ethnicity target groups, this graph shows that POLAR4 and Ethnicity are the most used systems of measurement or categorisation for an institution in this sample demonstrating its commitment to WP.

iv) This graph (Fig.9) shows where information about WP that shapes the APPs come from:

Most used data source by the four sample institutions within their APPs



Source: OfS (2020 [2], [3], [4], [5])

Fig.9

This graph highlights that the Access and Participation Data Set, which is provided by OfS to institutions submitting an APP is by far the biggest data source used within the Plans. This means that the OfS provides information that shapes the APP that they will in turn agree. As long as the institution's Plan aligns with the information provided, there is little reason for the APP to be rejected. However, this also means that there is little room for institutions to take an autonomous approach to WP.

To summarise, the APP Target Template Trends discussed in this section show that:

- *Participation* is the most common way that WP is conceptualised
- *LPN* and *Ethnicity* are the most common indicators used to define target groups of WP
- *POLAR4* and *Ethnicity* are the most common systems used to measure WP
- The *Access and Participation Dataset* is the most commonly used source of information that shapes APPs

APP Investment Templates

The Investment Template attached to the end of APP consists of two tables. The first of which is the **Investment Summary (£)**, which lists the total access activity investment (£) across Access (pre16), Access (post16), Access (adults and the community), Access (other), Financial support (£), and Research and evaluation (£). The second table details the **Investment Summary (HFI%)**, which lists Higher fee income (£HFI), Access investment, Financial support, Research and evaluation, and Total investment (as %HFI). These investments are listed across five columns: 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23, 2023-24, and 2024-25.

In order to simplify this information to allow for comparison, I produced the following table (Fig.10):

Simplified data from APP Investment Templates from the four institutions

UNIVERSITY	£HFI	TOTAL ACCESS ACTIVITY INVESTMENT (£) 2020-21	TOTAL INVESTMENT (AS % HFI) 2020-21
CAMBRIDGE	£32,451,480.00	£3,650,000.00	32%
EAST ANGLIA	£37,080,905.00	£2,514,132.90	19.90%
OXFORD	£29,661,620.00	£4,041,767.60	14%
SUFFOLK	£20,563, 046.00	£731,020.00	11.50%
Total			

Source: OfS (2020 [2], [3], [4], [5])

Fig.10

This table shows the amount that each provider receives through Higher Fee Income, their total access activity investment, and their total investment as %HFI.

Interestingly, Cambridge's 32% investment as HFI seems at odds with the other providers, so I probed a little deeper. It appears as though when calculating the %, Cambridge also included the Financial Support and Research & Evaluation columns into their calculations, as demonstrated here in Fig. 11:

Cambridge's calculation of Total Investment (as %HFI)

	CAMBRIDGE (AS IS)	CAMBRIDGE (AS PER OTHERS)
Total access investment	3,650,000	3,650,000
Financial support	6,484,276	
Research & Evaluation	250,000	
	10,384,276	**3,650,000**
Higher Fee Income	32,451,480	32,451,480
Total	**32%**	**11%**

Source: OfS (2020 [2], [3], [4], [5])

Fig.11

The table shows that had Cambridge based their calculations without these two additional columns, as did the other three providers, their Total Investment (as % HFI) would be 11%, as opposed to the 32% reported. This would suggest that Cambridge invests less in Access than the other universities in this sample, even though the Total Investment (as %HFI) column suggests the opposite.

The OfS' *Regulatory Advice 6: How to prepare your access and participation plan* (OfS, 2019 [1]: 20-25), does not stipulate which of these two methods of calculation are correct; it only advises on what to include within the investment return sheet and what to consider as 'investment'. Each university has calculated their investment correctly, although Cambridge

has used a different method of calculation than the others. This demonstrates how ambiguity can skew processes of metrification that can lead to false assumptions.

APP Thematic Analysis

OfS *Regulatory notice 1: Access and participation guidance*, point 75, stipulates that:

> Providers are strongly encouraged to use the template provided to structure their access and participation plan. If a provider does not use the supplied template it may take longer for the OfS to assess the plan (OfS, 2019 [2]).

All four 'providers' in my sample structure their APPs around the OfS template, using the following subheadings:

1. Assessment of performance
    - 1.1. Higher education participation, household income, or socioeconomic status
    - 1.2. Black, Asian and minority ethnic students
    - 1.3. Mature students
    - 1.4. Disabled students
    - 1.5. Care leavers
    - 1.6. Intersections of disadvantage
    - 1.7. Other groups who experience barriers in higher education
2. Strategic aims and objectives
    - 2.1. Target groups
    - 2.2. Aims and objectives
3. Strategic measures
    - 3.1. Whole provider strategic approach
    - 3.2. Student consultation
    - 3.3. Evaluation strategy
    - 3.4. Monitoring progress against delivery of the plan
4. Provision of information to students

Structuring their APP around the template is the quickest route for universities to have their APPs assessed, and it is arguably a more secure way of meeting the approval of the Director

for Fair Access and Participation, which is an essential step in the OfS registration process which allows institutions to charge up to maximum tuition fees.

To seek out common threads within the APPs I apply a thematic analysis that allows me to search for key words within the texts. These key words are derived from a statement that I created to simulate the hypothesis of this thesis:

> ***disadvantaged*** **people have an** ***opportunity*** **for** ***social mobility*** **providing that they have** ***potential*** **and** ***aspiration*** **(i.e. intelligence and effort = meritocracy).**

Using the CtrlF search function I searched each of the APPs for the italicised words. This table (Fig.12) shows the number of times that each of these words appear in the APPs:

Number of times the keywords appear in the APPs

	DISADVANTAGE	OPPORTUNITY	SOCIAL MOBILITY	POTENTIAL	ASPIRATION
CAMBRIDGE	9	5	1	14	4
EAST ANGLIA	7	5	5	14	1
OXFORD	50	10	8	7	2
SUFFOLK	9	14	0	7	2
Total	75	34	14	42	9

Source: OfS (2020 [2], [3], [4], [5])

Fig.12

It is important to recognise that this approach does not claim quantifiable significance, as some words could be used out of the context for which they are being conceptualised – for example ‘potential’ may be highlighted but the sentence may read something along the lines

of ‘potentially this could mean….’, rather than *potential* being synonymous with *intelligence*. Similarly, many of the words highlighted in the key word search appeared in footnotes, often meaning duplication.

Nonetheless, this method of highlighting words through a key word search allows me to select sentences from within the APPs which I find particularly relevant to my investigation. The following sections detail findings from each institution’s APP for each theme. I have highlighted some of the text in bold when coming across something I found intriguing and that requires further investigation.

Disadvantage

Cambridge:

- (p.1) by 2035 we expect that one third of our intake will be drawn from the most under-represented and **disadvantaged groups (defined at this point by the bottom two quintiles of the POLAR and IMD measures, but this definition may change if and when data underpinning more sophisticated measures becomes available to universities at the point of application, such as free school meals data)**
- (p.2) We are nonetheless **deeply committed to widening participation** and to encouraging and admitting a greater proportion of applicants from groups that are **disadvantage**d and/or currently under-represented at Cambridge; it is in this respect that we consider **potential** given the context of each applicant
- (p.18) **FSM eligibility** forms the basis for allocation of Pupil Premium funding in state maintained schools, and has been identified in recent academic literature as having particular promise as a **contextual admissions indicator of disadvantage** because it is “one of the most comprehensive and accurate measures of [socio-economic status] available”
- (p.24) We have taken steps to ensure that we provide the right kind of **support to other disadvantaged groups**. We have for example signed the Care Leavers Covenant and the Stand Alone Pledge, which commit the University to providing specialist support for care leavers and estranged students

East Anglia:

- (p.5) Over the last year, we have been working to better understand the trends caused by **intersectionality** between demographic, educational and **disadvantage indices** through developments in our **internal data** capability. We have also reviewed the **OfS dataset** for the intersectionality between **ethnicity and gender** and indicators of disadvantage to ensure we understand the key issues we need to consider in our action planning
- (p.6) reviewing our **Outreach target schools** in terms of **IMD profile** and understanding internal trends in **IMD performance** by subject and other **intersections of disadvantage**
- (p.16) We have **secured funding from the OfS** for the **Norfolk Graduate Talent Programme**, which will address challenges to students from disadvantaged backgrounds gaining **employment**

Oxford:

- (p.2) Our key challenge is to improve the **opportunities for admission for those from disadvantaged backgrounds** who fail to receive an offer, or who, because of **prior academic attainment**, are not able to make competitive applications
- (p.2) We are developing a **foundation year** programme for **state school candidates** from underrepresented backgrounds who, because of **severe personal disadvantage** or **disrupted education**, are not able to meet our standard offer but who would benefit from a one year intensive programme and support to bring their attainment to the level required to start an undergraduate degree at Oxford
- (p.9) those from more **disadvantaged backgrounds (measured by POLAR4 and ACORN)** who attend **poorly performing schools** likely to be most adversely affected
- (p.9) We plan to explore further aspects of intersection, in particular, the **intersection of gender and ethnicity with disability**
- (p.10) Other groups that may experience barriers in higher education include those with **caring responsibilities**, those who are **estranged from their families**, those from **Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities**, those from **military families, refugees and asylum seekers**. The University **does not have significant data to indicate disadvantage** as the declared numbers involved are very small
- (p.10) **inequalities in the education system** in the UK which contribute to lower prior school attainment among students from disadvantaged backgrounds
- (p.11) we will explore the scope to increase participation by **mature students** from disadvantaged backgrounds, both through the work of the Department for Continuing Education, and the future **development of our new access measures**
- (p.11) We will also work to improve access to **postgraduate study** for those from disadvantaged backgrounds
- (p.18) a new **financial support package** for UK undergraduate students, starting in 2020. The new package is intended to encourage more applications from students from disadvantaged backgrounds
- (p.19) we also wish to create new opportunities for academically able students from **very disadvantaged backgrounds**
- (p.19) The **foundation year** is aimed at candidates from **disadvantaged backgrounds in general**. It will provide new opportunities for participation among particular under-represented groups, such as care-leavers and those with caring responsibilities
- (p.20) Under **Opportunity Oxford**, we will provide, within existing overall numbers, an additional 200 places a year by 2021 for 2022 entry for disadvantaged students who meet our standard A-level offer
- (p.20) Under **Foundation Oxford**, we aim to provide up to 50 foundation year places a year by 2022 for 2023 entry for **disadvantaged students who have shown the academic potential to benefit from an Oxford education and who meet a contextual A-level offer**
- (p.20) Oxford uses **a range of indicators of disadvantage** including school performance at KS4 and/or KS5, home postcodes (ACORN and POLAR4) and periods in care. The University also produces a contextualised GCSE score for all applicants with at least five GCSE results, comparing the candidate's performance with that of applicants from schools with similar Key Stage 4 performance

Suffolk

- (p.2) Closing the gap is therefore not wholly within our control, but we are **committed to working with employers to promote engagement of their staff from disadvantaged backgrounds in part-time study** as part of our strategic measures for IMD Q1 access
- (p.11) We will extend our work to better engage other disadvantaged groups, for example within BAME communities, recognising the enrichment of the learning experience that comes from having a diverse student body. Our county and region have **areas of significant disadvantage and low participation,** and our local secondary schools and colleges are often in remote small towns serving populations that include sparsely populated **rural areas**, and urban areas characterised by **low-skill, low-wage economies**; and we will therefore continue to provide activity to support access to HE for all under-represented groups. **We will work collaboratively with local partners, including Suffolk County Council, Suffolk Refugee Support, Ipswich and Suffolk Council for Racial Equality, the Ipswich Opportunity Area, and the National Collaborative Outreach Programme to achieve these outcomes and increase data available about these groups**

- (p.13) National research on understanding and overcoming barriers to access for students from disadvantaged ethnic backgrounds has highlighted a **range of factors influencing equality of opportunity**, including prior educational outcomes, financial constraints (recognising that BAME students are more likely to be from deprived areas), experiences of racism and identity factors. We are particularly conscious that the University's location in a region with a lower proportion of BAME young people than elsewhere in the country can be a **barrier to access,** leading to reluctance for those from outside the region to move away from family and community support mechanism
- (p.17) The recent report commissioned by the OfS on understanding and overcoming the challenges of targeting students from disadvantaged ethnic backgrounds identified a range of factors acting as **barriers to success** that we aim to address, including **lack of a sense of entitlement to support services**, resources and opportunities; lack of recognition of **white privilege** within institutions; failure to adequately address issues of **diversity, equality and discrimination within the curriculum**; and a **weak sense of student belonging to the wider university community**

Opportunity

Cambridge:

- (p.1) The University is **committed to widening participation**, and to achieving an intake that is reflective of UK society and providing **equality of educational opportunity** for all those who study at Cambridge
- (p.23) This will allow those from under-represented backgrounds who do not have the level of attainment or access to qualifications required for entry to a Cambridge course, but who are **believed to have the potential to succeed**, the opportunity for undergraduate study at Cambridge following the successful completion of the programme

East Anglia:

- (p.6) an ambitious and credible set of aims, objectives and targets to ensure **equality of opportunity for all across the student lifecycle**
- (p.13) maximise the **opportunity for success for all**

Oxford:

- (p.2) We are determined to improve **equality of opportunity at each stage of the student journey**, from school through higher education into employment or further study
- (p.2) We will introduce a University wide **bridging programme** that will enable additional places, within our existing overall numbers, to be provided to candidates from under-represented backgrounds who meet our standard offer, to help prepare them for study at Oxford. Under this new scheme, **Opportunity Oxford**, starting in 2020, we aim to offer 200 places a year by 2021 for 2022 entry

Suffolk:

- (p.7) We aim to provide an inclusive and **supportive environment** for all students, embracing and valuing diversity and providing **equality of opportunity** for all
- (p.11) Our strategic approach to WP is underpinned by our commitment to ensuring **equality of opportunity** for all, as outlined in our equality, diversity and inclusion activity
- (p.11) We will work collaboratively with local partners, including Suffolk County Council, Suffolk Refugee Support, Ipswich and Suffolk Council for Racial Equality, the **Ipswich Opportunity Area**, and the **National Collaborative Outreach Programme** to achieve these outcomes and increase data available about these groups
- (p.13) Playing a key role in the work of **the Ipswich Opportunity Area (IOA)** by hosting the project team, having a place on the Board, and chairing the IOA priority group for **raising aspirations**
- (p.14) Working collaboratively with the **Ipswich Opportunity Area** and **neaco** on a new Parent Ambassador project, where parents are HE ambassadors within their communities, prioritising work with **BAME communities** and in **IMD Q1 areas**

Social Mobility

Cambridge:

- (p.1) The University recognises that it along with the higher education sector as a whole must play a **leading role** in **supporting the Office for Student's (OfS) commitment to social mobility**, and trusts that our reasonable endeavours to this end will be in **active partnership** with an education sector adequately resourced to narrow the gaps which manifest during primary and secondary schooling

East Anglia:

- (p.10) We note the vital importance of **collective responsibility and collaborative action** from HE providers in working to improve social mobility
- (p.16) Sector research into graduate outcomes and social mobility highlights that 'students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to participate in the type of extra-curricular activities that are **attractive to employers**. They are less likely to make use of careers services or apply for internships'

Oxford:

- (p.2) **Oxford offers considerable social mobility** to its students, with graduates from all backgrounds having **excellent career destinations**
- (p. 16) The University runs a **range of programmes**, involving **collaborations** between schools, education experts at the University, and public sector organisations tackling social mobility and social justice, to help raise attainment in schools and encourage applications to selective universities

Suffolk:

- No mention of social mobility

Potential

Cambridge:

- (p.1) The University comprises 29 **autonomous Colleges** which undertake undergraduate admissions. The University and the Colleges collaborate closely in developing and implementing admissions **policy in partnership**. The principal aim of the admissions policy of the University is to admit, via processes that are transparent and fair, students of **the highest academic calibre and potential to succeed** in their chosen course, irrespective of financial or other non-academic considerations
- (p.1) We have in place a rigorous and **contextualised selection process** during which each applicant's **attainment and potential** are assessed individually and in relation to the gathered field
- (p.2) We use our process to identify those applicants who have **the greatest ability and potential to succeed** academically on our courses
- (p.2) deeply **committed to widening participation** and to encouraging and admitting a greater proportion of applicants from groups that are disadvantaged and/or currently under-represented at Cambridge; it is in this respect that we consider **potential given the context of each applicant**
- (p.21) The University seeks to ensure that our students **achieve their potential**, through full and **active participation** in their education
- (p.23) The **programme**, which is in its pilot phase, utilises tests provided by Cambridge Assessment to help schools identify students who are underachieving relative to their **potential** as assessed by previous school assessment data
- (p.24) our overall aim of admitting students with the **greatest academic ability and potential** regardless of the background from which they come, and continues to uphold the principle of fair and transparent admissions

East Anglia:

- (p.9) Our Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2017-2022 underscores UEA's commitment to the promotion of wellbeing for all students through a "whole university" approach that embeds mental wellbeing in the teaching and learning context, both attitudinal and structural, recognising that wellbeing is necessary to students' capacity to learn and **achieve their potential**

Oxford:

- (p.2) While our selection criteria for undergraduate study are demanding, we are committed to making Oxford **accessible and attractive to students with high academic potential** from all backgrounds
- (p.11) Our objective, set out in the Strategic Plan (2018-23), is to attract and admit students from all backgrounds with **outstanding potential and the ability** to benefit from an Oxford education
- (p.11) But we do see room for improvement in attainment rates to enable all students to **demonstrate their full academic potential** on course
- (p.19) To address this challenge, we are developing a foundation year, **Foundation Oxford**, to provide a year of intensive tuition and **support for students with high academic potential from disadvantaged backgrounds** to bring their level of attainment to that required for entry to undergraduate study at Oxford
- (p.20) Admissions coordinators and tutors are provided with comprehensive **contextualised data** about applicants to assist in **assessing academic potential** in the context of the applicant's **education experience**, and in making decisions about shortlisting and offers

Suffolk:

- (p.7) Our progressive Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2018/2023) is designed to reflect the profile of our student body and recognise that our students join the University from a range of backgrounds, requiring support and development to **enable them to achieve their full potential throughout the full student life cycle**

Aspiration

Cambridge:

- (p.23) **We work intensively with schools** in East Anglia (specifically Cambridge, Peterborough and West Norfolk) through the **Insight programme**. Insight is a new Y7-Y13 programme working at both whole-school level and with targeted individuals from under-represented backgrounds. The programme seeks to not only **raise aspirations** for progression to highly-selective universities, but **support students** in securing the grades required for entry
- (p.26) Practitioners working with pre-16 learners recognise that **simply raising aspiration is not sufficient to raise attainment**, but that these concepts can complement efforts in schools and are realistic goals within the **interventions we deliver**

East Anglia:

- (p.14) Understanding that UEA's student body is made up of **distinct groups**, each with **different life experiences and backgrounds, and with different aspirations** for their time at UEA is thus a central pillar of UEA's **strategic Theory of Change for widening participation**

Oxford:

- (p.17) We are radically re-structuring our **regional outreach work** by establishing College Outreach Consortia. Each consortium, comprising 3-5 colleges, will offer focused, coordinated engagement with **schools** and students across a UK region. Consortia will work with local schools to **encourage aspirations** to higher education and selective universities, and will offer comprehensive information and guidance on applying to Oxford

- (p.17) working towards this aim by delivering, to targeted geographical areas, a **range of aspiration - raising events and activities** to young people as well as providing high quality, impartial advice and guidance about the variety of higher education opportunities on offer

Suffolk

- (p.7) Established in 2007 (originally as University Campus Suffolk), the University aims to **raise aspirations** and widen participation to HE across Suffolk and the region, and have a clear, **measurable and positive impact** on the economic, cultural and educational lives of the communities we serve
- (p.13) Playing a key role in the work of the **Ipswich Opportunity Area (IOA**) by hosting the project team, having a place on the Board, and chairing the IOA priority group for raising aspirations
- (p.14) For those from IMD Q1 areas, recognised barriers to access that we need to address include poor school performance, **low aspirations**, concerns about the financial burden of HE, lack of visibility of graduate job opportunities and a fear of not fitting in

APP Thematic Analysis Findings: uniformity, ambiguity, and partnership

Disadvantage

The concept of 'disadvantage' underpins all of the APPs approaches to WP. This uniform approach is matched by the layout of the APPs, which are all structured around the OfS template. Yet the definition of 'disadvantage' being discussed is multiple, varied, and diffuse; this creates an aura of confusion and ambiguity. For example, Cambridge's Plan highlights how the current measures of disadvantage lack sophistication:

> the most under-represented and disadvantaged groups (defined at this point by the bottom two quintiles of the POLAR and IMD measures, but this definition may change if and when data underpinning more sophisticated measures becomes available to universities at the point of application, such as free school meals data) (OfS, 2020 [2]: 1).

