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THIRD SECTOR ORGANISATIONS IN WIDENING PARTICIPATION POLICY: NETWORKS, EXPERTISE AND AUTHORITY.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement of Sheffield Hallam University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Candidate Declaration

I hereby declare that:

1. I have been enrolled for another award of the University, or other academic or professional organisation, whilst undertaking my research degree. I was enrolled for the following award:

   PGCert Advanced Social Research

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2. None of the material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.

3. I am aware of and understand the University's policy on plagiarism and certify that this thesis is my own work. The use of all published or other sources of material consulted have been properly and fully acknowledged.

4. The work undertaken towards the thesis has been conducted in accordance with the SHU Principles of Integrity in Research and the SHU Research Ethics Policy.

5. The word count of the thesis is: 87,958

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Acronyms

AA	Access Agreement
APP	Access and Participation Plan
FE	Further Education
FEC	Further Education College
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEP	Higher Education Provider
NCOP	National Collaborative Outreach Project
NNCO	National Networks for Collaborative Outreach
TSO	Third Sector Organisation
TSWPO	Third Sector Widening Participation Organisation
WP	Widening Participation
WPO	Widening Participation Organisation

Organisations

BIT	Behavioural Insights Team
EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
FAC	Fair Access Coalition

FACE	Forum for Access and Continuing Education
FEA	Fair Education Alliance
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
NNECL	National Network of Education for Care Leavers
NEON	National Education Opportunities Network
NESTA	National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts
OFFA	Office For Fair Access
OfS	Office For Students
PURSUE	Practitioners from Underrepresented Sections United through Education
SMC	Social Mobility Commission
TASO	Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education

Abstract

This thesis examines the involvement of third sector organisations in widening participation policy enactment. Whilst national widening participation policy is largely concerned with the actions of higher education providers and of government, there are a growing number of third sector organisations informing policy and practice through their activities and research. Thus far, these organisations have been absent from widening participation research and hence this thesis addresses a gap in understanding the many actors engaged in enactment of widening participation policy.

This research is based in an interpretive approach to policy analysis, combining expert interviews with documentary analysis to explore the roles that third sector organisations have taken on within widening participation policy enactment. Based on Colebatch's (2002) articulation of policy as authority, order and expertise, this thesis analyses the actions of third sector organisations in context to assess how they are contributing to shaping widening participation policy and the potential for further development of their influence.

This research identifies that third sector organisations play a peripheral role in shaping widening participation policy, though some have more prominent roles in promoting a fair access variant of widening participation, in mainstreaming specific forms of outreach activity and in promoting a focus on evaluation and particularly a 'what works' approach. Despite limited indications of influence on policy, this research also demonstrates that many third sector organisations are actively engaging in policy discussions and seeking to inform the direction of policy through establishing positions as 'networked experts'. These positions are unstable, and are influenced by funders, engagement in elite networks and by the leading organisations in the field.

This thesis makes distinct contributions to knowledge through examining the emergence and practices of organisations not yet examined in widening participation policy and by exploring widening participation policy enactment in context. Additionally, the findings in relation to the environment of widening participation policy making offers new insights into how policy is made and enacted, including whose interests are represented.

Contents

Chapter one: Introduction

Widening participation, the process of broadening higher education participation to under-represented groups, is a global concern for expanding economies. In the UK it has been part of policy and of public concern for social justice and economic reasons for some time. There has been extensive research on widening participation (WP), usually with a focus on the actions or contexts of government and universities as the institutions responsible for widening participation, as well as on the experiences of students and communities targeted in widening participation work. In England, the past 20 years has seen a growing number of non-state, non-university organisations aligning themselves with widening participation as part of their commercial activities or social mission, forming part of a broad 'sector' of organisations engaged with WP. Many of these newer organisations can also be considered part of the 'third sector', neither private nor public organisations, operating with a social purpose. These organisations have rarely been included within research on the WP sector and have not previously been a primary focus for research. Consequently, this thesis contributes to literature on widening participation by filling a distinct gap in empirical research by focusing on the actions of third sector widening participation organisations and their relationship to policy. In addition, it contributes to literature on third sector organisations as policy actors by examining a set of organisations that are not easily categorised, with elements of philanthropic, social enterprise and cooperative organisations. These organisations have been part of education policy research but rarely considered specifically in terms of their status as charitable organisations or part of a third sector (Williamson, 2013).