Similarly, grouping people into categorizations based on identity such as ethnicity becomes more complicated when considering the intersectionality of disadvantage, which all providers do, following the structure of the OfS template.

Furthermore, as Oxford's Plan highlights, there are many 'barriers' which shape the idea of 'disadvantage', meaning that this concept is far-reaching:

> Other groups that may experience barriers in higher education include those with caring responsibilities, those who are estranged from their families, those from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, those from military families, refugees and asylum seekers (OfS, 2020 [4]: 10).

And, as the pool of 'disadvantage' grows wider, measuring it can become problematic:

> The University does not have significant data to indicate disadvantage as the declared numbers involved are very small (OfS, 2020 [4]: 10).

Opportunity

All of the APPs in this study discuss 'opportunity' in terms of WP being a mechanism of 'equality of opportunity'. Along with the concept of 'disadvantage', this idea of 'equality of opportunity' will be scrutinised within the discussion of Chapter 6.

Social Mobility

While Cambridge shares OfS' commitment to social mobility (OfS, 2020 [2]: 1), East Anglia views social mobility as being a 'collective responsibility and collaborative action' (OfS, 2020 [3]: 10). Oxford boasts that it offers 'considerable social mobility' (OfS, 2020 [4]: 2), while Suffolk does not mention social mobility (OfS, 2020 [5]). It is important to question why these universities approach 'social mobility' in different ways within their APPs, given the fact that it is the narrative of social mobility that drives WP at a macro-level. This will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 6 of the thesis.

Potential

Ideas of potential signal a belief in meritocracy. This can be seen in the move towards contextualised admissions processes, discussed within Cambridge's Plan:

> We have in place a rigorous and contextualised selection process during which each applicant's attainment and potential are assessed individually and in relation to the gathered field (OfS, 2020 [2]: 1).

Similarly, Oxford's Plan promotes the idea that those with 'ability' have the potential to benefit from higher education, regardless of their disadvantage:

> to attract and admit students from all backgrounds with outstanding potential and the ability to benefit from an Oxford education (OfS, 2020: [4]: 11).

Aspiration

Although Suffolk's Plan does not talk about social mobility per se, it does discuss its linkages with the Ipswich Opportunity Area:

> Playing a key role in the work of the Ipswich Opportunity Area (IOA) by hosting the project team, having a place on the Board, and chairing the IOA priority group for raising aspirations (OfS, 2020 [5]: 13).

As this chapter will go on to demonstrate, the Ipswich Opportunity Area (IOA) plays an important role in determining how the need for WP is *recognised* at a local level, and how it becomes connected with the narrative of social mobility at a meso-level. The idea of *raising aspirations* at a meso-level, in-part, through the work of the Opportunity Area's, is what facilitates WP within localities at a micro-level through a partnership approach. This partnership approach and its relationship with facilitating WP on a micro-level is discussed in Cambridge's Plan:

> The University recognises that it along with the higher education sector as a whole must play a leading role in supporting the Office for Student's (OfS) commitment to social mobility, and trusts that our reasonable endeavours to this end will be in active partnership with an education sector adequately resourced to narrow the gaps which manifest during primary and secondary schooling (OfS, 2020 [2]:1).

Partnerships are also discussed as playing a crucial role in WP connecting students with the labour market. As East Anglia's Plan notes:

> We have secured funding from the OfS for the Norfolk Graduate Talent Programme, which will address challenges to students from disadvantaged backgrounds gaining employment (OfS, 2020 [3]: 16).

Raising aspirations through partnerships that connect universities with schools and other organisations is the feature of this chapter's micro-level analysis. All of the four APPs selected for the meso-level analysis discuss the need of aspiration rising as being central to WP:

Cambridge discusses the Insight programme, which:

> seeks to not only raise aspirations for progression to highly-selective universities, but support students in securing the grades required for entry (OfS, 2020 [2]: 23).

East Anglia understands that:

> UEA's student body is made up of distinct groups, each with different life experiences and backgrounds, and with different aspirations for their time at UEA is thus a central pillar of UEA's strategic Theory of Change for widening participation (OfS, 2020 [3]: 14).

Oxford commits to WP by:

> delivering, to targeted geographical areas, a range of aspiration-raising events and activities to young people as well as providing high quality, impartial advice and guidance about the variety of higher education opportunities on offer (OfS, 2020 [4]: 17).

And, for Suffolk, raising aspirations and widening participation is a main aim of the university:

> the University aims to raise aspirations and widen participation to HE across Suffolk and the region, and have a clear, measurable and positive impact on the economic, cultural and educational lives of the communities we serve (OfS, 2020 [5]: 7).

Measuring Ambiguity: understanding OfS logic

As my thematic analysis of the APPs shows, the four universities in my sample, despite their differences, all share commonalities. There is a uniform approach to the ways in which they conceptualise, measure, and report WP, yet their approaches to WP are all shrouded in ambiguity. They are all also characterised by a partnership approach to WP, which will be discussed in more depth during the micro-level analysis. For now, it is important to try to unpack this uniform ambiguity a little more, which I do by probing the logic of OfS.

The OfS measure the 'success' of their vision to create a 'system where every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers', by setting 'outcomes-focused' targets, through which the OfS itself can be held accountable (OfS, 2020 [6]). The targets are grouped into 5 strategic objectives:

- Participation
- Experience
- Outcomes
- Value for Money
- Efficiency and Effectiveness

Each strategic objective has strategic outcomes which are measured using Key Performance Measures (KPM). Importantly, the OfS recognise that:

> The measures themselves are proxies - we can't directly measure how fulfilling students' find their experience, or whether every student from an underrepresented background, with the ability and desire to do so, is supported to access, succeed in and progress from higher education (OfS, 2020 [6]).

Recognising that it is not possible to 'directly measure', highlights the ambiguity involved with using KPMs, which in turn limits the extent to which OfS' success can be held accountable. The terms used are themselves equally ambiguous. For example, what does 'participation' actually mean? Could a student who has enrolled at university, paid their fees, but does not attend any lectures more than is enough than to not be excluded, still be considered as 'participating', especially when considering the commonplace use of recording devices for lectures which enable and even encourage non-direct participation?

The statement from OfS also highlights the central role that ideas of meritocracy play within the 'student lifecycle'. By claiming to focus on the experience of students from underrepresented backgrounds with 'ability' and 'desire' and linking it with the opportunity to 'succeed' within and 'progress' from higher education, OfS reaffirm the notion of merit discussed as a satirical critique of inequality by Michael Young in 1958 – the proposal that IQ + Effort = Merit. But, like Prime Minister Tony Blair twenty years earlier (Young, 2001), the OfS appear to be playing a central role in the 'unironic deployment' of conceptualisations of meritocracy. By individualising the need for 'success' and 'progression', structural inequalities become largely ignored and the process increases competition that idealises hierarchy in ways that work to strengthen social stratification (Williams, 1958).

The OfS' 5 Strategic Objectives have a total of 13 Strategic Outcomes which are measured by 26 KPMs. In analysing the KPMs and their Data Source I produced the following table and graph (Fig. 13 and Fig. 14) that demonstrate where the information that shapes OfS' strategy originates from.

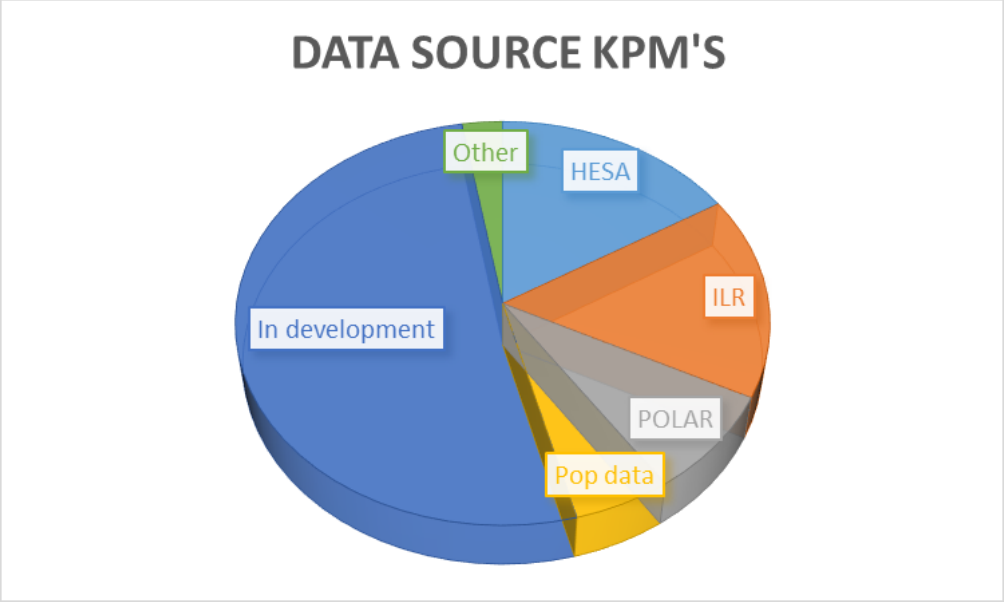
Number of KPM's using data source to inform OfS' 5 strategic objectives

DATA SOURCE	PARTICIPATION	EXPERIENCE	OUTCOMES	VALUE FOR MONEY	EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS
HESA	5		1		
ILR	5		1		
POLAR	3				
POP DATA	2				
IN DEVELOPMENT	2	6	3	1	7
OTHER		1			
Total	17	7	4	1	7

Source: (OfS, 2020 [6])

Fig.13

Data source used as OfS KPM's



Source: (OfS, 2020 [6])

Fig.14

As Fig.14 highlights, at the time of writing, many of the sources used to provide data to measure OfS' KPMs were still in development. Measuring with an instrument that is unfinished is unlikely to provide much accuracy. Nonetheless, the findings presented in Fig.13 also show the use of authoritative sources. OfS Strategic Objectives rely heavily on data from HESA, which is an expert in UK higher education data and analysis (HESA, 2020), the Office for National Statistics, which is UK's largest independent producer of official statistics and represented within the graph as 'Pop data' (ONS, 2020), and the Education and Skills Funding Agency, which is an executive agency sponsored by the Department for Education, and represented in the graph as 'ILR' (GOV.UK, 2020).

Crucially however, these Objectives also rely heavily on data from POLAR, which is the OfS' own system of measuring participation in higher education through postcode classification. The POLAR methodology is rooted in a 2005 report from HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) (HEFCE, 2005). Both HEFCE and the Office for

Fair Access (OFFA), were absorbed into the OfS following its creation following the *case for creation of the Office for Students* put forward by the Department for Business Innovation & Skills in 2016 (DBIS, 2016 [2]), and the subsequent Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (GOV.UK, 2018).

My thematic analysis of the APPs shows the important role that the POLAR measuring system plays in shaping institutional approaches to WP:

- *Participation* is the most common way that WP is conceptualised
- *Low participation neighbourhoods* are one of the most common indicators used to define target groups of WP
- *Polar 4* is one of the most common systems used to measure WP
- The *access and participation dataset* is the most commonly used data source that shapes the information that institutions submit within their Plans

The use of authoritative sources aside, the OfS' own measuring systems carry much weight in shaping how WP is perceived and how it operates. And when considering the proportion of OfS data sources that are 'in development', it is reasonable to suggest that the OfS produce 'hegemonising knowledge regimes' (Machen & Nost, 2021) based upon uniformity and ambiguity.

Despite the overwhelming presence of the POLAR system of measurement within the OfS' own logic, and the extent to which it is used to shape institutional approaches to WP, there is recognition by OfS of its shortfalls. When discussing 'POLAR4 being the most recent

iteration of POLAR', the OfS also mention a new system of measurement: TUNDRA (OfS, 2020 [7]):

> TUNDRA is a different measure to POLAR4 because it focuses on the participation rate of state-funded mainstream school pupils and only applies to England.
>
> It differs from POLAR4 in three key ways:
>
> 1. TUNDRA uses data-linking to track students from the GCSE (Key Stage 4) cohort at age 16 to participation in higher education at age 18-19. POLAR4 does not use data-linking.
> 2. TUNDRA focuses on pupils in state-funded mainstream schools, excluding those pupils at independent schools, special schools and pupil referral units. POLAR4 includes all school types.
> 3. TUNDRA focuses on local areas within England, whereas POLAR4 is a UK-wide measure.

The creation of TUNDRA is yet another example that demonstrates how measuring systems continuously change, are 'proxies' for 'directly measuring', and largely remain 'still in development'. Through these ambiguous processes of measurement, university policy becomes shaped by the uniformed practice of WP. OfS claims of accountability are questionable when considering the confusion around how to measure the effectiveness of their outcomes-focused targets (OfS, 2020 [6]).

In Smith and Atkinson's (2016: 99) analysis of 'the sociology of contemporary measurement practices' for 'the context of proliferating regimes of institutional performance measurement and league tables, risk assessment and audit', they draw upon Cicourel's classic text, *Method and Measurement,* to discuss 'overly subjective interpretations of social phenomena and the arbitrary application of crude categories to complex forms of organisation'. The authors suggest that:

> Measurement is becoming increasingly central to the constitution of contemporary subjectivities, identities and experiences…populations, publics and selves are made up in and through increasingly pervasive measurement strategies (Smith & Atkinson, 2016: 108).

WP, grounded with the rhetoric of 'equality of opportunity' and 'raising aspirations', is a strategy that haphazardly and pervasively measures 'disadvantage'.

How the need for WP is recognised at a local level

I now move on to examine how the need for WP is *recognised* at a local level. The *recognition* of the social mobility narrative at a meso-level positions WP as a deliverable mechanism that becomes legitimised for facilitation at the micro-level. To showcase how the narrative of social mobility gathers strength at the meso-level, this section demonstrates how politicised narratives can shape the practice of institutions, which can in turn go on to shape the perception of people. In 2017 the Department for Education (DfE) launched its *Opportunity Area Programme* (GOV.UK, 2019). This initiative highlighted twelve areas within England considered to be 'disadvantaged' due to their 'entrenched obstacles to social mobility'. The programme aims to 'improve outcomes and increase opportunities for all young people in these areas' (GOV.UK, 2019).

My analysis in this section looks at the Opportunity Area Delivery Plans of Ipswich and Norwich (DfE, 2017 [2] [3]). Both of these locations are recognised by DfE as being 'disadvantaged areas', otherwise described as 'social mobility coldspots' by the Opportunity Area programme (DfE, 2017 [4]). The Opportunity Areas Selection Methodology combines the Social Mobility Commission's Social Mobility Index, which identifies the strength of Local Authority Districts (LADs) in England in terms of the 'opportunities young people

from poorer backgrounds have to succeed', with the DfE's Achieving Excellence Areas Index, which focuses on 'school performance and capacity to improve' at a LAD level (DfE, 2017 [4]). Like the measuring techniques used by OfS, these systems of measurement are shrouded in ambiguity and saturated with loaded terminology. For example, the Social Mobility Index does not appear to question what an 'opportunity' is or what 'success' means, and the Achieving Excellence Areas Index does not appear to recognise that ideologies often play a role in shaping what 'improvement' entails. Rather, these measuring systems work to create more measuring systems that go on to influence the ways in which public institutions are managed.

Ipswich and Norwich are homes to the universities of Suffolk and East Anglia, respectively. My analysis interrogates the Delivery Plans of 2017-20 (which are publicly available on the GOV.UK website), seeking to understand how the narrative of social mobility relates with the local university in terms of WP, and how the narrative of social mobility is framed more broadly. Scrutiny of the *Opportunity Area Delivery Plans* looks specifically for mention or signs of connection with the local university, given the fact that, within the initiative, the UK Government correlates social mobility with education:

> Opportunity areas are part of the government's national plan for dealing with social mobility through education (DfE, 2017 [4]).

Opportunity Area Delivery Plan: Ipswich

Fig.15

Ipswich was chosen by DfE as an Opportunity Area because it was ranked 292nd out of 324 districts in the Social Mobility Index and was ranked within the bottom ten of all local authority districts in the 2016 'Achieving Excellence in all Areas' analysis (DfE, 2017 [2]: 8). The Plan highlights that 'young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Ipswich achieve, on average, poorer outcomes in education than disadvantaged pupils across the country' (DfE, 2017 [2]: 8).

In the 'Vision' section of the Plan, former Secretary of State for Education, Damien Hinds states that:

> The world economy is changing and it is through education, skills and training from the early years into adulthood that we will make sure no one is left behind. Education will be key to achieving that goal, and is central to breaking down the barriers to social mobility that face too many young people in Ipswich…We need to ensure that every child's future is determined by their talent and hard work, rather than where they began (DfE, 2017 [2]: 5).

Within this political statement, education, skills and training are stated as the 'key to achieving' social mobility. The 'talent and hard work' being promoted here symbolise a belief in meritocracy.

The Plan is structured on four Priorities (DfE, 2017 [2]: 10):

- Priority 1: Ensure all children in Ipswich are prepared to learn for life by developing key behaviours such as resilience and self-regulation.
- Priority 2: Strengthen the teaching profession in Ipswich by providing world-class support and development.
- Priority 3: Improve attainment for disadvantaged pupils by embedding evidence based practice in the teaching of English and maths.
- Priority 4: Inspire and equip young people with the skills and guidance they need to pursue an ambitious career pathway.

These Priorities put responsibility for social mobility into the hands of the teachers and learners. They suggest that teachers need 'professional development', while learners need behaviour that equates with 'ambition'.

The Plan highlights local partnership with employers (DfE, 2017 [2]: 17), including Adecco, BT Adastral Park, Barclays, Dayle Bayliss Associates, East of England Co-operative, Grant Thornton, Ipswich Building Society, John Grose, Lloyds Banking Group, Morgan Sindall, and Suffolk County Council. It also details three partner organisations tasked with helping to deliver the Priorities: The Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC), The National Citizen Service, and The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (DfE, 2017 [2]: 16).

These connections with employers and partner organisations help to position education as being a pathway into the labour market. Social mobility is conceptualised within this

narrative as being an individual pursuit. A key component of education then, is to teach students to adopt this narrative. This is how the narrative of social mobility becomes *recognised* at a local level – through this partnership approach.