This thesis explores the role of third sector organisations in shaping widening participation policy and its enactment. Based on interviews with those within selected third sector widening participation organisations (TSWPOs) and others with professional experience in widening participation policy, in combination with the records and policy documents of a wider range of TSWPOs, this study examines how and in what ways these organisations have sought to shape WP policy since 1997. It

provides the first comprehensive account of the context of emergence of these organisations and identifies that, although there are different approaches to shaping policy, these organisations have developed some limited influence through their roles as 'experts' within the sector. This thesis critically examines how organisations have established this position through the creation and utilisation of elite networks and how, through participating in a politics of influence, some organisations have contributed to promoting and sustaining dominant narratives on evidence and fair access. In doing so, this thesis provides a unique account of WP policymaking not currently represented within existing research and a basis for further exploration of how these conditions enable and restrict policy change.

This study draws on Colebatch's (2002) articulation of policy as expertise, order and authority to explore capacities for policy influence within third sector organisations. This framework has not previously been applied in this way or to these types of organisations, who may not ordinarily be considered as unique policy actors. In looking at third sector organisations and networks in higher education policymaking, it draws on the work of researchers focused on global policy mobilities, new forms of education governance and how these forms of organisations contribute to new forms of education governance (e.g. Williamson, 2013; Ball, 2012; Ball & Junemann, 2012; Ball & Olmedo, 2011; Hogan, 2015). This research points to the significance of such organisations in promoting market solutions to education 'problems', to shaping pedagogy and to shaping research use in education policymaking. Several of these studies have examined individual organisations or networks but have not examined the practices within these organisations and the internal logics which guide their actions as policy actors. This study therefore goes beyond this focus on networks to look at practices within networks and how these contribute to 'making policy with good ideas' in the context of networked governance.

1.1. The context of this study

This study covers an extended period of policymaking and of third sector involvement in WP, starting from 1997 and the publication of the Dearing Report and the foundation of the Sutton Trust, to 2021, when this thesis was written. The interviews that form the core of this thesis took place from May 2019 – July 2020, a period of significant social and political turbulence. Many interviewees were reflecting, not solely on their current working practices, but on sometimes far longer professional histories working in widening participation. Nonetheless, the context in which this study took place in important for framing their reflections on the policymaking environment and indicates why this study is needed.

The period covered by this study, from 1997 to 2021, saw significant changes in higher education and widening participation policy, with movement towards a marketised HE system and regulation of WP activity across all higher education providers (HEPs). During this time, there was also a notable increase in the number of third sector organisations with widening participation goals forming part of their social mission. These organisations, barely mentioned in policy documents in 1997, were by 2018 referenced in the comments of the Director of Access and Participation, appeared in individual institutions' access and participation plans, and, since 2009, have frequently appeared as examples of best practice in enquiries into HE access and social mobility (Squire, 2020). In an initial search in 2018 for active third sector organisations with widening participation goals or working to deliver widening participation activity, I identified 32 such organisations. This thesis focused on those who were active, registered charities in England and had widening participation as a major goal; however, the number of non-state organisations taking an interest in WP is far wider, with many of them delivering activity intended to widen participation on a large scale. This interest in WP from charitable organisations shows little sign of slowing, with a further five organisations identified over the course of this thesis. Despite their growth, these organisations and their involvement in widening participation policy and practice have not been a focus for research.