Once the narrative of social mobility is recognised as a desirable route by the student, WP is needed to reinforce the idea that it is higher education that can deliver social mobility. The work of Neaco (Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach), which is the feature of the micro-level analysis of this chapter, is promoted within Ipswich's Opportunity Area Plan:

> Neaco have already appointed four Higher Education Champions (HEC's) to work with all secondary schools and sixth-form colleges in the Opportunity Area as well as Suffolk New College. The HEC's are already delivering a diverse range of targeted activity with schools with pupils in years nine to thirteen (DfE, 2017 [2]: 15).

This shows how WP activity in Ipswich is supported by the collaborative outreach work of Neaco. The Opportunity Area Plan of Ipswich highlights the importance of WP, and the role that its local university, Suffolk, plays:

> there is an exciting network of further education and sixth-form colleges to access. Two of these colleges have partnered with the University of Suffolk, which opened its central Waterfront Campus in August 2016, to widen participation in higher education. The university itself is well integrated into the community (DfE, 2017: [2]: 7).

The University of Suffolk is discussed in the Opportunity Area Plan as opening with the purpose 'to widen participation to higher education'. Through a partnership approach, the university connects with local colleges to deliver this mission, and in turn plays an integral role in shaping the town of Ipswich.

Opportunity Area Delivery Plan: Norwich

Fig.16

Norwich was chosen by DfE as an Opportunity Area because it was ranked 323rd out of 324 districts in the Social Mobility Index, which compares the likelihood that children eligible for free school meals (FSM) will 'do well' at school and go on to get a 'good job'. This positions Norwich as having 'poor educational performance amongst disadvantaged children' (DfE, 2017 [3]: 8).

In the 'Vision' section of the Plan, former Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities Justine Greening states:

> I want to level up opportunity across this country so that all young people can go as far as their talents and drive will take them. Education is at the heart of that ambition, and is central to breaking down the barriers to social mobility that too many face in our country today. This ambitious plan for Norwich will open up opportunity for children and young people across the city (DfE, 2017 [3]: 5).

Within this political statement, the ‘talents and drive’ promoted here symbolise a belief in meritocracy, while education is positioned as being the gateway of ‘opportunity’ for ‘social mobility’.

The Plan is structured on four Priorities (DfE, 2017 [3]: 19):

- Priority 1: Improve early speech, language, listening and communication.
- Priority 2: Raise attainment through targeted, evidence-based continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers and stronger system leadership support.
- Priority 3: Support children at risk of exclusion from school.
- Priority 4: Give young people the information and support they need to move successfully between school, college, university and into work.

These Priorities correlate education with the labour market and position social mobility as being dependent upon the professional development of teachers and support staff, and having a strong system designed to give information and support to students to move between school, college, university, and the labour market. It is clear that universities have an important role to play within this narrative of social mobility.

The Plan highlights local partnership with employers ((DfE, 2017 [3]: 16), including Aviva, Adecco, Grant Thornton, Norfolk County Council, and KPMG. It also details the four partner organisations tasked with helping to deliver these Priorities (DfE, 2017 [3]: 12): The Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC), The National Citizen Service, The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), The Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach (Neaco).

The University of East Anglia is only mentioned twice within the Plan, and Norwich University of the Arts, only once. And these mentions are brief to say the least. It states that Norwich has ‘two strong universities – University of East Anglia and Norwich University of

the Arts' DfE, 2017[3]: 11), and in the description of partnership board members, one is listed as being Head of the School of Education at the University of East Anglia (DfE, 2017 [3]: 15).

However, despite the lack of emphasis on the importance of Norwich's universities within the Plan, the message of WP is strong. Like in Ipswich's Plan, the work of Neaco features within Norwich's Plan. It is listed as one of the partner organisations and is specifically tasked with delivering Priority 4:

> Neaco will use dedicated funding to encourage and support more young people to apply to higher education or higher level apprenticeships (DfE, 2017[3]: 32).

The Opportunity Area Delivery Plans create a narrative that *recognises* the need for WP at a local level by correlating higher education with 'social mobility'. As a facilitator of WP, Neaco is promoted within the Plans. In Norwich's Plan it is described as:

> a consortium of all of the universities in East Anglia which are working together to help us ensure Norwich's young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are fully aware of and can access all of the opportunities that may transform their life chances. Neaco is already working in schools across Norwich, focusing on those schools serving wards where there is low participation in higher education. Neaco has already begun to place coordinators in schools to increase engagement with pupils (DfE, 2017[3]: 13).

As with Ipswich, Neaco helps to shape Norwich through its partnership approach that works with local schools and colleges with the aim to 'transform the life chances' of 'young people from disadvantaged backgrounds' by helping them to 'access the opportunities' of higher education.

As this meso-level analysis shows, the Opportunity Area programme is a mechanism that works to champion the narrative of social mobility. It works to legitimise WP by *recognising*

a need for it at a local level and helps in the facilitation of WP by opening-up space for organisations such as Neaco to operate. Within this championing of 'social mobility', the concept is presented as being an individual pursuit of 'opportunity', dependent upon the meritocratic ideals of 'talent' and 'hard work'. To nurture the chances of prospective students, systemic changes that require the professional development of teaching and support staff become bound within the politicised narrative of social mobility.

How WP is facilitated at a local, micro level

As the meso-level analysis has shown, the workings of WP at an institutional level are directed by the OfS and characterised by a uniform approach that is underpinned by ambiguous measurement. The meso-level analysis also shows how WP becomes mediated at a local level where the narrative of social mobility becomes legitimised. It is here, at the local level, where the partnership approach works to 'raise the aspirations' of OfS target groups, commonly referred to as 'disadvantaged'. This section analyses, at micro-level, how WP becomes facilitated within localities. It does this by looking at the work of Neaco (2023 [2]).

A Partnership Approach

Neaco, otherwise known as *Take Your Place* (Neaco, 2023 [2]), is one of twenty-nine partnerships organised and funded by the OfS. These partnerships make up the OfS' *Uni Connect* programme (OfS, 2023 [2]), which aims to:

1) Contribute to reducing the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups.

2) Equip young and adult learners from underrepresented groups to make an informed choice about their options in relation to the full range of routes into and through higher education and to minimise the barriers they may face when choosing the option that will unlock their potential, including barriers relating to academic attainment.

3) Support a strategic local infrastructure of universities, colleges and other partners that can cut through competitive barriers, offer an efficient and low burden route for schools and colleges to engage with higher education outreach, enable schools to engage with attainment raising activity, and address outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups.

4) Contribute to a stronger evidence base around 'what works' in higher education outreach and strengthen evaluation practice across the sector.

These aims laid out by OfS in relation to their Uni Connect programme are far reaching, and the OfS logic of uniform ambiguity is apparent throughout these aims. For example, what figures are needed to constitute 'reducing the gap'? And what does 'minimise the barriers' mean? What these aims do, is to allow 'disadvantage' to be pervasively measured (Smith & Atkinson, 2016) in order to produce 'hegemonising knowledge regimes' (Machen & Nost, 2021) for the 'sector' of higher education.

As the meso-level analysis shows, the work of just one of these twenty-nine partnerships, Neaco, features in the APPs of Cambridge, East Anglia, and Suffolk, and in the Opportunity Area Delivery Plans of Norwich and Ipswich. This suggests that the 'hegemonising knowledge regime' (Machen & Nost, 2021) being spearheaded by OfS is saturating not only the 'sector' of higher education, but also the localities within which universities are based.

The University of Cambridge uses its APP to highlight its position as being the lead institution of the Neaco partnership:

> Cambridge is the lead for the Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach, a partnership of the five HEIs and eight FECs with HE provision in East Anglia. It is (by funding allocation) the largest of the 29 OfS-funded National Collaborative Outreach

> Partnerships across England and the largest collaborative project ever created in the region, working with over 80 schools (OfS, 2020 [2]: 23).

This demonstrates further how the OfS, through the work of Neaco, extends its influence within schools by promoting HE participation. As the 'largest collaborative project ever' (OfS, 2020 [2]: 23), Neaco has significant impact on the region. The Neaco website offers numerical representation of the level of engagement with school children. The website homepage (Neaco, 2023 [2]) uses large font numbers to highlight that:

- We currently work alongside 275 schools and colleges across East Anglia
- Our higher education champions and Neaco staff have helped to deliver 4,959 activities in 2022
- In 2022 we saw an increase in the number of target students engaged at 14,790
- Since the project began in 2017, we have worked with a total of 90,457 students

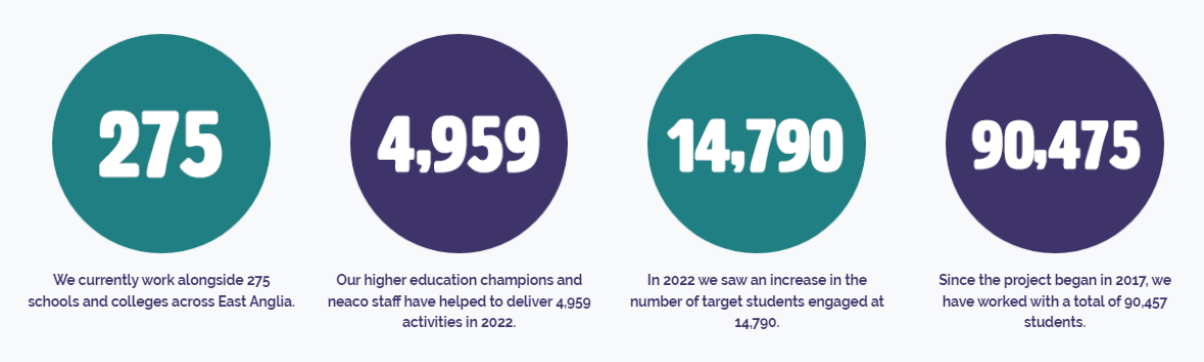


Fig.17

Despite the accuracy that these numbers supposedly represent, they remain shrouded with ambiguity. For example, what does 'work alongside' mean? It could mean visiting only once. However, regardless of the number of visits or the extent to which 'disadvantaged' children are supported through engagement, the partnership approach of Neaco works to instil the narrative of social mobility.

When describing the work it does Neaco boasts of its importance in helping to deliver the DfE's goals of 'driving social mobility' through the Opportunity Area programme:

> Our work is included as an integral part of the Delivery Plans for the Opportunity Areas of Norwich, Ipswich and Fenland & East Cambridgeshire (Neaco, 2023 [1]).

This shows Neaco's commitment to the narrative of social mobility. As with the Opportunity Areas and their created partnerships; and the universities committing to WP through their APPs; the narrative of social mobility being launched by the DfE becomes powered by the OfS.

A Targeted Approach

Findings from my analysis of the APPs of the University of Cambridge, University of East Anglia, University of Oxford, and the University of Suffolk show that Low Participation Neighbourhood (LPN) and Ethnicity make up the largest percentage of Target Groups declared within the WP strategies of the sampled institutions. To demonstrate how the targeting of groups works within localities, I build a case study of Ipswich to highlight the ways in which the workings of WP at a meso-level, open up opportunities for the facilitation of WP at a micro-level.

The University of Suffolk, which is based in Ipswich, has strong WP activities within the local community (DfE, 2017 [2]: 8). As an Opportunity Area, the 'young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Ipswich achieve, on average, poorer outcomes in education than disadvantaged pupils across the country' (DfE, 2017 [2]: 8). A study between the University of Suffolk and Neaco, entitled *Enhancing BTEC students' transition to HE:*

Developing pedagogical partnerships across post-16 and HE sectors, aims to 'promote and facilitate successful progression to HE among students from non-traditional backgrounds' (Neaco, 2023 [3]). This represents a WP strategy being built in partnership at ground-level between Neaco, and a university committed to WP (OfS, 2020 [5]) which is based within an Opportunity Area. Ipswich has a high proportion of Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPN's), as defined by the OfS' POLAR4 measuring system and shown in the map (OfS, 2023 [3]) below:

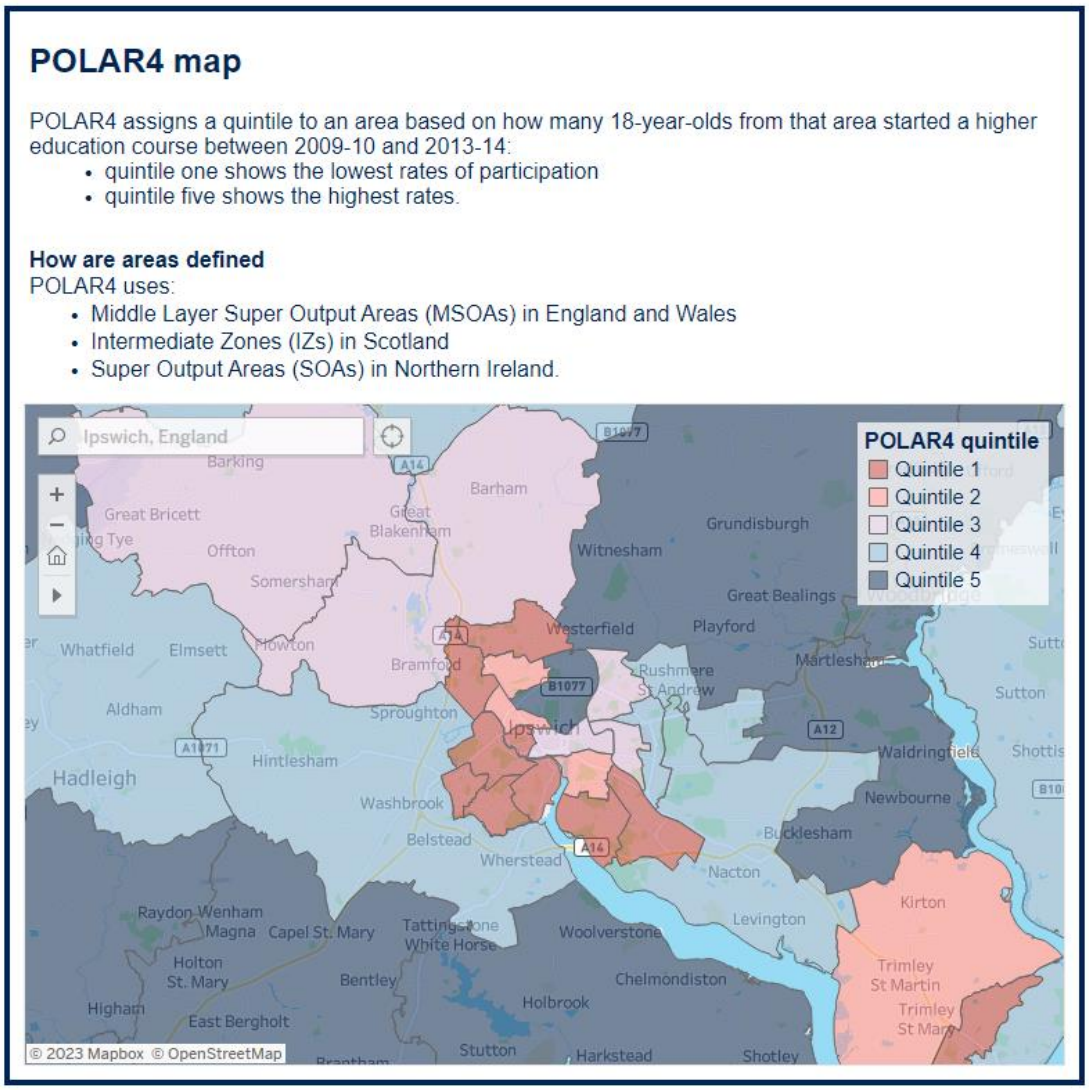


Fig.18

The University of Suffolk, by engaging with its local communities, is able to meet the OfS objectives of targeting groups living in LPN's. Within Suffolk's APP it states that:

> We are particularly conscious that the University's location in a region with a lower proportion of BAME young people than elsewhere in the country can be a barrier to access, leading to reluctance for those from outside the region to move away from family and community support mechanism (OfS, 2020 [5]: 13).

This statement explains the University of Suffolk's localised and LPN targeted approach to WP through its justifying of potential shortfall in terms of targeting groups by Ethnicity. Nonetheless, another report by the University of Suffolk, again in collaboration and Neaco, and published in 2021 with the title *University, is it for me?* analyses access to higher education from the perspectives of Black, Asian, and Eastern European young people (Collis-Phillips & Tyrell, 2021). This report aligns with a 2018 publication from the Ipswich and Suffolk Council for Racial Equality, called *It Takes a Village to Raise a Child* (ISCRE, 2018), which was funded by Neaco to gather intelligence about WP:

> We interviewed parents and family members about their experiences and identified barriers for children from their communities when accessing higher education (ISCRE, 2018: 3).

The findings suggest that:

> Whilst parents want to support their children to achieve academically, many of them struggled to navigate and understand the system. Those from more established communities, such as Indian and Afro-Caribbean families, had better capacity and confidence to support their children in making informed choices around higher education. Conversely, those from newer communities, such as Eastern European and Roma families, had considerably less (ISCRE, 2018: 3).

The report recommends intervention at primary school level and throughout the child's education to address the 'educational disadvantage and underrepresentation in higher

education', which it argues, stems from 'this gap in knowledge and understanding' (ISCRE, 2018:3).

This report, funded by Neaco, justifies the work of Neaco while gathering intelligence for Neaco. Although the University of Suffolk is not mentioned within the report, the Ipswich and Suffolk Council for Racial Equality (ISCRE) does feature within the APP of the University of Suffolk:

> We will work collaboratively with local partners, including Suffolk County Council, Suffolk Refugee Support, Ipswich and Suffolk Council for Racial Equality, the Ipswich Opportunity Area, and the National Collaborative Outreach Programme to achieve these outcomes and increase data available about these groups (OfS, 2020 [5]: 11).

The National Collaborative Outreach Programme mentioned here, was the previous name used for the OfS *Uni Connect* programme, for which Neaco is one of 29 partnerships. This statement demonstrates that national objectives of WP are being conducted by a local partnership approach that aims to produce data about WP target groups.

Aspiration Raising Outreach

Take Your Place is the outreach programme designed and delivered by Neaco, and funded by OfS, with the aim of 'helping young people aged 13-19 consider their study options after school or college' (Neaco, 2023 [2]). It claims to be a 'non-descriptive approach to widening participation, intuitive to the needs of students, schools and local communities' (Neaco, 2023 [4]). Through this 'non-descriptive approach', the position and purpose of higher education is descriptively determined:

> Going to university or college is a big commitment, in both time and money, but by getting a degree your child will be making a big investment in their future. It will

> increase their chances of getting a good job and improve their earning potential. For many young people it is their first taste of independence and an exciting opportunity to try new activities and make new friends (Neaco, 2023 [2]).

The website of Neaco has a 'Teacher', 'Student', and 'Parent/Carer' section – these are the target audiences of Neaco's work. The above statement from the homepage of the website speaks to the Parent/Carer to convince them that going to university will be an investment in their child's future. It positions universities as being pathways to good jobs and higher earnings. It aims to alleviate Parent/Carer concerns by normalising the process as one of 'opportunity'.

Within the Teachers section of the website a range of resources are on offer to 'support student aspiration and progression between years 9-13' (Neaco, 2023 [5]). This notion of *aspiration* is listed as the number one mission of Neaco in their 2021 Annual Report:

> Delivering and coordinating outreach activities that raise aspirations and support target students to make informed choices (Neaco, 2021:4).