The groundwork for this study, including a mapping of all TSWPOs, began in 2018, at a point where significant changes were being made to higher education regulation in England and to widening participation specifically. The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 established a new HE regulatory body for England, the Office for Students (OfS), in January 2018. The Office for Students made substantive changes to the regulation of widening participation activity over its first two years, including requiring more analysis of student characteristics at provider level, the introduction of national performance measures, longer-term planning cycles and the creation of a national 'evidence centre' (Office for Students, 2018). Alongside this, a new national outreach programme, now known as Uni Connect, was launched in January 2017 and, at the time of writing, is still active. In addition to regulatory and programme changes, there was also an ongoing review of post-18 education and funding launched in 2018 and, after some delay, published in May 2019. The government response came in Jan 2021, though with a full review of HE spending still pending at the time of writing. For TSWPOs, the changes during this period presented opportunities to extend their reach, with Uni Connect partnerships and new providers creating commercial and partnership opportunities. However, this period of change also presented a threat to TSWPO funding streams and stability, as changes to regulation prompted some universities to consider bringing activity previously delivered by TSWPOs 'in-house' and Uni Connect funding reduced over time, often with relatively short notice changes. The focus of Uni Connect and national performance measures on POLAR, an area-based measure of young HE participation, shifted funding and institutional priorities to reaching specified groups of young people, often requiring TSWPOs to align with these targeting measures. Amidst this turbulent environment, some TSWPOs came together to form the Fair Access Alliance, making public statements on the responsibilities of the OfS, HE regulation and funding. In this context, the involvement of TSWPOs in WP policy has been public and relevant to their organisational survival, making this thesis a timely review of their role and positions.

Since this study began, HE policymaking has not been 'business as usual', with government first heavily preoccupied with exiting the European Union, a process

formally begun in March 2017 and completed at the end of January 2020, and then dealing with the Covid-19 global pandemic from early 2020, a process still ongoing. In the period during which this research was carried out there have been four different university ministers (one, Chris Skidmore, holding the post on two separate occasions during this time), as well as changes in the responsibilities of the role, bringing uncertainty to the HE sector and shifting areas of focus. Although not intended as an account of the past four years of policymaking specifically, the recent strategies used by TSWPOs to engage with government and with policy detailed in this thesis do offer some insight into how such organisations adapt and into the WP policy environment during a period of turbulence. It demonstrates how some TSWPOs have come to think of policy influence differently, focusing less on access to a rapidly changing cast of senior figures and more on long-term relationships with organisations as a route to achieving their social missions.

1.2. The focus of this study

This study sought to understand the role of third sector organisations within widening participation policy. Specifically, it sought to understand how they related to WP policy, how they have sought to influence it and in what ways. There are a wide range of different non-state, non-HEP organisations that could be considered part of the third sector currently involved in delivering on or commenting on WP policy aims and hence this thesis focused on a particular group of organisations who share common characteristics in their legal frameworks, policy focus and broad conceptual similarities that impact on how they are perceived. Those identified as Third Sector Widening Participation Organisations in this thesis were registered charities, active in England and with a major focus on widening participation as part of their work and/or social mission. This therefore excluded some non-state organisations that have been active participants in delivering widening participation work, such as Buttle UK whose Quality Mark was significant in raising the profile of the needs of care leavers within HE. These exclusions were made to ensure a focus on WP policy, rather than other policy areas (in the case of Buttle UK this would be the care system more broadly) and to establish

how the legal and social framework of being a charity can impact on WP and policy work.

This study, in being concerned with how organisations and individuals within them navigate and attempt to exert influence within a specific policy environment, is concerned with both the context in which organisations and individuals work and with their interpretations of this context. Drawing on an interpretative approach to policy analysis, it uses documentary analysis and interviews with 'experts in their own domains' (Yanow, 2000: 18) to explore the communities of meaning in which TSWPOs carry out their policy work. These experts were drawn from within TSWPOs (as experts in how they interpreted their positions and the rationale behind their actions) and outside these organisations (as experts in how these organisations and individuals fit within a broader WP policy context and in how their positions have been supported or otherwise). All of the interpretations of these selected experts are necessarily partial, varied by positional differences within the field, and the selection of interviewees was therefore designed to enable exposure to multiple interpretations (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013).

Within the study I focused on four organisations of varying size (as defined by recent income) and foci; one large and one medium organisation focused on delivery of widening participation work; and one large and one medium organisation focused on policy and coordination of widening participation work. All methodological issues are discussed in further detail in chapter six. Within these organisations I aimed to capture the perspectives of multiple staff with an 'institutionalised authority to construct reality' (Hitzler, Honer & Maeder, 1994, quoted in Meuseur & Nagel, 2009: 19), with the involvement of individuals at different levels of policy enactment providing a broad exposure to communities of meaning (Yanow, 2000). Experts external to TSWPOs were also identified on the basis of their standing within the field and their institutionalised authority, previous or current, to assess or influence the position of TSWPOs. These therefore included the previous Director of Fair Access, former civil servants working on social mobility and education, and prominent commentators on WP policy. In the

course of identifying suitable interviewees and in interviewing, it became apparent that no neat divides existed between organisations or between roles. One individual could hold multiple authoritative roles in different organisations, with individuals initially identified as external to TSWPOs often having close personal or professional connections to them. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic also meant that full coverage of a range or roles for each identified organisation was not possible. As a consequence, this research does not provide an organisational perspective but one focused on a field of policy, with overlapping organisational and personal fields providing additional context for policy interpretations and actions of individuals and organisations.

The view of policy and policy influence explored in this thesis is explicitly not about a specific policy change or about policy solely as text. It examines WP policy as a process in which third sector organisations are part of contestation, played out 'in regard to whose voices are heard and whose values are recognised or 'authoritatively allocated' in the policy and which groups ultimately benefit as a result' (Taylor et. al., 1997:28-9). In examining WP policy, it looks specifically at the aspects of a broad area of policy that TSWPOs have chosen to engage with, primarily those concerning outreach, 'fair access' and social mobility. These areas are only a subset of WP policy but nonetheless are important facets of its conception and enactment. This thesis explores TSWPO engagement in WP policy, how they understand it as relevant to their work and how they choose (or not) to attempt to influence what policy is, whether at a stage of ideas and values or at a stage of implementation. As such, this thesis is about how third sector organisations come to be policy actors and what guides their actions and not about whether those actions have or have not been a determining factor in the text of policy. It provides an account of the WP policy that is rarely explored, particularly in describing and analysing the interrelations and power dynamics between organisations and in examining the how policy ideas are interpreted outside the structures of policy.

1.2.1 An insider account?

An interpretive approach to studying policy suggests that 'it is not possible for an analyst to stand outside of the policy issue being studied, free of its values and meanings and of the analyst's own values, beliefs, and feelings' (Yanow, 2000: 5) and accepts that exploring interpretations, both of participants and of researchers, is part of the research process. This is particularly true of my own position as a former widening participation practitioner, closely connected to the networks and individuals within this study. Whilst my positionality and how I have understood this, particularly in relation to the organisations and individuals that are the focus of this study, is covered in greater detail in chapter six, I mention it here because it pertains to the focus and framing of this study and to how this thesis is written. I was a widening participation practitioner between 2005-2017, starting as an intern and ending as a head of department, with some responsibility for writing institutional policy and translating national policy in a local context. As such, the policy and practice changes discussed within chapters two and four of this thesis were also the context for my own career. I experienced them as someone engaged in the process of policy enactment and this was the initial basis of my interest in this level of policy research. My alignment with interpretative policy analysis and its associated epistemological position, which values the words and reasonings of those involved in making policy, is also informed, in part, by my professional experience and my own understanding of how policy is 'made' in practice.

My professional experience in widening participation was also closely tied to the growth of third sector organisations in WP. My first roles were working on projects linked to the government-funded Aimhigher programme, including working with an early TSWPO, Brightside. I later spent 18 months working for Teach First, a major funder and active promoter of third sector education organisations, particularly those led by former teachers trained by the organisation. As part of my role at Teach First, I supported organisations including The Brilliant Club and The Access Project, both TSWPOs identified in this thesis, as they launched their programmes. In being a

London-based practitioner, I encountered and participated in several of the networks discussed by participants in this thesis, including early iterations of the Bridge Group and the Fair Education Alliance. The account of TSWPO emergence given in chapter four therefore, in part, draws upon my own knowledge of these organisations and my associated awareness of where details about their activities have been recorded. My identification of the growth of third sector organisations, something not remarked upon within WP research, came from this professional experience and formed the basis of my initial research questions seeking to understand how and why these organisations had, from my perspective, become so prominent within the field of WP. I was also seeking to understand some of the varied interpretations of widening participation that I had come across in my career and how widening participation policy was contextualised within organisations and by individuals reconciling policy with their own experiences and values. My personal view of widening participation, as an issue of social justice and equity, had come into conflict with positions in and outside HEPs which placed expectations of change on individual applicants and students, rather than institutions, and were informed by (I felt) limited ideas of merit, deservedness and social mobility. I was curious as to what informed the position of organisations like TSWPOs, who appeared to be growing and becoming more vocal, and what this might mean for how widening participation is done in future.