Fig.19

Neaco's 2021 Annual Report (Neaco, 2021), as demonstrated by its front cover above, is about targets. The 'Year in Review' section of the report shows that 35,391 students were engaged in 4,737 activities. This snapshot from the section shows how important the OfS target groups, described here as Uni Connect Target Students, are for the work of Neaco:

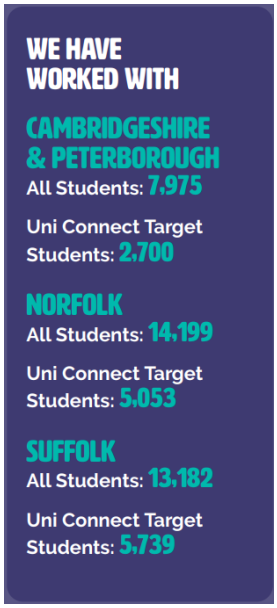


Fig.20

The targeting of students to 'raise aspirations' and then 'support them to make informed choices' is a process facilitated by the work of teachers, who are encouraged to undertake continuing professional development (CPD) provided by Neaco. Positions such as Higher Education Champions and Parent and Carer Ambassadors supplement the work of schools and colleges to help deliver a range of workshops and mentoring schemes aimed to facilitate the targeted students' progression to higher education (Neaco, 2021). Neaco's total expenditure in 2021 was £3,559,155, with the highest percentage being spent on staffing costs for programme management - £1,001,210. (Neaco, 2021: 15).

The OfS invest in Neaco to target students who they then encourage to invest in higher education. The narrative of social mobility, underpinned by a belief in meritocracy, is used to legitimise these practices of WP. To test the success of OfS' investment, Neaco must evaluate their work:

> Assessing and understanding the difference our activities make to the pupils we work with is central to Neaco's approach. Through research and evaluation, we are able to improve the evidence base of widening participation work and help inform practice within Neaco, as well as the broader outreach landscape (Neaco, 2021: 15).

To do this, Neaco use the HEAT database to track students throughout their educational journey. The Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) 'works closely with government agencies such as the Office for Students (OfS), the Department for Education (DfE) and data custodians including the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)' (HEAT, 2023).

Data is a valuable by-product and driver of WP. To gather momentum for WP, strategies of applied behavioural science are used:

> In collaboration with CFE and the Behavioural Insights Team we also conduct randomised controlled trials. These trials provide a unique opportunity for robust evaluation of innovative outreach interventions. The interventions consist of a set of text messages to Y11 and Y13 students, designed to nudge students to make more informed choices about post-16 and post-18 options (Neaco, 2023 [4]).

Young people in England are being targeted and tracked because of their 'disadvantaged' status, which is determined by a range of indicators such as their ethnicity, where they live, whether they are eligible for free school meals, or whether they are registered disabled. These young people unwittingly become participants within randomised controlled trials, becoming 'nudged' by text messages which are designed to 'inform their choices' about progressing to

higher education. Their response to this trial is monitored, evaluated, and entered into a database of evidence that is used to feed into the workings of WP.

Summary

Meso-level analysis within this chapter looks at how WP works at an institutional level and how WP becomes *recognised* at a local level. It is at this meso-level that the narrative of social mobility becomes legitimised to drive WP, and in turn, WP further strengthens the narrative of social mobility through its practices.

The chapter begins with an explanation of how universities become bound with WP through regulation, with OfS allowing universities to charge maximum tuition fees providing that they can demonstrate commitment to WP through their Access and Participation Plan. My analysis selects four APPs for examination, two from universities recognised as being prestigious, and two located within areas deemed by government to be 'social mobility coldspots'. The analysis begins with examining the APP target templates of the four universities, to allow for comparative analysis. Findings suggest that the two universities located in 'social mobility coldspots' (East Anglia and Suffolk) have roughly double the amount of *Aims* than the prestigious universities (Cambridge and Oxford), signalling a more varied approach to WP. When looking at the *Target Groups*, the analysis shows that East Anglia and Suffolk have a broader approach to WP that considers 'Success' within and 'Progression' from university, while Cambridge and Oxford's approach is more focused on only giving 'Access' to the targeted groups. The *Description* component of the target templates mirrors these findings and reveals that 'POLAR4' is a system of measurement used by all universities to demonstrate commitment to WP. When looking at the *Data Source* used

to compile the APPs, all universities rely heavily upon the OfS' Access and Participation Data Set. I produce a number of graphs to highlight these trends found within the Target Template, summarising the findings to show that WP is generally conceptualised in terms of 'Access'; people living in a 'Low Participation Neighbourhood' (LPN), and characteristics of 'Ethnicity' are the groups most targeted by WP; WP is most commonly measured by 'POLAR4' and 'Ethnicity'; and the 'Access and Participation Dataset' is most used source of information that shapes the APPs. The analysis then looks at the APP Investment Templates, with findings revealing ambiguity within OfS guidelines about how universities should calculate their investment to WP.

This idea of ambiguity is explored further through thematic analysis of the four APPs. Using a statement that reflects the hypothesis of the thesis, I search the texts for five key words: *disadvantaged, opportunity, social mobility, potential,* and *aspiration.* I then copy and paste sentences around those key words for each of the universities under the heading of the term being searched and highlight surrounding text that I feel requires further examination. Findings from the thematic analysis show uniformity around the institutional focus on *Disadvantage*, while at the same time university understandings about what this term means reveals ambiguity. Uniformity is also reflected in the theme of *Opportunity,* with all universities equating WP with 'equality of opportunity'. Cambridge, East Anglia, and Oxford all approach the notion of *Social Mobility* in slightly different ways within their APPs, while Suffolk does not mention the term. *Potential* represents meritocratic ideals and selections from Cambridge and Oxford's APPs are used to demonstrate a belief in meritocracy. The theme of *Aspiration* binds all of the APPs though an approach of 'raising aspirations', which is a key technique of WP that connects WP on a meso-level with WP at a micro-level where it becomes facilitated through a partnership approach.

To understand these ideas of uniformity and ambiguity that characterise the APPs, the next section looks at the *logic* of OfS. Though an investigation of the targets that the OfS sets itself to measure its own success I produce a table and a graph to show the data sources that OfS uses to measure its KPMs. Findings reveal that although some authoritative sources are used, the majority of the data that informs the measurement of their own success is either incomplete or is their own system of measurement, which as the analysis shows, are themselves continuously changing. The discussion goes on to suggest that the OfS uses WP to pervasively measure 'disadvantage' as part of its homogenising knowledge regime.

The meso-level analysis continues by examining how the social mobility narrative is *recognised* at a local level, and how its legitimation perpetuates WP's legitimation at a micro-level. To do this, I interrogate the Opportunity Area Delivery Plans of two 'social mobility coldspots' – Ipswich and Norwich, which are home to the University of Suffolk, and the University of East Anglia, respectively. Both of the Plans begin with a statement from a government minister which correlates social mobility with education and promotes ideas of meritocracy. The Plans conceptualise 'social mobility' as being an individual pursuit geared towards participation in the labour market, with 'social mobility's' success being dependent upon the professionalisation of teachers and the behaviours of students. Both Plans approach 'social mobility' from a 'partnership' perspective that connects schools, colleges, universities and employers. While Norwich's Plan does not feature the University of East Anglia with any notable significance, Ipswich's Plan keeps the University of Suffolk as a central feature of its social mobility strategy. Crucially, both Plans feature the work of Neaco, which is an organisation that facilitates WP, and works through the partnerships outlined within the Opportunity Area Plans.

The chapter then moves into the micro-level analysis by interrogating the work of Neaco to understand how WP is facilitated within localities. Beginning with a recap of how the OfS orchestrates WP at an institutional level through the APPs, and how the narrative of social mobility becomes legitimised at a local-level by government initiatives such as the Opportunity Area programme, the micro-level analysis recognises the bridge from the meso-level being the concept of *raising aspirations.* The discussion goes on to explain that Neaco is a partnership funded by OfS as part of its *Uni Connect* project, which works in partnership with the Opportunity Area programme to deliver government objectives of 'social mobility'. Neaco, which facilitates WP, features within the APPs of Cambridge, East Anglia and Suffolk, and in the Opportunity Area Delivery Plans of Ipswich and Norwich, which I suggest, positions it as playing a central role in the OfS' 'homogenising knowledge regime'. I showcase information from the Neaco website which represents engagement levels with school children to show how the partnership approach plays out in practice, while also highlighting how the OfS logic of ambiguity features as part of Neaco's practices.

The micro-level analysis then moves on to present a case study analysis of Ipswich to demonstrate how the University of Suffolk targets local students from LPNs. The case study shows that Neaco plays an active role in shaping WP practices in Ipswich by partnering in and funding research that aims to broaden both the University of Suffolk's, and the wider 'sectors' WP practices to effectively focus on the OfS target group of 'Ethnicity'. Findings suggest that Neaco, funded by OfS, funds research that justifies the work of Neaco, to gather intelligence for Neaco. This idea of intelligence gathering is expanded upon in the last section of the micro-level analysis, which looks at the idea of 'Aspiration Raising Outreach'. Exploring the WP work of Neaco, through its avatar *Take Your Place*, the section highlights that parents and teachers become key actors in 'raising aspiration', and as a result, become

targets of WP strategies, tasked with ‘guiding’ prospective students. Scrutiny of the Neaco website reveals how prospective students become monitored and tracked as a result of their ‘disadvantaged’ status, and even become unwittingly recruited as participants in experiments that seek to ‘nudge’ their decision making, with their responses to the testing being evaluated and entered into a database.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Homogenising Knowledge Regimes

The macro, meso, and micro-level analyses laid out in Chapters 4 and 5 document the processes through which the policy and practice known as 'widening participation' has evolved in such a way as to become an instrumental tool in the operation of English universities. WP can be seen as the pipeline that oils the machinery of a marketized 'sector' of higher education – it provides a steady stream of human beings ready to become 'formulated' in terms of capital investment and appreciation (Brown, 2015: 176). The policy and practice of WP is based on the premise that by students passing through the higher education system they can achieve 'success'. This is framed within a political narrative of 'social mobility', and as such, WP becomes a discursive formation.

As my analysis details, the idea of 'achievement' is positioned by policy makers and professionals as being an individual pursuit that is geared towards engagement with the labour market. The impact that framing the purpose of higher education in these terms has upon universities is profound. It instrumentalises knowledge and devalues education which does not place emphasis on easily measured outcomes, such training for a specific job. Yet, as my analysis of the Graduate Outcomes Survey in Chapter 1 highlights, the accuracy of the methodological individualism and positivism used to measure 'success' is questionable to say the least. Similarly, as the meso-level analysis details, the regulator of higher education in England uses a system of measurement which is uniformly based upon ambiguity. I discuss this as *OfS logic*, showing how their 5 Strategic Objectives, which have a total of 13 Strategic Outcomes measured by 26 KPMs, are primarily based upon the OfS' own systems of

measurement, coupled with data sources that are largely still in development. I argue that this enables the regulator to produce a homogenising knowledge regime (Machen & Nost, 2021) that reinforces the individualistic and instrumentalist vision of education, and which operates through partnerships to pervasively measure (Smith &Atkinson, 2016) 'disadvantage' at the micro-level. My analysis also highlights that the concept of 'disadvantage' is similarly ambiguous. With ever-increasing categorisations, such as 'military families', and unclear distinctions of measurement, such as Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPNs) which group everyone in the same postcode as having the same life experience, means that the pervasive measurement is not really about disadvantage. Rather, it is about producing systems for measuring WP, through which the idea of WP becomes reinforced, and the homogenising knowledge regime is legitimised.

The impact that the homogenising knowledge regime orchestrated by the OfS has upon universities is clear to see, even in my small study of just four universities in England. My sample selects universities representing opposing ends of the 'advantaged' spectrum, with two being considered 'elite' (OfS, 2020 [2] & [4]) and two being located in areas of 'disadvantage' (OfS, 2020 [3] & [5]). Two of the universities are what are commonly referred to as 'ancient' universities, meaning that they were established centuries ago when universities were reserved for a select few. Another was established in the Robbins era of the 1960s which laid the groundwork for WP, and the other received university status in 2016, just before the Higher and Education Research Act which led to the creation of OfS. Despite their characteristic differences they are all bound to WP through the centralised regulatory practice of the OfS. My analysis of their APPs suggests that they approach WP in very similar but also slightly different ways. Notably, the 'disadvantaged' universities appear more committed to WP across the 'student lifecycle', meaning that they try to ensure students do

not drop-out once enrolled, and that they move on to further study or employment that can be measured as being 'graduate level'. The need for demonstrating the effectiveness of WP for the 'disadvantaged' universities likely results in a higher expenditure on professional service staff (Wolf & Jenkins, 2021), which arguably, is partly because they are dependent upon fee paying students from WP target group backgrounds, and therefore need to 'game the system' a little more. The 'elite' universities on the other hand are not so dependent upon the fees of students from WP target backgrounds, and they face less pressure to prove the value of their education, due in large part to their reputational clout and philanthropic backing (Abulafia, 2022). Regardless of these differences, and my suppositions about each of the university's finances, these four 'providers' all echo the buzzwords of 'equality of opportunity' – a phrase that champions the narrative of social mobility; they all aim to 'raise aspirations' of students from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds in the name of WP. Why? Is this a matter of regulatory requirement alone, or is it more about culture, about keeping the purpose of a university aligned with ideas of individual success (the homogenising knowledge regime of the 'sector' of higher education)?

My analysis shows that through WP, government policy that promotes politicised narratives of social mobility at the macro-level shapes the practices of universities at the meso-level, which in turn influences the perceptions and behaviours of school-age children and their parents/carers and teachers at a micro-level. With ideas of individual success dominating the conversation about the purpose of higher education, there is not much room for conceptualising education in terms of democratic citizenship (Dewey, 1916; Newman, 1912; Nussbaum, 2012). The homogenising knowledge regime shapes the ways in which universities become structured and managed, and with schoolteachers becoming tasked with instilling the knowledge regime of individual success through their 'professionalisation'

(DfE, 2017 [1] & [2]), the expectations to deliver measurable results get pushed upwards to university lecturers, who in turn are held responsible by their institution and its regulator for ensuring 'student success' (Custer, 2023). With WP targeting teacher, parent/carer, and student audiences to promote the 'aspiration raising' agenda (Neaco, 2023 [2]), the student's worldview becomes informed by individualistic ideals of action that leaves little room for the contemplation which Hannah Arendt (2018) recognises as an important characteristic of the human condition. This narrowing of psychological space hinders opportunities for collective knowledge to grow, while further strengthening a belief in meritocracy. With the homogenising knowledge regime shaping the structures of institutions at a meso-level and the minds of school children at a micro-level, scholars within universities hoping to promote education orientated towards democratic citizenship, face challenges in terms of both supply and demand.

Legitimising the Hypothesis

My interest in the relationship between widening participation and 'social mobility' stems from understanding that the narrative of social mobility that has developed as WP has morphed into a discursive formation (Foucault, 2013 [1969]) is something different from sociological conceptualisations of social mobility (Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2007). This difference is characterised by ambiguity as there is a lack of clarity about what the politicised term 'social mobility' means. The politicised narrative positions 'social mobility' as an achievable goal of intragenerational upward social mobility, measurable in terms of occupation loosely explained as 'graduate level'. But even this notion of graduate-level employment is contested. The Office for National Statistics (ONS), in their Data and Analysis from the Census 2021, reporting on the percentage of employed graduates in non-

graduate roles, applies the following explanation about what defines a graduate or non-graduate role:

> Researchers at the University of Warwick and the University of the West of England have defined a non-graduate role as one which is associated with tasks that do not normally require knowledge and skills developed through higher education to enable them to perform these tasks in a competent manner. Examples of non-graduate jobs include receptionists, sales assistants, many types of factory workers and home carers. These classifications are indicative of what may be expected of roles. Holding a graduate qualification does not guarantee a person's ability or interest in gaining an occupation defined here as a 'graduate role'. Graduates can hold non-graduate roles and non-graduates can hold graduate roles (ONS, 2018).

The suggestion here that non-graduate roles do not 'normally' require knowledge and skills related with higher education does not mean that they do not. There may be some 'non-graduate jobs' where the employer requests that the candidate is educated to degree level. The Higher Education Statistics Agency's (HESA) definitions list in relation to the Graduate Outcomes Survey, describes the 'qualification required for job' section as relating to 'whether the HE graduate's qualification was necessary in gaining the job' (HESA, 2023 [2]). In theory, then, if the employer requires a qualification for a 'non-graduate' role, it could still be counted as graduate-level employment in the Graduate Outcomes Survey. Furthermore, the fact that 'non-graduates can hold graduate jobs' (ONS, 2018) further problematises the importance that a higher education qualification plays in the recruitment process of graduates. Nonetheless, the politicised narrative of 'social mobility' correlates education with success based on this premise of employability.

Keen to learn more about this narrative of social mobility, I use the interrogation of WP as a method to reveal the power structures that shape the narrative (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012) with the aim to reveal the sociological implications that this has for universities. While it is reasonable to suggest that WP, and the narrative of social mobility which drives it, is

primarily about tuition fees, as commercialised higher education requires consumers, and consumers need a reason to invest (which is the promise of social mobility); there is more to the make-up of this narrative than the justification of investment. My study chooses to look at English universities in particular, as I want to understand the impact that the OfS, as regulator of higher education in England, has upon WP. This is not to suggest that WP is a feature of English higher education alone. Further study is needed to examine the policy and practice of WP within Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland, all of which use different bodies for regulating higher education, and importantly, all of which have different approaches for setting tuition fees for 'home' students, with Scotland being the notable example of offering free education similar to that of higher education in England throughout the Robbins era.

The fact that 'widening participation', regardless of the terminology used to describe it, was the underlying philosophy that drove the expansion of higher education in England throughout the Robbins era demonstrates that there is more to it than just tuition fees. If we are to consider the recommendations of the Dearing Report, the introduction of tuition fees in England were a response to both the growth of WP and state disinvestment in higher education – the introduction of fees was needed, argues Dearing, to continue what was already happening (The Dearing Report, 1997). As I have discussed in Chapter 1, early models of WP can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century in Britain (Vincent, 2013). Even without an in-depth investigation of the subject, I have become aware through researching this thesis, that higher education in Scotland, for example, still has WP objectives that are underpinned by a narrative of social mobility (Scottish Funding Council, 2020). Why is this the case if the tuition fee element is taken out of the equation?

Ideas of national prosperity have an undeniable influence on the narrative of social mobility. As Chapter 1 demonstrates, higher education plays an important role in building consensus for statecraft, with modernisation projects being dependent upon the development of culture (Holmwood, 2018; Lubenow, 2002; Sanderson, 1972). The macro-level analysis of Chapter 4 highlights the extent to which the culture of British society has been shaped by the expansion of higher education with its commitment to WP. And as Chapter 2 discusses, it is important to question whether social mobility has become a political spectacle similar to what Edelman, (1988) described in regard to US social policies such as those designed to ameliorate racism. If this were the case for social mobility, then the increasing political emphasis on the importance of trying to boost social mobility by increasing higher education participation rates, and the subsequent WP policies and practices that arise from that political emphasis, would suggest that Britain has an entrenched problem of social and economic inequality. Indeed, Reay (2017: 101) highlights that 'social mobility has an iconic place in English political discourse', suggesting that 'the less mobility there is, the more it becomes a preoccupation of politicians and policy makers', much like the racism in Edelman's study.