Although I began this work from the position of an 'insider', like other qualitative researchers (Mercer, 2007) I argue that the position of insider/outsider is not a dichotomy and is continually changing throughout the process of research. Having spent two years outside practice at the point of interviewing, only a small number of the participants in this research had any prior relationship to me and my knowledge as an 'insider' was already dated given the rapid changes in HE policy. In terms of how this affects the presentation of this research, there are points where it has been appropriate to talk in terms of "I", both as a researcher whose position is closely tied to this research in multiple ways, and as an informant, whose insider knowledge and connections have been relevant to the practicalities of research design and to the content of this thesis. The conscious choice to include myself within the writing of this

research is part of a broader commitment to maintain 'a reflexive awareness that research relations are never simple encounters, innocent of identities and lines of power' (DeVault & Gross, 2012: 215). This is true in the research process but also within the communication of this research. I argue that this does not take away from my critical position but rather provides a point from which to interrogate it, acknowledging that there may be limitations in doing so.

1.3. Contribution to knowledge

This thesis makes a distinct contribution to knowledge through the topic of study, TSWPOs, and in the application of Colebatch's (2002) model of policy as order, authority and expertise to the study of policy influence. This study provides the first comprehensive account and analysis of the emergence of a type of organisation termed here 'third sector widening participation organisation'. Third sector organisations have rarely been mentioned within widening participation research, with the exceptions focusing on their programmes of outreach activity (Lasselle, Kier & Smith 2009; Byrom, 2009) or on their research and use of language (e.g. McCaig, 2015; Maslen, 2019). Within education policy research, third sector organisations and their roles in policy formation and enactment have been an area of focus for several researchers in different national contexts (e.g. Ball, 2012; Williamson, 2013; Williamson, 2014; Thompson, Savage & Lingard, 2016), though this is still an emergent area of research. Much of this research has focused on narrative accounts or on using conceptual devices such as networks or policy assemblages to understand how such organisations come to occupy positions of influence and how policy ideas travel. Researchers in these areas have highlighted that such accounts are a starting point, with a need for 'further enquiry into the participation of the third sector in public education' (Williamson, 2013: 10).

The type of third sector organisations covered within this thesis is challenging to define, with some arguing that they are not actually 'third sector'. These organisations defy some traditional definitions of charitable organisations, particularly those that

emphasise voluntary action as a core component, as few rely on volunteers. Their funding models have changed over time, blending philanthropic backing with sold services, commercial ventures, public donations and government and institutional funding streams. Many are constitutively hybrid organisations, blending practices and functions from different sectors. They appear to form part of a growing number of TSOs developed in response to state initiatives, occupying government 'invited' spaces, whilst also operating as independent organisations (Howard & Taylor, 2010). In this, they are not necessarily unusual as third sector organisations, but their hybridity and fluidity does present particular challenges in accountability and governance (Ebrahim, Battilana & Mair, 2014). The findings within this thesis, which describe and critique the context in which TSWPOs develop their reputation as boundary spanners and experts, contribute to research articulating the challenges of hybridity, particularly in relation to policy influence.

This thesis uses an understanding of policy as process, taking policy to comprise more than a text but also the processes 'prior to the articulation of the text and the processes that continue after the text has been produced' (Lingard & Ozga, 2007: 2). It uses the concept of 'enactment' as 'creative processes of interpretation and recontextualisation' (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012:3), to capture how policy is continually contested. This view of 'politics in action' traces how 'economic and social forces, institutions, people, interests, events and chance interact' (Taylor et. al., 1997:20) to examine power relations within widening participation policy making. Although power relations within HE policy and within the construction of widening participation policy have been explored by several policy researchers (e.g. Shattock, 2012; McCaig, 2018), the account of policymaking represented in the findings of this thesis, encompassing intermediate levels of policy and from the position of policy actors seeking opportunities to advance their ideological or material positions, is relatively rare. Examining widening participation policy as enactment is a relatively recent development within WP research (Rainford, 2021; McCaig, Rainford and Squire, 2022), particularly at the level of practitioners (Burke, 2012). This thesis therefore contributes to a growing body of work that examines widening participation policy

enactment, whilst looking specifically at this in a context not yet explored by other researchers.

Finally, in applying Colebatch's (2002) articulation of policy as comprising order, authority and expertise, this thesis makes a unique contribution to understanding policy influence in complex contexts. It contributes to research examining the 'politics of expertise' and to accounts of evidence use in policy (e.g. Stevens, 2011) and posits some explanations of the limitations of expert positions in WP policy. This model of policy has not been applied to analysis of policy action and, I argue, offers a practical framework for understanding the effectiveness of attempts to influence widening participation policy.

1.4. Research questions

The focus of this study on the policy engagement of TSWPOs was refined into three research questions, which are addressed directly and in order within in chapters seven, eight and nine.

I.   How and in what ways are TSWPOs shaping policy and practice in relation to higher education access and success?

II.   How is their relationship to policy shaping and being shaped by their status as charitable organisations in a 'third sector'?

III. What are the implications of this for the project of widening participation?

These questions specifically make use of the word 'shaping', rather than 'influence', recognising that influence can imply a direct relationship between an action and policy outcome, which is not intended or assumed here. Shaping is also more reflective of the type of influence described and even sought by TSWPOs, which about making policy and its enactment 'amenable to certain forms of thought and remedial intervention' (Williamson, 2014: 38). The first question also makes reference to 'policy and practice' however the use of these two words is not intended to imply that these aspects of widening participation are distinct. There is significant overlap and interaction

between these and the focus of this thesis is primarily on policy, including the practices that form part of enactment.

1.5. Thesis structure

In tackling a subject matter – TSWPOs – that has not previously been identified as an object of study, this thesis deviates slightly from a model of an initial literature review, followed by empirical research. Instead, it is divided into three distinct sections. Firstly, chapters two through four examine the policy contexts which support the emergence of these organisations and in which they are operating as policy actors. Chapters five and six describe the design of this research, with the final chapters seven through ten focusing on findings and conclusions from this research, including recommendations for policy, practice and further research.

Chapters two and three explore policy developments in two areas – widening participation and third sector respectively – that provide the context for understanding these organisations and their roles within a field of widening participation policy. Chapter two focuses on the development of widening participation policy in England and primarily on the period since 1997, in which the majority of TSWPOs have been operating. This provides much of the context for understanding the development of the social missions and policy concerns of TSWPOs and the opportunities presented within policy for involvement of TSOs. Chapter three examines the development of the 'third sector' as an object in policy, with a focus on the relationship between 'third sector' organisations and the state. This chapter also examines literature on TSOs within education policy to demonstrate how similar organisations have developed and become active in shaping policy. Chapter four then draws together these policy contexts and literature about TSOs as policy actors to look specifically at organisations designated as TSWPOs for the purpose of this research. This chapter describes how these organisations have been identified and categorised. It then draws on documentary evidence and policy documents to provide an account of their emergence and their participation in national policy and policy making processes.

Chapters five and six relate to research methodology, specifically the design and conceptual framing of this research. Chapter five examines in more detail the concepts operationalised within this research and within analysis, with specific reference to policy, policy enactment and networks. Chapter six provides details of how this research was designed, carried out, and how the data was analysed. It explores the critical realist underpinning of this research and the interpretative policy analysis approach. It also provides a further analysis of the use of expert interviews within interpretative policy analysis and articulation of researcher position and how this relates to the research and presentation of findings.