This political spectacle works to not only create the illusion that something is being done about the problem, but more so, to alleviate the threat of political instability that growing awareness of the problem can bring. This can be seen as a diversion tactic for what Habermas (1988) describes as a legitimation crisis of the state (Habermas, 1988 [1973]). For Habermas, the state gains legitimacy to rule the public as it takes responsibility for managing the internal contradictions of advanced capitalism, which as he explains, can lead to *economic crisis.* By manipulating markets, the state aims to avoid this economic crisis but then it must also balance out the consequences of its economic manipulation by avoiding what is termed a *rationality crisis,* whereby the economic approach fails to meet the needs of the electorate. A

state's failure to meet the needs of its electorate can then result in a *legitimation crisis,* which is Habermas' explanation for a loss of faith in leadership, services, and organisations. The political interest in social mobility acts as a political spectacle (Edelman, 1988) to avoid this legitimation crisis (Habermas, 1988 [1973]) by attempting to bolster faith in services, organisations, and in turn, leadership. By correlating social mobility with higher education, the state also avoids what Habermas refers to as a *motivation crisis*, which results in a reduction of work ethic among the populace, which itself can lead to *economic crisis.* The 'aspiration' and 'opportunities' that the political narrative of social mobility offers through WP, and the alignment of education with individual career orientated goals of success, work to subdue the likelihood of a *motivation crisis*, and subsequently, a *legitimation crisis*, which the state needs to ensure for economic stability.

To understand how this process works at a deeper level I need to unpack the relationship between WP and the narrative of social mobility, so apply a hypothesis that explores the role that meritocracy plays within this relationship:

> *WP is legitimised by a narrative of social mobility that is underpinned by a belief in meritocracy.*

Essentially, I am examining the narrative of social mobility via an interrogation of WP's legitimacy. In order to interrogate the legitimacy of WP I have to understand what WP is and how it works, which the macro, meso, and micro-level analysis has helped me to do. The hypothesis suggests a 'belief' in meritocracy, which is synonymous with legitimacy. In Chapter 2 I propose three avenues through which to study legitimation in relation to the hypothesis:

a) *The legitimacy of WP itself*
b) *How the narrative of social mobility becomes legitimised and how that in turn shapes the legitimacy of WP*
c) *How a belief in meritocracy is legitimised and in turn how this shapes the legitimacy of the narrative of social mobility*

I will return to these elements of legitimation later, in the conclusion of the thesis, where I will begin with c) and work my way through to b), and then a). This is not to suggest a linear progression of development but more a method to build the interpretation to demonstrate the make-up of the legitimacy of WP. In fact, findings suggest that the legitimacy of WP works as a feedback loop to shape a belief in meritocracy that perpetuates a cycle of WP activity that relates with the narrative of social mobility, and as the Augar Review section (Augar, 2019) of Chapter 4 demonstrates, this occurs even when the narrative of social mobility becomes reframed.

It is with meritocracy, then, that this discussion now continues. As Chapter 2 has set out, there are five 'problems' of meritocracy (Littler, 2017: 3-7) that I have formulated into questions for the context of an investigation of WP:

i) *Does WP aim to address the problem of the 'left behind', and if so, is the problem addressed or altered?*
ii) *How does WP measure talent and intellect in prospective students and how does it aim to nurture it within universities?*

iii) *How does the concept of the 'disadvantaged student' relate to climbing the ladder of success?*

iv) *In what ways are ideas of professional status formulated within universities, and what role does WP play?*

v) *Does WP work to obscure and extend economic and social inequalities. If so, how?*

I will now work my way through each of these questions, using them as a sub-heading for discussion in this chapter, drawing upon findings discussed throughout this thesis.

Does WP aim to address the problem of the 'left behind', and if so, is the problem addressed or altered?

To determine if WP aims to address the problem of the 'left behind', and whether or not the problem becomes addressed or altered, it is important to think about who the 'left behind' are, and what the 'problem' is. The 'left behind' in WP terms are commonly referred to as 'disadvantaged' or 'non-traditional/underrepresented students'. As my meso-level analysis shows, there are various markers of 'disadvantage' that are most commonly measured in terms of postcode or ethnicity. But as my findings also show, the concept of 'disadvantage' is constantly shifting, with continuous expansion in the number of categorisations used to define 'disadvantage', including, being a commuter student, coming from a military family background, being the first in the family to attend university, coming from a low socio-economic background etc. Along with the expansion of the definition of 'disadvantage', comes new ways of measuring it, such as students being eligible for free school meals. But this expansion also reveals challenges in understanding the full extent of someone's disadvantage, which leads to calls to consider the intersectionality of disadvantage, which the

OfS itself encourages, through the structure of the APP template (OfS, 2020 [1]). This concept of 'disadvantage', which is a defining feature of WP, can be problematised on a number of fronts. For example, it assumes that people who share the same categorisation of 'disadvantage', such as postcode or ethnicity, experience the same life problems that hinder their ability to experience higher education. What's more, with ever-increasing categories used to mark 'disadvantage', most 'providers' of higher education in England are made up primarily of 'disadvantaged' students.

So, what is the 'problem' that the 'disadvantaged' face, and how does WP aim to address it? Essentially, the 'problem' that WP aims to address for the 'disadvantaged' is about access to higher education. My meso-level analysis shows that WP incorporates three elements defined by OfS as *access, success,* and *progression,* which translates to students accessing higher education, students continuing with education to achieve a 'good' degree, and students progressing on to either further study or 'graduate level' employment. Although all three of these elements make-up WP, my analysis suggests that WP is primarily conceptualised by institutions as being about access, especially where the 'elite' institutions are concerned. This is tied to the presumption of the 'elite' universities, that they are naturally a pathway to 'social mobility' (OfS, 2020 [2] & [4]). In fact, all of the universities in my study discuss WP as being about 'equality of opportunity'. The idea being promoted by WP is that everyone should be able to get into, get through, and establish a career, by going university, including the 'disadvantaged'.

To a large extent WP meets its aim of addressing the problem of access. Record numbers of students categorised as being 'disadvantaged' now enter into higher education (UCAS, 2022, 2023). But this understandably links with the growing definition of 'disadvantage', and as the

macro-level analysis shows, increasing concerns from government ministers and policy makers about the destinations of learners, and their ability to repay their student loans, leads to debates about the purpose and provision of pedagogy, which threatens to create a multi-tier system of higher education (Donelan, 2020, 2022; Williamson, 2020). With mechanisms designed to measure 'success' dominating higher education (Custer, 2023), and with expenditure on professional service staff to ensure continuation and completion outweighing the investment in educators (Wolf & Jenkins, 2021); and with increasing emphasis on the importance of graduate outcomes through correlation of higher education with employment and further study (Graduate Outcomes, 2023), higher education in England has become defined by the narrative of social mobility, which positions higher education as a gateway to 'equality of opportunity'.

So, if 'equality of opportunity' to gain access to higher education is the 'problem' that WP aims to address, then the problem has been more or less addressed. Using GOV.UK's interactive dashboard *Explore Education Statistics*, I produced the following chart presenting the numbers of disadvantaged HE students in England between 2013 and 2022.

'All Characteristics' for Disadvantaged in England between 2013/14 and 2021/22

Academic Year	Number of HE Students	Number of HE Students (High Tariff)
2013/14	30,509	3,919
2014/15	32,877	4,643
2015/16	37,031	4,781
2016/17	41,751	5,194
2017/18	41,269	5,534
2018/19	42,075	6,582
2019/20	41,831	6,410
2020/21	42,903	6,864
2021/22	43,755	8,281

Source: Explore Education Statistics (2023), *GOV.UK*

Fig.21

These figures show that during this period the numbers of disadvantaged students have increased year on year across higher education, including at High Tariff institutions. The only year which saw a decrease during this period was the academic year of 2019/20, which it is reasonable to assume, was in relation to the global pandemic.

However, despite the increase in 'equality of opportunity' in terms of access to universities, it is still important to recognise, that even with the 'aspiration raising' efforts of WP (Neaco, 2023 [2]), and the contextualised admissions processes which allow universities to admit students who may not have acquired the necessary grade for entry (OfS, 2020 [2]), there are still some students who do not go into higher education – there are still some that get 'left behind'. For those that do gain entry, there is an assumption that the 'opportunity' being offered through engagement with higher education will result in success. And despite the fact that it is unrealistic to expect universities to be able to control the enthusiasm levels or life challenges of their students, or to determine the health and prejudices of the labour market, the OfS, through its 'regulatory levers' (OfS, 2018), places pressure on universities to ensure that students not only 'succeed' when in higher education, but also experience 'success' in terms of their progression from higher education.

As my meso and micro-level analysis demonstrates, the pervasive measurement of student success entails monitoring and tracking school age children by 'nudging' their decision to go into higher education through outreach activities. These 'aspiration raising' initiatives work to instil a belief in learners that they are living in a meritocratic society within which their intelligence and effort will transport them to their desired destination in terms of future career and lifestyle. Yet, the systems used to measure this success is shrouded with ambiguity, as demonstrated by my critiques of the Graduate Outcomes Survey. Furthermore, the

methodological individualism and positivism that is used to determine impact by correlating enrolment at university with the job that the student is doing fifteen months after graduating is based upon an ideology of metrification that enhances the role that neoliberal meritocracy plays in shaping the broader culture of society.

To return to the question, the fact that some students continue to get 'left behind' by not accessing higher education suggests that the 'problem' has not been *addressed*, but rather, that it has been *altered*. Even for those that do access higher education, being 'left behind' is a reality for many in terms of their progression from university. This is clearly the case when considering the astronomical outstanding student loan repayments (Bolton, 2023), the level of non-responses in Graduate Outcomes surveys (Graduate Outcomes, 2023), and announcements from government ministers stating that universities have taken advantage of students and failed to deliver on their promises of delivering social mobility (Donelan, 2020). It would seem then, that WP has failed in its efforts to address the problem of disadvantage – despite the increases in participation, disadvantage continues. But it all comes down to how 'disadvantage' is conceptualised. If someone is 'disadvantaged' because of their ethnicity or postcode, then it is highly unlikely that engagement with higher education will alter this status because ethnicity is largely a fixed concept, and people may choose to live in the same property or relocate for a whole host of reasons, separate and aside from their level of education. And with the term 'disadvantaged' being ascribed by those in powerful positions to those who the powerholders aim to target for recruitment, the very notion of being 'disadvantaged' seems to be a tied to a fictitious marketing ploy to expand the 'sector'.

It appears, then, that the real problem is the way in which the purpose of higher education is perceived and promoted. Higher education has become socially, politically, and economically

aligned with ideas of individual success that are conceptualised in terms of monetary gain and status. For higher education to be recognised as being worthy of investment (which includes time, effort, and money, emotional labour etc.), it needs to be seen to be delivering its 'opportunity'. And by expanding its reach as far as possible, this ideology of competition and material gain becomes ingrained into the culture of the masses. My study shows how this is facilitated by a partnership approach that connects ideas generated at a macro-level, through institutions and partnerships at the meso-level, and into young minds at a micro-level. This process acts as a breeding ground for neoliberal meritocracy to flourish, and it offers a perfect alibi for plutocracy (Littler, 2017).

How does WP measure talent and intellect in prospective students and how does it aim to nurture it within universities?

At a meso-level, all of the universities in my study discuss WP as a strategy that helps students to achieve their 'potential'. The talent and intellect of prospective students is of particular concern for the 'elite' institutions, whose rigorous admissions processes act as a filter to admit those with 'the highest academic calibre and potential to succeed' (OfS, 2020 [4]). It is clear from the description of their APPs that a lot of emphasis is placed upon the grades achieved at school and college as being a marker of their talent and intellect (OfS, 2020 [2] & [4]). For the 'disadvantaged' universities of my study, talent and intellect are primarily discussed as being something that can be nurtured through the 'opportunity' that higher education offers students to develop their 'potential' (OfS, 2020 [3] & [5]). There is an understanding then, for the 'disadvantaged' universities, that the talent and intellect of prospective students is not of great significance; what is most important for these institutions, and also for the 'elite' institutions, is 'raising aspirations'.

The ’elite’ universities make adjustments to allow access to students from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds that do not meet the standard entry requirements. The use of ‘contextual admissions’ is one such approach (OfS, 2020 [2]) – a method which encourages universities to look at the student’s broader experiences in a more holistic way, beyond just the grades achieved at school and college. It is important to recognise, however, that this move towards contextual admissions comes after many years of pressure being put onto the ‘elite’ institutions to widen access to students from non-privileged backgrounds. The *Elitist Britain* report of 2019 highlighted the need for contextual admissions for the ‘elite’ universities as one of its main recommendations (Sutton Trust & Social Mobility Commission, 2019).

Another way that the ‘elite’ universities make adjustments to give access to students who do not meet the standard entry requirements is through the creation of Foundation Year programmes (OfS, 2020 [4]). These are discussed within the APPs as being an important strategy for increasing the participation of state school educated students within the ‘elite’ universities. Although these programmes do help the universities to become more accessible in some respects, such as by being ‘free and fully funded’, they remain exclusionary through their ’strict eligibility criteria as well as academic entry requirements’ (University of Cambridge, 2023). It is also possible that because of the structure of the ‘elite’ universities, which includes being made up of different colleges, space can be created for ‘disadvantage’ that remains segregated away from the main arena of privilege; the inclusion of ‘disadvantaged’ students into these ‘elite’ institutions does not alter the university’s position of hierarchy (Abulafia, 2022). Furthermore, while there is recognition within the APPs of some of the challenges that ‘disadvantaged’ students face in educational terms prior to reaching university level, such as attending ‘poorly performing schools’ (OfS, 2020 [4]),

there is little recognition of the ways in which privilege reinforces itself through the education system (Koh & Kenway, 2016), such as when students from private schools were awarded higher teacher assessed grades during the covid pandemic (Whittaker, 2022). There is an assumption within the APPs, particularly those of the 'elite' universities, that talent and intellect are positivistic traits that have no linkage to the social inequality upon which privilege thrives.

These positivistic understandings of talent and intellect are the cornerstones of meritocracy (Young, 2008), and they are what gives WP its authority. The notion of individual success which characterises English higher education works under the assumption that if you are clever enough and work hard enough, you can achieve 'success', because everyone has 'equality of opportunity'. The fact that not everyone *is* equal, and that different people will experience different levels of opportunity along the way tends to be ignored. By giving attention to 'disadvantage' there becomes created a claim that this problem is being addressed and that the playing field is being levelled, but this is not true. The reason why the 'elite' universities can state with such conviction within their APPs that they can deliver social mobility (OfS, 2020 [4]), is because a large percentage of their graduates hold powerful position in society (Sutton Trust & Social Mobility Commission, 2019); the 'disadvantaged' universities are more reluctant to make such claims, because this is not the case. Rather, a large percentage of their graduates will be paying back their student loan for the majority of their working lives (GOV.UK, 2023[3]), with the only real opportunity being created by higher education participation in monetary terms being the hope of securing employment that pays above the minimum wage. The trade-off for the investment into higher education is an additional tax on their earnings, with those having started their studies more recently only being required to pay it back over thirty years, instead of the previous forty, albeit with a

lower threshold hold for repayment and a higher percentage of contribution from their wages (Donelan, 2022).

Students who attend well-funded private schools with a broad-based curriculum, whose home lives are not impacted by the effects of social deprivation, stand a better chance of achieving the markers of 'talent' and 'intellect' (Helm, 2023). These chances are heightened further if the school that they attend has the power to manipulate the results of their learning to maintain the reputation of the school (Whittaker, 2022). These 'talented' and 'intelligent' students are more likely to satisfy the standard entry requirements of the 'elite' universities, where they enrol as one of many privately educated students. During their time at university, family wealth means that it is unlikely that they will have to take out a student loan, let alone skip lectures to work jobs just to eat (an opinion poll commissioned by the Sutton Trust found that 6% of respondents prioritise paid work over study [BBC News, 2023]). And the chances of them achieving 'success' during their time at university, is also much greater, especially when considering that a large part of their education is about building up the social and cultural capital that will help them to secure their position in society following graduation (Koh & Kenway, 2016). For 'disadvantaged' students who attend underfunded state schools, enrol at mainstream universities, and measure their graduate outcomes through surveys, their 'success' within the educational journey is increasingly measured by practices of grade inflation (Hinds, 2019) which becomes fuelled by the pressure put on universities by OfS to 'deliver', and by the need to compete with for fee paying students. This process works to keep the dream of meritocracy alive: the students receive 'good degrees' because they are 'clever' and have put in the 'effort'. This leads to an increasing number of graduates who are all competing for the same 'graduate level' jobs, and while many of them may tick the box when the survey comes round (Graduate Outcomes, 2023), it is increasingly unlikely that

these jobs will be secure in the long-term and have all of the benefits associated with permanent employment, such as sick pay, pension, and annual leave (Standing, 2011). Others will take more student loans for further study in the hope that by boosting their level of education they can increase their chances in the competition.

In the context of formal education, ideas of 'talent' and 'intellect' are manipulated markers of hierarchy. They work to perpetuate the myth of meritocracy and reinvigorate structures of inequality. With all of the universities in my study committing to 'raising aspirations' in the name of WP, this myth becomes perpetuated further, and the structures of inequality are strengthened – this is the work of *neoliberal meritocracy,* where supposedly, everyone has 'equality of opportunity' in the quest for 'social mobility'. Universities nurture the markers of hierarchy, 'talent' and 'intellect', by encouraging students to view their education in terms employment. The culture of 'outcomes' focused targets infiltrates, not just the bureaucratic practices of institutions, but also the minds of learners, who are constantly taught to conform to this logic of uniformity, despite the ambiguity in which it is cloaked.

How does the concept of the 'disadvantaged student' relate to climbing the ladder of success?

The political narrative of social mobility can be visualised in terms of the ladder (Littler, 2017). It is designed for going upwards, alone. This narrative does not consider sociological dimensions of social mobility that work inter-generationally (Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2007), or factor in the prospects of downward social mobility (Alm, 2011). Moving towards a successful destination within your own lifetime, powered by your own intelligence and effort, is the story of meritocracy (Young, 2008). As the macro-level analysis shows, this narrative

of social mobility has evolved in partnership with WP, most notably since the introduction of tuition fees during the time of the Blair administration which followed on from the Dearing Report. As Dearing became tasked with tackling the impact of neoliberal policy making on universities, its solution was to create room for more neoliberal policy making to take place (Scott, 1998).

The ingenuity of WP is that by correlating higher education with the narrative of social mobility, neoliberal meritocracy has an ever-increasing target audience of minds within which to plant its ideological seed. Even before 'widening participation' had morphed into WP, it was still rooted in ideas of meritocracy – the Robbins era of higher education expansion was in many ways a response to the grammar school movement (Committee on Higher Education, 1963). With increasing numbers of students having achieved the required 'talent' and 'intellect' to satisfy university entry requirements through their schooling, there was growing demand in the 1960s for expanding university education in the name of social justice (Holmwood, 2018). To not meet these demands would be to deny the existence of meritocracy and admit that Britain was a class-based society governed through plutocracy. So, Robbins reinvigorated the idea of meritocracy by expanding the number of places available within higher education for qualified entrants.

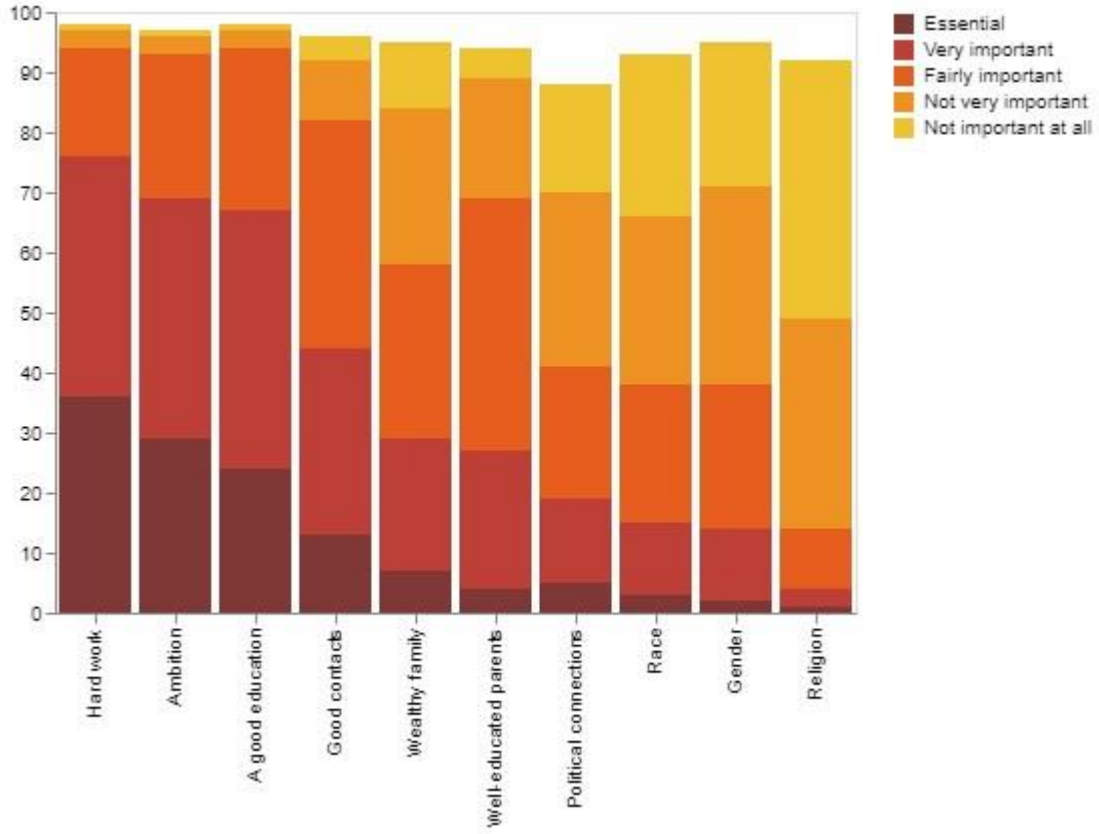
But as global politics played out in the decades that followed, Britain became impacted by various factors that disrupted the social milieu and altered the human experience (Jacobs & Malpas, 2022), which in turn impacted upon the ways in which higher education was viewed, supported, and directed by the state. Modernisation brought with it shifts in the labour market, divisive politics sowed division within society, and the promotion of neoliberal ideals helped to instil a consumer mindset within the masses (Hall, 1988). When Tony Blair reached office

in 1997, he came with a ‘new vision’ for Britain, one within which education would become the great leveller (Blair, 2001). In setting his goals of seeing half of all young people attend university, Blair was bolstering support for votes by asserting his faith in meritocracy, which served as a political spectacle (Edelman, 1988) to distract attention away from the social ills of inequality strengthened by eighteen years of Conservative government. Blair’s mission claimed to give everyone a lift-up onto the ladder of success, from where ‘social mobility’ would become possible.

The idea of the ladder within the context of WP, is dependent upon the ‘disadvantaged student’. Without anyone to climb the ladder, the ladder itself has no purpose. This perhaps explains why the concept of ‘disadvantage’ is continuously expanding – the ideology requires participants; without which, it loses its legitimacy. But the ideology of meritocracy also requires a belief in equality that assumes everybody is starting from the same position (Littler, 2017). This is another feature of WP’s ingenuity – it works to create the illusion of ‘equality of opportunity’. The ‘elite’ university’s WP initiatives of contextual admissions (OfS, 2020 [2]) and Foundation Year programmes (OfS, 2020 [4]) work to authenticate this illusion, as giving access to ‘disadvantaged’ students creates the sense that everyone within the institution is running the same race. The reality is, however, that while some believe that they are climbing the ladder of success by gaining access to an elite institution, others inside that same institution have no need for the ladder, and do not even believe in its existence (Watters, 2016). For some, who are guaranteed a secure future through their birth status, family wealth, or professional networks, the ladder is irrelevant – they are not on an individual journey in pursuit of success because their security is automatically assigned or negotiated through collective privilege.

In 2021, the Economics Observatory published a blog asking: ‘Is the UK a Meritocracy?’ The study includes analysis of attitudes about success taken from a survey conducted in the same year, with this graph showing the results:

Perception of the importance of different factors in success



Source: Economics Observatory (2021)

Fig.22

The findings reveal that:

> in the UK, hard work and ambition are perceived as the most important determinants of success, far ahead of family status (wealth, connections, well-educated parents) and demographic traits (such as race, gender and religion). Three-quarters of respondents believe that hard work is essential or very important for getting ahead in life. But evidence suggests that, in reality, the link between merit and success is tenuous (Economics Observatory, 2021).

There is a general consensus in British society about the ladder's existence. Perhaps this is because those who do not really need the ladder do not like to accept the extent of their own privilege, and also maybe because those who believe that they are climbing the ladder but are in a position that begins ahead of others, may not like to believe that they have an unfair advantage because it undermines their sense of self-esteem in deserving their own success.

Despite the fact that different people experience the ladder in different ways, its political representation is one of fairness and equality. Some people, through exercising their 'talent' and 'effort', do achieve their desired goal, which acts as a success story to reinforce the legitimacy of the story of meritocracy. Universities are not alone in singing the praises of people who have passed through their door and 'made it', but you do not have to spend much time on any university website or walk across a non-elite university campus, without reading about the successes of its graduates. And as institutions go, universities are instrumental in perpetuating the myth of meritocracy and the ideology of accumulation that characterises it. Universities are designed to measure and grade, to award status and recognition of achievement, which for the most part, is an individual pursuit. Even when collegiality and collaboration is promoted and celebrated within universities, it tends to be underpinned by meritocratic ideals. Much of an academic's working time is spent measuring their own success through systems such as the Research Excellence Framework and Teaching Excellence Framework, and it is not uncommon for scholars to spend time filling out forms to nominate themselves for awards that demonstrates their institution's ability to provide an 'excellent education'. Within this process, the academic's own talents and efforts become consumed by the institution to become part of its own neoliberal meritocracy played out within league tables of competition (Hazelkorn, 2011).

Universities that can claim to have helped ‘disadvantaged’ students climb the ladder of success by giving them access to higher education and an ‘excellent’ education which leads them on to a ‘graduate level’ job or further study, strengthen their own position within the competitive ‘sector’. Through the relationship between student and university, the student’s own ‘successes’, like that of university staff, become the property of the institution; they become measured and accumulated and fed into the ‘sector’ in a manufacturing-like process. The concept of ‘disadvantage’ becomes commodified and traded, with the only ‘success’ that counts being one that is measurable.

In what ways are ideas of professional status formulated within universities, and what role does WP play?

The idea of status underpins the university structure. Students enter into the institution ‘uneducated’, and graduate with a certificate of achievement which authenticates their learning. With a variation of awards available, most commonly BA/BSc, MA/MSc, Ph.D., higher education offers learners the promise of getting on the ladder of achievement with the view to progress their way up the through the ranks until they become highly qualified and can sign their name with a list of letters after it. Once achieving the Ph.D. students can even change their title to ‘Dr.’. But being awarded a Ph.D. does not propel the learner into a particular profession, unlike someone who passes through Bar School to become a barrister. The Ph.D. does not even qualify the graduate to teach at school level, even though they are likely to have worked as a teaching assistant at university level. This being said, the Doctor of Philosophy can begin a career as an academic working at a university, although this career is not necessarily dependent upon the status of being a Dr. During the expansion of universities throughout the Robbins era it was not uncommon for people to be given tenured positions

within universities before they had even completed a Ph.D. And in the contemporary era of higher education, there are many graduates with a Ph.D., a list of publications, and teaching and research experience who struggle to find permanent posts, with studies suggesting that 'only a tiny minority of those with a doctorate manage to find a university post' (Wolff, 2015).

Nonetheless, universities are, generally speaking, a route into professional status; or at least, into a job that can be framed as 'professional' through manipulation of status (Styhre, 2022). Other than for specialist subjects and professions, which require a specific qualification and are studied at particular institutions which specialise in those courses, many job listings require applicants to be educated to degree level. Commonly, there is no stipulation about which subject needs to have been studied, only that the award has been achieved. The general perception around this trend is that studying at degree level will teach the student a range of skills which can be applied in the workplace, such as research, writing, presentation, communication skills etc. While this may be true, it is also the case that this trend links with perceptions of status. Those who attend university are often perceived to be 'intelligent' and a class apart from their uneducated peers. Anyone who is familiar with the British sitcom *Only Fools and Horses*, may remember Del Boy's admiration for the fact that Rodney had 'GCE's'; and even though Rodney only went to art college for three weeks before getting expelled for smoking cannabis, his experience of formal education gave him a sense of status around his friends and family, even though he remained the goofy younger brother without a university degree. This example is important when considering how WP relates with professional status in England. *Only Fools and Horses* was set in 1980s London when ideas of individual success and meritocracy were in full swing, with the character Del Boy being a parody of the yuppy city boy. During this era, although higher education participation had

increased for some, this was still largely uncommon for the working classes, hence the status applied even to Rodney's non-university level qualifications. Fast forward to 2022, and with record numbers of 'disadvantaged' students being enrolled onto higher education courses (UCAS, 2022), having a degree may not offer the same level of status as it once did.

WP, then, impacts how professional status is formulated within universities. With around half of young people going to university, having a degree does not make graduates standout against their peers. In fact, studies have shown that many students enter university as a form of 'insurance', conscious of the fact that by not going, they risk being in a professional status deficit (Harrison, 2019). With universities seemingly unable to offer the professional status they once could, they become tasked with manufacturing status to ensure their own legitimacy. The OfS aligns WP with a 'student lifecycle' model based on *access, success,* and *progression.* Giving students access to university is not enough to ensure that they achieve professional status, so the OfS regulates universities to encourage universities to make sure that students achieve 'good' degrees. But with many 'disadvantaged' students having entered university via relaxed entry standards to compensate for their 'poorly achieving schools' (OfS, 2020 [4]), many students require an education that gets them up to speed with what they have missed out on. Universities and their educators become tasked with dealing with the impact of civic stratification that has resulted in inadequate living standards, housing, and schooling (Samson, 2020: 26-27) for many of their students. Remaining under pressure from the regulator to deliver on *success*, and to generate positive responses to student surveys (OfS, 2023 [4]), a culture of grade inflation has developed within English universities (Hinds, 2019) in an attempt to continue the narrative that students are gaining professional status from their studies.

Once students leave university, the institution and its educators are still held responsible for the graduate's success in terms of their *progression*. For the education to have been deemed a success, when filling out the Graduate Outcomes survey fifteen months after leaving university (Graduate Outcomes, 2023 [1]), the student should be either in 'graduate level employment' or 'further study' (OfS, 2020 [6]). As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, there is ambiguity about what constitutes 'graduate level employment' (ONS, 2018), and the measurement does not take into consideration the longevity of the contract of employment, meaning that for people who are temping in a 'graduate level job', they would still be recorded as having achieved professional status even if they soon after move into a job that does not require a qualification. For those wanting to increase their professional status by going on to further study, there are student loans for both Masters and Ph.D. (GOV.UK, 2023 [1] & [2]); but with the opportunity for available funding through the students loan system, and the drive from OfS to encourage it, the number of students staying on for further study increases, which in turn, reduces the exclusive nature of the qualification, and therefore its status. The following table shows the increase in English domiciled postgraduate students in England between 2017 and 2022:

HE student enrolments at English universities for English domiciled 2017-2022

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Total postgraduate research	51,590	52,545	51,305	53,545	52,950
Total Postgraduate taught	249,440	251,970	253,420	303,275	298,410
Total postgraduate	**301,030**	**304,510**	**304,720**	**356,820**	**351,360**

Source: HESA (2023 [3])

Fig.23

A study examining the impact of the postgraduate loan on the postgraduate taught landscape in the UK over the last ten years notes that 'without doubt, the Postgraduate Loan Scheme has been hugely beneficial in enabling postgraduate participation'. However, the study also highlights that:

> As soon as the scheme was introduced, the impact of the Postgraduate Loan Scheme was felt. Immediately, many universities raised their fee levels for masters courses, and this has continued year on year (Morgan, 2023).

This demonstrates the important role that the idea of status plays in the commercialisation of higher education. It confirms the position of universities as being instrumental in the formulation of the idea of professional status. WP, driven by this notion of status, is facilitated by the student loan system which makes enrolment in postgraduate study possible in economic terms, which in turn benefits the institution financially while simultaneously diluting the status which motions the action of enrolment.

As WP has boosted participation in higher education, the number of young people leaving school and going into manual work has decreased, although many young people work alongside their studies, and quite often in low-paid manual jobs. Blair's push for WP (Blair, 2001), while seemingly all about the meritocratic dream of individual success and 'social mobility', was also influenced by the perceived needs of national prosperity. With modernisation bringing technological change, most notably, the internet and mobile phones, the labour demands in Britain had begun to change. Many of the working-class jobs that could once be filled by unqualified school leavers were no longer there due to political meddling throughout the Thatcher era, which led to deindustrialisation, attacks of trade unions and the cultivation of the service sector. Furthermore, with the EU expanding its borders to central and Eastern Europe, Britain saw an increase in labour that went in tandem

with the casualisation of workforce strategies brought about through neoliberal policy making. Britain's young people were now being funnelled into universities under the guise that individual success relates with national prosperity through the creation of a 'knowledge economy' (Milburn, 2012).

But these government efforts to push Britain's young people towards ideas of professional status by appealing to social mobility reached a crossroads in 2019 when the long-awaited Augar Review was released (Augar, 2019). The Augar Review directly challenges the marketisation of higher education and the WP that it has been built upon. Augar calls out grade inflation, the non-repayment of student loans, and the fact that most people entering higher education do not experience social mobility, thus repudiating a large amount of policy and practice post-Dearing, and almost all post-Browne. Recommendations include the lowering of fees, the lowering of threshold for repayment of loans, and a student number cap on courses offering 'poor value for money' (Augar, 2019: 101). Augar's challenge to institutions and to WP in particular is matched by his enthusiasm for Degree Apprenticeships and vocationally orientated education that can contribute to the 'development of the skills that we need as a country' (Augar, 2019: 65). Recommendations from Augar (2019) have since been brandished by government ministers (DfE, 2023; Donelan, 2020, 2022; Williamson; Zahawi, 2021) in an effort to reshape higher education in England. The new narrative is pretty much the same as the previous one, in that, ideas of individual success correlate education with the labour market. The significant difference, however, is the emphasis on skills learning, with Degree Apprenticeships being marketed as the new symbol of professional status. But this skills-based learning is not being applied for advocating change in the make-up of all universities - the University of Cambridge's Foundation Year programme (2023), for example, covers the following subjects:

- Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic
- Archaeology
- Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
- Classics
- Education
- English
- History
- History and Politics
- History and Modern Languages
- History of Art
- Human, Social and Political Sciences
- Land Economy
- Law
- Linguistics
- Modern and Medieval Languages
- Music
- Philosophy
- Theology, Religion and the Philosophy of Religion

Like Cambridge, the University of Oxford's Foundation Year programme is fully funded, and also includes free accommodation and a bursary. The *Astrophoria* programme offers up to fifty places each year for UK state school students who have 'significant academic potential', and aims to:

> enable motivated students to reach their academic potential through a supportive and challenging academic course aimed at developing their skills, self-belief and academic confidence (University of Oxford, 2023).

It would seem then, that while a very small minority of 'disadvantaged' students selected by elite universities may be able to access a broad-based curricular that aims to nurture curiosity and develop confidence; the vast majority are being steered towards a provision of education that is based upon individualist and positivist notions of success, and further away from humanistic-based pedagogy that can foster skills for democratic citizenship (Nussbaum, 2012).

Does WP work to obscure and extend economic and social inequalities. If so, how?

WP creates an impression of equality of opportunity by assuming 'aspirations' to be free from other social influences that negate equality; in assuming that everyone has the same opportunity, the reality of economic and social inequalities becomes obscured.

The narrative of social mobility positions education as the great leveller. Through the process of 'raising aspirations' and creating a belief in 'equality of opportunity', ideas of meritocracy become legitimised. Neoliberal meritocracy directs attention away from structural inequality by placing emphasis on individual success and failure. Research seeking to understand experiences of failure within universities (Whittle et.al, 2020) has suggested that 'fear of failure is an intense affectual experience which many students encounter'. This is largely a result of, and is heightened by, the fact that 'neoliberalism's focus on individuals and competitiveness breeds constant self-comparison and leads to increasingly narrow definitions of success and failure'. Furthermore, neoliberalism's commodification of higher education, which instrumentalises learning to equate with a pathway to labour, means that this fear of failure often becomes manifested. A study from scholars at the University of Bath examining graduate un/under-employment in the COVID-19 labour market suggests that:

> The UK had a significant issue of graduate underemployment even before the pandemic: more than one third of UK graduates are underemployed, compared to less than 20% in Scandinavian countries and Germany (Dickson et.al, 2021).

Neoliberal meritocracy works as a diversion strategy which not only obscures inequality, but also takes attention away from privilege. WP's emphasis on uplifting the 'disadvantaged' through higher education, offers no policy recommendations for tackling why disadvantage

exists in the first place, and it lacks any conversation that dare suggest that the 'privileged' should also experience 'social mobility', albeit in a downward fashion (Alm, 2011).

To promote the idea that gaining a qualification that almost half of all young people in Britain have will be a golden ticket that can undo the violence caused by civic stratification (Morris, 2016, in, Samson, 2020: 26) is insulting. To frame this strategy in individualistic terms, and to reinforce this framing through positivistic, pervasive systems of measurement (Smith & Atkinson, 2016) is deceitful. To use this strategy as a tool for targeting and tracking people based upon their personal characteristics, and then entering them into trials to monitor, evaluate, and record their behaviour (HEAT, 2023; NEACO, 2023 [4]) is disturbing. And to then adjust the repayment rules on the debt that people have been charged for that experience because they are too slow at paying it back (GOV.UK, 2023 [3]), is quite frankly, laughable.

The *Elitist Britain* report (Sutton Trust & Social Mobility Commission, 2019) clearly highlights the networks of privilege that connect private schools with powerful positions in society, and it shows how the 'elite' universities featured in my study play an instrumental role in helping to facilitate those pathways of privilege. Consecutive reports from the Social Mobility Commission (2016, 2017, 2019) have further highlighted the social and economic inequalities of Britain, with internationally acclaimed studies highlighting the health impacts that these inequalities bring (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2010), and reports from the United Nations stating how the UK's austerity measures breach the human rights of its citizens (Alston, 2018). Reports such as these, which raise awareness to social and economic inequality, pose a threat to the legitimation of the state (Habermas, 1988 [1973]), and questions start to become asked when even the great leveller of education (Blair, 2001) cannot seem to address these issues.

The emphasis that WP places on the 'disadvantaged' leads to the presumption that 'they' are the problem and that solutions must be created for 'them'. As my study shows, the categorisations of 'disadvantage' continuously expand, to such an extent that 'they' make up a large proportion of the student cohort within the 'sector' built upon the marketisation of English Higher Education (McCaig, 2018). The attempt of WP to obscure social and economic inequalities through strategies that 'raise aspirations' to create a belief in 'equality of opportunity' has been such a success that it has now plateaued. The Augar Review (2019) can be seen as a watershed moment in WP's life course. The Review is a response to the paradox of the narrative of social mobility that has been generated by WP's success – higher education participation rates have increased but 'social mobility' has not been achieved. Even with the 'elite' institutions committing to WP, it is not delivering on its promise (Donelan, 2020).

The plateauing of this obfuscation needs a redirection that can continue to steer attention away from privilege and the social and economic inequalities it creates. The Augar Review responds to this challenge by creating a political spectacle (Edelman, 1988) of higher education's legitimation crisis (Habermas, 1988 [1973]). It does this by highlighting problems with higher education and offering alternatives, in turn directing attention away from political failings and corruption that causes social and economic inequality. The Review does not highlight the extent of the problems associated with social and economic inequalities in Britain, or the reasons behind them, but rather continues to promote the idea that education is the route to individual success – although seemingly dispelling the myth of the social mobility narrative, Augar reinforces it. By proposing that the problem is with higher education itself, it suggests that the issue is not with the fact that structural inequalities mean

that upward social mobility is unachievable for most, but that student's inability to achieve 'success' in economic terms has to do with the type of education that they are engaging with. Augar champions the need for more engagement with vocational learning and an uptake in the newly established Degree Apprenticeships, which can take students directly into the labour market. This works to re-instil a belief in meritocracy that was under threat of being lost. By blaming the education system for the individual's failure to succeed, and then offering a solution that promises better results, the same story is perpetuated.

With a large majority of students being 'disadvantaged', and with the 'disadvantaged' being the ones failed by promises of social mobility (Donelan, 2020), the moves brought about by Augar can be seen as a serious redirection of WP. Government ministers following up on this approach laid down by Augar do not place emphasis on redirecting privately educated children into vocational learning (Williamson, 2020). By redirecting WP, a two-tier higher education system could be created, within which children from affluent families continue to get fast-tracked through elite universities and into powerful positions in society (Sutton Trust & Social Mobility Commission, 2019), while the rest become earmarked for skills-based training that can meet the labour demands of society, in turn fulfilling the objectives of national prosperity under the guise of individual success.

When, in 2023, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Education Secretary Gillian Keegan announced to 'crackdown on rip-off university courses', they were pushing the agenda of skills-based learning for students who had not achieved 'good value for money' for their degrees:

> Under the plans, the Office for Students (OfS) will be asked to limit the number of students universities can recruit onto courses that are failing to deliver good outcomes

> for students…The Office for Students will also continue work to make it easier for students to assess the quality of each university course, including its earnings potential, so that they can make the most informed decision about where and what to study. We are asking the Office for Students to ensure that courses which fail to deliver good earnings are subject to stricter controls…The government is also making it easier for employers to take on apprentices. This includes by cutting the steps needed to register to take on an apprentice by a third and updating 100 apprenticeships in sectors such as construction and healthcare (DfE, 2023).

This announcement, which follows on from Augar's recommendations, values the education of specific courses at particular institutions, based upon the student's destinations. The 'elite' universities, which are more or less able to guarantee successful graduate outcomes through their networks of privilege and prestige are unlikely to see a change to their education provision arising from this new approach. But for the mainstream and lower ranking universities which are made-up primarily of students from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds, the existing social and economic inequalities that have become obscured through WP, means that these announcements have the potential to dramatically reshape the learning provision of the institutions. Subjects such as the arts and humanities, which are historically and internationally celebrated for being important methods for teaching the skills of democratic citizenship, are likely to remain the preserve of 'elite' universities, while the 'disadvantaged' universities become tasked with producing cohorts of skilled labourers that can help to 'grow the economy' (DfE, 2023). With different styles of learning for different classes of people, the redirection of WP will only extend the social and economic inequalities already obscured.

Summary

This chapter begins with a summary of findings from Chapters 4 and 5, recapping on how the macro, meso, and micro-level analysis has produced evidence to suggest that WP is underpinned by a logic of uniform ambiguity that infiltrates policy, practice, and behaviours

through a partnership approach that works as a homogenising knowledge regime. The discussion details how my analysis at a meso-level produces findings which show that different 'classes' of universities approach WP in slightly different ways, although they all share the commonality of championing the narrative of social mobility through the rhetoric of 'equality of opportunity'. I argue that the homogenising knowledge regime of individual success, which is representative of the narrative of social mobility, impacts upon universities through pedagogical orientation which correlates learning with labour.

The chapter then moves on to revisit the images that inform WP laid out within Chapter 2. I explain that the interrogation of WP is a method I use to reveal the power structures that shape the narrative of social mobility. I offer reasoning for why WP is about more than just the collection of tuition fees within a marketised 'sector' of higher education, proposing that the notion of national prosperity, as discussed in Chapter 1 is inextricably linked with the political narrative of social mobility, which is itself intertwined with legitimation of the state. In order to fully investigate the narrative of social mobility and how it relates with legitimation, I must examine the narrative via an exploration of WP's legitimacy, which sets the basis for my hypothesis, so I then confirm the framework presented in Chapter 2, which aims to analyse the legitimacy of WP from three perspectives in order to address the hypothesis.

My hypothesis proposes that the concept of meritocracy is integral to WP's legitimacy. As detailed within Chapter 2, I apply Littler's (2017:3-7) 'five problems' of meritocracy to my analysis by formulating five questions based upon their structure. This discussion chapter moves on by addressing each one of those questions in turn. I begin by considering the fact that within the formation of the policy and practice of WP the notion of 'disadvantage' can be

problematised in a number of ways, primarily through the ambiguity surrounding what the concept means, and its expansion. I summarise how my findings show that universities generally associate WP with 'access' to university, but that the 'disadvantaged' universities in my study are more likely than the 'elite' universities to also conceptualise it in terms of 'success' and 'progression'. This leads me on to debate about how 'equality of opportunity' can still leave people 'left behind', through all stages of the 'access', 'success', and 'progression' student life-cycle, and how this rhetoric of 'opportunity' works in conjunction with individualistic and positivist systems of measurement to instil an ideology of neoliberal meritocracy within popular culture.

The second of the five questions looks at how ideas of talent and intellect are measured and nurtured through WP. Revisiting the meso-level analysis, the discussion highlights that the notion of 'potential' is viewed in different ways by the 'elite' and 'disadvantaged' universities, with the former viewing it through the positivistic lens of prior achievement before university, and the latter as something that can be obtained through university. The discussion highlights some of the methods used by 'elite' universities to accommodate shortfalls in prior attainment, before suggesting that this process can also work to reinforce privilege. The discussion highlights the ways that privilege is produced through the British schooling system and suggests that ideas of 'talent' and 'intellect' are manipulated markers of hierarchy and work to perpetuate the myth of meritocracy and reinvigorate structures of inequality.

For the third question, I examine how the 'disadvantaged student' relates with climbing the ladder of success. I begin by positioning the narrative of social mobility as being visually represented by the ladder, recapping on how WP has evolved alongside the narrative of social

mobility, and explaining that politically aligning WP with the narrative of social mobility equips neoliberal meritocracy with a steady stream of participants. I use the macro-level analysis to argue that 'widening participation', even before morphing into WP as a result of neoliberal policy making, had its roots in ideas of meritocracy, and that this worked to distort the class-based distinctions and plutocratic ruling of British society. I detail how WP is dependent upon the narrative of the 'disadvantaged student' and their prospect to climb the ladder, or rather their prospect to achieve 'social mobility', through meritocracy; and that WP creates the illusion of 'equality of opportunity'. I then explain how individualistic and positivist systems of measurement within the 'sector' of higher education work to reinforce the belief in meritocracy through their logic which is based upon ideas of individual success.

The fourth question addresses the idea of professional status within universities and the role that WP plays. I argue that the university structure is based around ideas of professional status, signalled by the titles and awards achieved through study and its hierarchical structure of development. I then move on to discuss how the professional status associated with a university qualification has altered with the increase in the number of people going to university, suggesting that pressure is being put upon institutions to deliver 'success' and 'progression', in ways that hold educators accountable for mitigating the effects of civic stratification within society. I argue that WP has evolved in response to modernisation and changes within the labour market and that this remains a driving factor of the way in which higher education is presented. I then propose the notion that, through the Augar Review, WP is being redirected, with greater emphasis being placed upon skills-based learning for the 'disadvantaged', which works to create a two-tier system of higher education that brings class-based pedagogical disruption.

Lastly, I explore the question if WP works to obscure and extend economic and social inequalities. Based upon findings from my meso and micro-level analyses, I argue that inequalities become obscured by WP through the creation in the belief of 'equality of opportunity' that is facilitated by strategies that aim to 'raise aspirations'. I propose that this legitimises a belief in meritocracy through which a failure to reach a desired destination is positioned as individual fault as opposed to structural injustice. I present this as a diversion strategy that averts the gaze from privilege through over-emphasising 'disadvantage'. I show that an increase in official reports highlighting the ways in which privilege operates through schooling networks, coincides with a paradox of the narrative of social mobility that results from WP's success but inability to address social and economic inequality. I suggest that the Augar Review is a response to the legitimacy crisis of higher education and that it works to position blame upon the 'sector', which again, averts attention away from privilege and reinvigorates the narrative of social mobility. Through this process, Augar gives authority to the OfS to target courses which do not deliver 'social mobility'; because of the structural inequalities which shape student destinations, this creates a scenario whereby the education on offer in 'disadvantaged' universities can become reshaped, where-as the education of the 'elite' universities can continued unscathed.

Conclusion

To understand the sociological implications that the narrative of social mobility has upon universities, this thesis investigates the policy and practice of WP. The research shows that WP plays an instrumental role in legitimising the 'sector' of higher education in England - it positions higher education as being a route to social mobility and acts to promote and seemingly facilitate efforts to see that is achieved. But the 'social mobility' being championed through the policy and practice of WP is an ambiguous concept. This ambiguity is similarly reflected within the systems of logic used by the regulator of English universities, the OfS, which are applied in uniform ways throughout higher education as the regulator works to mediate the political directives coming from government, positioning the narrative of social mobility and WP as a central objective of university policy and practice.

Through this politicised strategy, government policy and directives influence a broader culture within society which places emphasis on the importance of individual success, and universities are tasked with instilling this culture to the public. This thesis set out to understand how this strategy becomes legitimised by investigating the hypothesis that:

> *WP is legitimised by a narrative of social mobility that is underpinned by a belief in meritocracy.*

Addressing the Hypothesis

Using Suddaby et.al's (2017: 451) three 'distinct configurations of legitimacy' I will now explain the validity of this hypothesis by considering legitimacy as *property*, legitimacy as *process*, and legitimacy as *perception* by reflecting upon:

a) The legitimacy of WP itself
b) How the narrative of social mobility becomes legitimised and how that in turn shapes the legitimacy of WP
c) How a belief in meritocracy is legitimised and in turn how this shapes the legitimacy of the narrative of social mobility

Understanding how legitimacy works across these three areas of: a belief in meritocracy, the narrative of social mobility, and practices of WP, helps to shine light on the power dynamics of hegemonic discourses that not only shape practices of WP, but also equip the universities that are dependent upon WP with the ability to carry out their government-assigned task of promoting a culture of individual success to the masses.

I begin with c) and work my way through to b), and then a). This is not to suggest a linear progression of development but more a method to build the interpretation to demonstrate the make-up of the legitimacy of WP. In fact, as I will demonstrate, the legitimacy of WP works as a feedback loop to shape a belief in meritocracy, which as explained in Chapter 2, is a term that was initially coined in 1958 in a satirical attempt to shine light upon the social and economic inequalities of British society, but which was later appropriated by politicians and policy makers to promote the notion that those who are intelligent and work hard can achieve, thereby signalling that equality of opportunity exists (Young, 2008). It is this signalling and

promotion of the idea of equality of opportunity that perpetuates a cycle of WP activity that relates with the narrative of social mobility.

How a belief in meritocracy is legitimised and in turn how this shapes the legitimacy of the narrative of social mobility

The belief in meritocracy can be seen as what Suddaby et al. (2017) describe as *legitimacy as perception.* The authors state that:

> this understanding of legitimacy has its theoretical roots in Berger and Luckmann's (1966) sociology of knowledge and Weber's (1968) conception of validity as a collective level judgment (Suddaby et al., 2017: 463).

This perspective suggests that a belief in meritocracy is generated through a formation of judgements at both an individual and collective level:

> a formation of legitimacy judgment by individuals and a set of collective processes that lead to aggregation of individuals' judgments and emergence of a collective consensus (Suddaby et al. 2017: 468).

This perspective proposes that legitimacy interacts between the macro and the micro (Suddaby et al. 2017: 468) to gain consensus. Based upon this formation of judgement, a legitimised belief in meritocracy does not necessarily shape the legitimacy of the narrative of social mobility. Rather, the legitimacy of the belief in meritocracy and the narrative of social mobility are mutually inter-dependent, operating between the macro and micro levels. WP works as part of the 'set of collective processes' to re-affirm the narrative of social mobility and strengthen the belief in meritocracy. This can also be conceptualised as being an act of propaganda which works to maintain the status-quo. Degradation of a belief in meritocracy

would be an open invitation for counterevidence that would likely spoil political platforms and invite division. Maintaining a belief in meritocracy, then, is an important method of ensuring consensus of the broader political system, and therefore, legitimation of the state.

How the narrative of social mobility becomes legitimised and how that in turn shapes the legitimacy of WP

Findings from my meso-level analysis demonstrate how legitimisation occurs between the narrative of social mobility and WP. The Opportunity Area delivery plans highlight how the narrative of social mobility coming from the macro-level through legislation and official reports presents a need for WP that becomes *recognised* and legitimised through the partnership approach at a local level. At an institutional level, through the APPs, the OfS (2020 [2], [3], [4], [5]) not only legitimises WP by synonymising it with 'equality of opportunity' and the narrative of social mobility but goes further by making it a requirement for institutions wanting to charge maximum tuition fees, which, through its uniform approach, creates a normalisation process. In their overview of the APP process, the OfS (2020 [1]) explains that:

> They detail the interventions that providers will make to challenge risks to equality of opportunity over a four year period, and how they will measure and evaluate their impact.
>
> A university or college must have an access and participation plan if:

- they are registered with the Office for Students in the 'Approved (fee cap)' category
- they want to charge above the basic tuition fee cap.

Suddaby et al. (2017) discuss *legitimacy as process* as being based on interactions and reciprocal influences:

> the legitimacy-as-process approach adopts a constructivist/interpretivist approach. The primary level of analysis for the process perspective is, necessarily, multilevel because social construction assumes interactions and reciprocal influences between the individual and collective levels of analysis (Suddaby et al., 2017: 462).

As my meso-level analysis shows, the narrative of social mobility presents a need for WP that becomes *recognised* at a local level, which positions WP as an interlocutor between political narratives and policy making at the macro-level, with practice at a micro-level. This multi-level social construction works to align the narrative of social mobility with WP through the notion of 'equality of opportunity', which works to reaffirm the belief in meritocracy.

The legitimacy of WP itself

The final 'configuration' from Suddaby et.al discusses *legitimacy as property* as being:

> a commodity that can be possessed or exchanged between organizations, and can even "spillover" (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999) to adjacent organizations and other legitimacy objects. This understanding of legitimacy has its theoretical roots in functionalism and focuses the research agenda around key puzzles of contingency theory. The core constructs upon which the concept of legitimacy rests are norms, values, beliefs, and morals (Suddaby et al. 2017: 458).

As my macro-level analysis shows, WP has its political history rooted in attempts to make university education more accessible to people other than a select few. Ideas of meritocracy have underpinned this vision for university expansion, and as higher education has become marketized, WP has become the property of the state to be traded as a 'commodity that can be possessed or exchanged between organizations' (Suddaby et al. 2017: 458). The 'norms, values, beliefs and morals' (Suddaby et al. 2017: 458) that the state aligns with ideas of

meritocracy become formulated into a narrative of social mobility which drives the commodification and legitimacy of WP.

For the commodification of WP to remain legitimate it needs to be measurable so that institutions can validate their commitment to the state-set directives. The OfS mediates this process, tasked with ensuring that institutions commit to WP, which they do by using the APP as a binding agreement that universities must adhere to in order to financially survive through the charging of tuition fees. As both the meso and micro-level analysis shows, the ambiguous systems of measurement used by the OfS and its partners work to construct measurable indicators of 'disadvantage', 'success', and 'progression' as a method through which to pervasively measure, track, and test the effectiveness of WP. These systems of measurement bring legitimacy to WP and shift the ideology underpinning university expansion to a neoliberal meritocracy.

Re-legitimising the Narrative of Social Mobility

The release of the Augar Review in 2019 was an important moment for the narrative of social mobility. The report can be seen as a response to the 'legitimation crisis' (Habermas, 1988 [1973]) of the narrative, and an effort to re-legitimise it.

WP, which has grown up in partnership with neoliberal meritocracy since the late 1990s, firmly set the basis for the narrative that going to university is a pathway to social mobility. The policy and practice of WP has been designed around the premise that 'disadvantaged' students can have equal opportunity for social mobility through WP. The story suggests that the individual success that results from giving equal access to higher education is a

demonstration of the student's intelligence and effort, that is, their 'merit'. Part of the issue, though, is that practices of WP are undifferentiated – the same number of 'disadvantaged students' are not expected to enrol in the colleges of Cambridge and Oxford, as they are, for example, into the universities of East Anglia or Suffolk. Nonetheless, this narrative of social mobility, with the marriage of meritocracy and WP at its centre, has pretty much gone unchallenged since its inception; that is, until Augar.

Augar announces recommendations that challenge government-sponsored commodified higher education. Reducing the maximum tuition fee amount and introducing student number caps, for example, threatens to destabilise university strategies that are based upon the business model of recruiting large numbers of students for institutional financial survival. Augar does not place great emphasis on the importance of higher education in relation to Further Education, Skills-based learning, and Apprenticeships; rather, unlike the earlier reports detailed within my macro-level analysis, higher education is only one branch of 'post-18 education' and appears to have lost its place at centre stage. Augar takes the challenge to the 'sector' one step further by going straight to the heart – WP - by questioning the correlation of a university education with social mobility:

> the connection between going to university and achieving social mobility has become something of an unquestioned – although we believe questionable – mantra (Augar, 2019: 97-99).

Crucially, however, Augar is not questioning the narrative of social mobility, or the ideology of meritocracy that underpins it; it questions the legitimacy of WP. Yet, at the same time, Augar works as a manifesto for WP by proposing a reorientation away from universities and towards Further Education, Technical Training, and Apprenticeships. Augar's statement is

clear - the idea of achieving social mobility is not the problem; the problem is the kind of education being studied to achieve it.

Through these announcements Augar creates a 'political spectacle' (Edelman, 1988) that re-centres the focus on social mobility while proportioning blame towards universities and the type of education that they offer. Statements from government ministers since the Review's release have echoed these sentiments, which suggests consensus around the 'political spectacle'. In 2020, at a summit on widening access and mobility, Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan delivers a speech outlining a 'new approach to social mobility', within which she exclaims:

> Too many have been misled by the expansion of popular sounding courses with no real demand from the labour market (Donelan, 2020).

This idea of being 'misled' by universities was echoed by the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson, only a week later when he delivered a speech that aligned Further Education with levelling up the nation:

> I don't accept this absurd mantra, that if you are not part of the 50% of the young people who go to university that you've somehow come up short. You have become one of the forgotten 50% who choose another path (Williamson, 2020).

A year later, during his time as Education Secretary, Nadhim Zahawi, alongside Donelan, wrote to the OfS prior to the announcement of their new Director for Fair Access and Participation. Within this letter, the OfS' role of mediating government directives was made clear:

> we have concerns that too many students are currently recruited to low quality courses with low completion rates and poor graduate outcomes. As set out in guidance earlier

> this year, we expect the OfS to progress rapidly to ensure that an enhanced regulatory regime is in place, supported by effective and meaningful enforcement action (Zahawi, 2020).

And the following year, in her retitled role of Higher and Further Education Minister, Donelan sets out the Government response to the Augar Review, echoing passion for Degree Apprenticeships and re-emphasising the instrumental role of education as being about labour market destinations:

> £750 million will go towards delivering high quality teaching, facilities and equipment and expand the UK's provision of high-cost, high-return subjects that will in turn drive our economy in the future, including the growth of strategically important STEM subjects, and turbocharge something I am particularly passionate about - degree apprenticeships (Donelan, 2022).

It is important to recognise that political signalling of the supposed failure of universities to deliver 'social mobility', does still not explain what exactly 'social mobility' means (Donelan, 2020). And it is no coincidence either that these announcements come at a time when the cost of unpaid student loans for the Treasury is increasing dramatically (Bolton, 2023), while simultaneously there is growing awareness about civic stratification in British society (Morris, 2016, in, Samson, 2020) and the health implications of inequality (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2010). What's more, the government's own Social Mobility Commission had released consecutive reports detailing the persistent social and economic inequalities of Britain. In 2015 they stated that:

> the hallmarks of a truly open, fair and meritocratic society…are a long way from the Britain in which we live (Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2015).

The following year, they reported that:

> Britain has a deep social mobility problem…for this generation of young people, in particular, it is getting worse not better (Social Mobility Commission, 2016).

The year after that they provide evidence showing how inequality becomes strengthened through changes in the labour market, demonstrating the fact that civic stratification has heightened to such an extent that workers are described as being 'imprisoned':

> In the labour market, major changes over recent decades have imprisoned five million workers – mainly women – in a low pay trap from which few find escape: only one in six of those workers who were low paid in 2006 had managed to find a permanent route out of low pay a decade later. At the other end of the labour market, our country's professions – despite considerable effort to widen the pool of talent from which they recruit – remain remarkably unrepresentative of the public they serve: only 6 per cent of doctors, 12 per cent of chief executives and 12 per cent of journalists today are from working-class origins (Social Mobility Commission, 2017).

And in 2019 they explain why the realities of privilege and disadvantage make the supposition of equality of opportunity redundant:

> Being born privileged in Britain means that you are likely to remain privileged. Being born disadvantaged, however, means that you will have to overcome a series of barriers to ensure that you and your children are not stuck in the same trap (Social Mobility Commission, 2019).

The continuing and strengthening of social and economic inequality in Britain has been occurring throughout the same period that WP has been increasing, and the political emphasis of enhancing 'social mobility' through higher education participation has been intensifying. This paradox presents a situation which means that there is a problem with either higher education, or with social mobility. For politicians to openly admit that there is a problem with

the concept of social mobility would risk highlighting the entrenched class-based nature of British society and the illusory nature of the ideology of meritocracy that enables plutocracy to thrive (Littler, 2017). It is far easier and safer to blame education. Coincidentally, and somewhat fortunately for those in powerful positions, meritocracy has a default which allows failure to be attributed to individual shortfall, where by the problem becomes personal as opposed to structural. This is reflected in the Higher and Further Education Minister's response to the Augar Review when stating that:

> real social mobility is not achieved by pushing people into university if they are not ready (Donelan, 2022).

Furthermore, the design of WP, with its constructed classes of 'disadvantage' provides a ready supply of students to be channelled into the re-orientated path of WP under the premise of a re-legitimised narrative of social mobility. As the Education Secretary announced following the Augar Review:

> It exasperates me that there is still an inbuilt snobbishness about higher being somehow better than further, when really, they are both just different paths to fulfilling and skilled employment…We must never forget that the purpose of education is to give people the skills they need to get a good and meaningful job (Williamson, 2020).

This statement works to reinforce the notion that learning is about wage labour and that individual success is about gaining employment post-study. This vision positions education as a vessel which can travel along two very different paths to reach the same destination. However, the goods that the vessel carries along the different routes are valued in different ways by those in powerful positions, meaning that they will not reach the same destination, despite the level of political insistence. Beneath the veneer, this statement from a government

minister is confirming that there are different kinds of education for different kinds of people; I imagine that it is highly unlikely that WP will target 'advantaged' students within private schools to promote enrolment into further education.

As mentioned above, the ideology of meritocracy has a default (individual failure) which can divert attention away from structural inequality. In a similar vein, the narrative of social mobility also has a default – the ambiguity of 'social mobility'. The narrative of social mobility that has grown up in partnership with neoliberal meritocracy and WP has kept a vague definition of what 'social mobility' actually means, and as this thesis shows, it is far removed from sociological understandings of social mobility. This ambiguity allows the narrative to reformulate itself when contradictions arise between evidence of persistent social and economic inequalities and policies that are said to promote equality.

In 2022, around the same time that government ministers were debating ideas discussed in the Augar Review about the purpose of higher education, the sustainability of the current model, and higher education's relationship with social mobility (Donelan, 2022; Zahawi 2021), the Social Mobility Commission underwent a radical overhaul that saw the departing of Commissioners and the appointment of a new Chair. In her inaugural address as the new Chair of the Social Mobility Commission Katherine Birbalsingh revealed a 'fresh approach' to social mobility (Social Mobility Commission and Katharine Birbalsingh CBE, 2022). This 'fresh approach' claimed to distance itself from 'the popular narrative about social mobility', which is described as the 'Dick Whittington' model that is about the individual moving away from home in a small town and moving into a big city to have a successful career and become rich. The 'small steps' approach to social mobility announced by Birbalsingh appears to consider some of the more sociological aspects of the concept, such as how social mobility can be viewed inter-generationally rather than just intra-generationally (Social Mobility

Commission and Katharine Birbalsingh CBE, 2022). However, like Augar, this move from the Commission can be seen to challenge contemporary market-driven higher education which is built on the idea of students moving away from home, by proposing that students can experience social mobility locally. Furthermore, by reframing and limiting social mobility to celebrate a scenario where by 'a child of parents who were long-term unemployed, or who had never worked, gets a job in their local area' (Social Mobility Commission and Katharine Birbalsingh CBE, 2022), does little to address or even raise awareness of structural inequality and civic stratification. Indeed, it ratifies it.

This new narrative works to re-legitimise the narrative of social mobility and the ideology of meritocracy that it is bound with. Like with the emerging re-orientation of WP away from universities and towards Further Education, Technical Skills Learning, and Apprenticeships, this new narrative of social mobility offers nothing new for the 'disadvantaged', other than perhaps a greater guarantee of employment and a lesser student loan balance. The aversion of attention away from privilege and the systems that enable it embolden inequality by proposing and celebrating the notion that some people are better suited to education away from universities, and that labouring in a job, regardless of its terms and conditions, is better than being unemployed. In 2023, the Living Wage Foundation reported that there are 6.1m workers in the UK who are in insecure work, with 3.4m of these being in low paid insecure work (Living Wage Foundation, 2023). While there may be some truth in the proposition by the Social Mobility Commission that something is better than nothing in terms of work, there remains little political discussion about the causes of unemployment, poverty, and educational dissociation.

Neoliberal Homogenising Knowledge Regimes

Through its investigation into the policy and practice of WP this thesis intricately details how a discourse of individual success, underpinned by a narrative of social mobility that is bound with an ideology of neoliberal meritocracy, dominates higher education. My examination shows how this discourse of individual success works in the interest of national prosperity by continuing the long-standing class structures of British society. Recent attempts to reorientate WP serve to divert attention away from the obscure nature of 'social mobility', there by shielding the falsity of its politically promoted character, while simultaneously perpetuating the discourse of individual success.

Throughout the thesis I have discussed the logic that enables the discourse of individual success as being a 'homogenising knowledge regime'. I have detailed how this logic is mediated through the regulator of higher education in England, the OfS, explaining it by its features of uniform ambiguity. But as my analysis of the narrative of social mobility shows, the ambiguity transcends WP, the OfS, and the 'sector' of higher education. I therefore draw this thesis to a close by probing a little deeper into the homogenising knowledge regime.

In their study of the impact of the use of algorithms in climate governance, Machen & Nost (2021) propose that technological changes have brought political implications in the form of hegemonic knowledge:

> Drawing from Laclau and Mouffe's theorisation of hegemony we argue that algorithmic forms of reasoning lend themselves towards producing hegemonising knowledge regimes, with important implications for a democratic politics of climate change. Recognising that algorithms stand for wider socio-technical assemblages that structure and create knowledge, we call for greater attention to the reliance on algorithms within climate governance – less for the algorithms themselves than for their particular epistemic commitments that create algorithmic ways of thinking, with associated claims to power (Machen & Nost, 2021: 555).

As these authors highlight, homogenising knowledge regimes are not about algorithms; they are about the 'epistemic commitments' that align particular ways of thinking with power that claims legitimacy. My thesis demonstrates how the logic of uniform ambiguity becomes operationalised as a homogenising knowledge regime through the centralising bureaucracy of the OfS. In theorising *bureaucratic ambiguity,* Best (2012) explains how 'standardization and bureaucratic rationalization' have come to dominate social-worlds through organisations working in the pursuit of 'measurable results'. Best (2012: 84) concludes that:

> Bureaucracies seek not only to contain ambiguity through various forms of quantification and standardization, but also to foster it .

The connection between quantification, standardisation, and ambiguity has been discussed throughout the macro, meso and micro-level analysis of this thesis, which details the processes through which the 'disadvantaged' student becomes manufactured, targeted, tracked, and monitored using methods of 'pervasive measurement' (Smith & Atkinson, 2016). As Smith & Atkinson demonstrate within their celebration of Cicourel's classic text *Method and Measurement in Sociology*:

> measurement is a process of decision-making, practically realised, embedded in the social conditions, situations and structures in which it is accomplished. This is often lost in contemporary treatments of 'method' as simply a neutral tool for getting a job done (that job being the straightforward measure of social reality for professional purposes). There is thus a continued significance for a properly sociological rendering of measurement for the practice of the social sciences themselves and for the contribution of sociology in analysing and critiquing measurement practices in society (Smith & Atkinson, 2016: 101).

My investigation of the policy and practice of WP offers a sociological contribution to the analysis and critique of measurement practices in society by demonstrating how bureaucratic processes of WP that make up the 'sector' of higher education are legitimised by the

inequalities of British society, and in showing how the ambiguity of 'disadvantage' enables its commodification, while uniformity facilitates its measurement. This homogenising knowledge regime of uniform ambiguity is constructed through a 'decision making process' (Smith & Atkinson, 2016: 101) and is bound with 'associated claims to power' (Machen & Nost, 2021: 555).

Machen & Nost's (2021: 555) assessment that homogenising knowledge regimes have implications for democratic politics can be seen throughout my investigation of WP, which shows how the discourse of individual success that correlates higher education with the labour market works to overshadow education orientated towards democratic citizenship. Brown (2015) details how this process works in the fascinating expose of neoliberalism, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution.* Neoliberalism is defined as being:

> best understood not simply as economic policy, but as a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes the human itself exclusively as *homo oeconomicus*…it formulates everything, everywhere, in terms of capital investment and appreciation, including and especially humans themselves (Brown, 2015: 176).

Explaining the effects that the 'rationality' of neoliberalism has upon public higher education in the liberal arts in American universities, which Brown (2015:175) recognises as being crucial for democracy due to the ability of a liberal arts education to help 'provide tools for understanding powers and problems', four key and inter-related areas are discussed: *public goods; democracy; subjects; knowledge, thought, and training.* The discussion highlights the ways in which neoliberalism reorientates universities from being a public good to a private good; distorts the perception of democracy to value technical skills over educated participants; subjugates human capital to become consumed by value-driven market metrics in a way which devalues 'knowledge and experience needed for intelligent democratic

citizenship'; and places value on knowledge based upon the extent that it can enhance capital (Brown, 2015: 176-178).

The effects that neoliberalism has on liberal arts education in American universities and colleges is not far removed from what is being experienced in English universities (Collini, 2012), primarily where the arts and humanities are concerned:

> cultural values spurn it, capital is not interested in it, debt-burdened families anxious about the future do not demand it, neoliberal rationality does not index it, and of course, states no longer invest in it (Brown, 2015: 181).

Neoliberalism, then, sets the rules of the game for the homogenising knowledge regime of uniform ambiguity. Through the construction and commodification of the 'disadvantaged' student', neoliberalism has a steady stream of human beings ready to become 'formulated' in terms of capital investment and appreciation (Brown, 2015: 176). The role that neoliberal meritocracy (Littler, 2017) plays within this process is fundamental. As Brown (2015) explains, when American universities and Liberal Arts Colleges began their expansion in the interwar years, before reaching heights in the 1960s to offer 'liberal arts to the masses', they promised a culture of social mobility:

> No mere instrument for economic advancement, higher education in the liberal arts was the door through which descendants of workers, immigrants, and slaves entered onto the main stage of the society to whose wings they were historically consigned. A basic familiarity with Western history, thought, literature, art, social analysis, and science, was integral to middle-class belonging, in many ways more important than a specific profession or income (Brown, 2015: 180).

Much like the Robbins era in Britain, expanding access to universities in the US was about building a culture for national prosperity. Ideas of democratic citizenship underpinned the vision, and meritocracy had an undeniable role to play – by engaging with education that had

long been the preserve of elites, those from the lower classes could climb the ladder to reach 'middle-class belonging' (Brown, 2015: 180). Ideas of individual success blended with efforts to build a culture of democratic citizenship with the aim of ensuring national prosperity. Higher education played an important role in building consensus for statecraft, with modernisation projects being dependent upon the development of the culture (Holmwood, 2018; Lubenow, 2002; Sanderson, 1972).

It is because of this intrinsic presence of meritocracy within formal education, that I argue that universities play a leading role in the development and facilitation of neoliberalism as a 'governing rationality' (Brown, 2015). Universities have become an instrument of neoliberalism, much like the state. In his discussion of *The Neoliberal State*, Davies (2017: 273) explains how neoliberalism 'abandons the vision of market and state as independent and ontologically distinct entities'. Drawing upon Karl Polanyi's classic work *The Great Transformation* (1944), which proposed that Victorian laissez-faire ideology created an illusion of the separateness between market and state as a political agenda through which the state could *imagine* and *construct* the free market, Davies (2017: 274) explores how the state has become 'a central instrument for the advancement of the neoliberal agenda', arguing that:

> Commitment to a strong state, capable of rebuffing political and ideological challenges to capitalist competition, is a defining feature of neoliberalism, both as a system of thought and of applied political strategy.

And as I have illuminated throughout the thesis, the influence that the state has upon higher education has intensified as neoliberalism has grown. The need to reinvigorate the narrative of social mobility, and in turn renew a belief in meritocracy, can be seen as act of 'rebuffing political and ideological challenges to capitalist competition' (Davies, 2017: 234), which acts

in response to the 'problems of meritocracy' (Littler, 2017). In Chapter 6 I discussed these problems in relation to WP, formulating questions based around these themes:

- the notion of the 'left behind'
- ideas of 'talent and intellect'
- the visual image of the 'ladder of success'
- belief in 'professional status'
- economic and social inequalities

These themes are derived from Littler's (2017) critique of contemporary meritocracy, yet it is reasonable to suggest that these themes were also a defining feature of American universities during the era of democratic culture building discussed by Brown (2015) – for every student able to use their talent and intellect to climb the ladder of success to reach 'middle-class belonging' (Brown, 2015: 180), there were others who were left behind. Brown discusses how the expansion of American universities in the 1960s 'also featured cultivation of a professoriat, and a professional class more generally, from the widest class basis in human history' (Brown, 2015: 180). Regardless of how wide the class basis for the professional class was, this reinforced the belief in the idea of professional status, which itself plays an important role in enhancing economic and social inequalities (Littler, 2017). The central role that meritocracy plays in the design of higher education has meant that as *neoliberal meritocracy* has grown, universities have played an increasingly important role in exacerbating economic and social inequalities:

> After more than half a century of public higher education construed and funded as a medium for egalitarianism and social mobility and as a means of achieving a broadly educated democracy, as well as for providing depth and enrichment to individuality,

> public higher education, like much else in neoliberal orders, is increasingly structured to entrench, rather than redress class trajectories (Brown, 2015: 184).

Narratives of Social Mobility and Sociological Implications

The political narrative of social mobility featured throughout this thesis began in England during the late 1990s. In 1997 the Dearing Report set out a financial strategy for higher education that included introducing tuition fees in response to increasing student numbers that were mirrored by state dis-investment in higher education. This strategy helped to enhance the mass system of higher education (Scott, 1995) by creating a framework through which student numbers could be increased even further under the guise of WP. Since this time, the narrative that correlates high education with social mobility has continued.

The sociological implications that this narrative of social mobility has had for higher education is evidenced throughout this thesis. By creating space for the discursive formation of WP to morph into an industry that trades in the commodification of neoliberal subjects investing in their own human capital, the narrative of social mobility offers legitimacy to the 'sector' of higher education. This 'sector' has become a mechanism through which neoliberal meritocracy works to reinforce and extend existing social and economic inequalities, giving room for plutocracy to dominate (Littler, 2017). Through WP, the 'sector' of higher education shapes the minds of young people to value their lives and set their dreams on goals seen through a neoliberal lens. Educators trying to offer a more kaleidoscopic view of the world become increasingly boxed-in by the box-ticking exercises and measuring techniques that aim to justify the neoliberal-setting agenda of higher education.

The re-legitimation of the narrative of social mobility, that I propose that the Augar Review enables by creating a political spectacle that focuses on the failure of higher education to deliver empty signifiers of social mobility, does not change the power dynamics at play. If anything, social and economic inequalities are enhanced as the chance of an education that can 'provide tools for understanding powers and problems' (Brown, 2015: 175) is returned to become the property of privilege. For un-privileged students, their 'disadvantage' becomes manufactured as their education becomes directed towards skills-training that equips them for a life of servitude in the labour market. The sociological implications that this has for universities is profound. The two-tier system that characterises the 'sector' of higher education in England is reshaping the *purpose* of a vast majority of institutions. My own university, Essex, has recently witnessed the further merging of humanities departments against the backdrop of new shiny buildings dedicated to STEM subjects and growing numbers of 'modules' offering vocationally orientated health related courses. In a recent staff blog celebrating the university's sixtieth anniversary, our Vice Chancellor Professor Anthony Forster wrote about the founding vision of Essex, noting, an equal commitment to research and education, with a tradition that good teaching really matters; a concern not just with the pursuit of learning but with the fulfilment of lives, where living matters as much as learning; recruitment of students on the basis of potential as well as prior achievement; and a university that is freer, more daring, more experimental (Forster, 2023). Being a staff member of the university for seventeen years and having taken the time to listen to Albert Sloman's Reith Lectures and explore our Library's special collection archives about our university, I have witnessed and understand the impact that the neoliberal takeover has had on our university's founding principles. Our Vice Chancellor's celebration of our university's history swiftly moves on to suggest:

> But we are also a University for our time: we live in the present and care about the future. Sir Albert Sloman said that our generation would judge our collective success by the extent to which the University meets the needs of our time, by our distinction as a university for our world. These ideas are central to our 60th birthday celebrations and over the next two academic years, through to July 2025, we will celebrate our impact and the positive change that we have made, locally and globally. So, for our 60th anniversary celebrations we will reflect on the University as the place "Where change happens 1964 - 2024" (Forster, 2023).

Changing narratives of social mobility drive changes within institutions. Narratives of social mobility have driven the expansion of higher education from the mid twentieth century as nations compete and collaborate in the geo-politics of modernisation (Brown, 2015; Committee on Higher Education, 1963). Beneath these narratives of social mobility lies a belief in meritocracy which 'weakens community and the task of common betterment' while it 'sweetens the poison of hierarchy' (Williams [1958], in, Littler, 2017: 3).

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