Chapters seven, eight and nine focus on the findings of this research. Chapter seven focuses on addressing the research question 'how and in what ways are TSWPOs shaping policy and practice in relation to higher education access and success?', arguing that, whilst TSWPO influence is largely peripheral to policy change, they have contributed to the advancement of narratives and practices around fair access and evidence use within widening participation that have dominated WP policy. It also demonstrates how capacity to shape policy is based on participation in a networked elite, with limited scope to influence in other ways. Finally, this chapter demonstrates how a volatile political climate and a structured regulatory environment has led TSWPOs to seek greater influence in practice and implementation, rather than at the level of national policy. Chapter eight examines how the organisational form of TSWPOs has shaped their policy actions, identifying funding and its instability as a key determinant in their policy decisions and in creating an environment of competition. It also demonstrates how TSWPOs have been able to 'borrow' from other fields, including academia and business, to develop their capacities to shape policy. However, this chapter also indicates that, in part because of the indistinctiveness of many of the organisations included within this research, that there is a limited identification with being a 'third sector' organisation or even a charity, with social purpose and activities being more important signifiers and making them more aligned to university widening participation teams than other charitable organisations. Chapter nine then draws together themes within the two previous chapters to examine how TSWPOs have

related to the three elements of policy – order, authority and expertise – arguing that the most successful organisations in shaping policy are those who are able to contribute to all three. It argues that the major role and contribution of TSWPOs has been in expertise, but that this has required them to participate in a politics of expertise that restricts expertise to a few select organisations. Ultimately, due to limited resources and the established structures of HE policy, most TSWPOs are unable to contribute significantly to either authority or order within policy at any but the lowest levels of enactment. Hence, their ability to shape policy is limited to a select few experts or to levels of policy where they can contribute to order or authority. This chapter concludes by examining what the capacity for TSWPOs to shape policy might then mean for future widening participation policy and for the development of TSWPOs.

A final chapter, chapter ten, returns to examine the significance of the findings of this thesis for policy, practice and for further research, suggesting that the regulatory environment continues to create opportunities for non-HEPs to deliver on HEP policy but with limited special advantage for social purpose organisations over others, particularly in an environment of financial constraint. It argues that a lack of stability has hampered the ability of TSWPOs to effectively engage in policy, instead giving their policy engagement a short-term focus that often lacks critical depth. It offers a critique of the policymaking environment, which relies heavily on elite networks and an image of credibility, arguing that these networks and a competitive environment has narrowed the field of debate, despite seemingly involving more policy actors. This critical perspective of the policy work of TSWPOs offered within this thesis surfaces many of the reservations of interviewees themselves, who feel or felt compelled to 'play the game' in influencing policy and draws attention to the limiting and performative practices of policy influence. Alongside this, it also recognises where there has been potential for alternative approaches, including in working on organisational policy change, seeking to diversify the social backgrounds of decision makers in TSWPOs and more directly involving the perspectives of those that TSWPOs identify as their main beneficiaries.

Chapter two: The widening participation policy context

2.1. Introduction

This chapter, together with the following chapter, provides an outline of the context for this study in two areas of policy and practice. Firstly here, the development of widening participation from the 1963 Robbins Report and HE expansion to its current form as 'access and participation', closely connected to 'social mobility' as a policy concern. Secondly, in the following chapter, the making up of the third sector in policy and practice and its place within the networked governance of education policy in England. In both cases, the focus is primarily on policy and practice from 1997, with the policies and approaches of a New Labour Government providing the immediate context for the foundation of some of the largest and most established third sector organisations focusing on widening participation. Taken together, the policy and practice histories within these chapters provide the framework for thematic issues of 'fair access', 'networked governance' and 'collaboration' that will be explored in later chapters. They also introduce aspects of the policymaking context in which TSWPOs have sought to develop their influence, some of which will be examined in further detail in chapter four. In this chapter, the focus is on widening participation and on the aspects of widening participation policy that have been most relevant to the TSWPOs examined in this thesis, namely outreach activity, young participation, 'fair access' and social mobility.

As noted in the introduction to this thesis, this research uses an understanding of policy as a process, encompassing everything from the ideas that make up the basis of policy decisions, to the enactment of policies, whether at national or organisational level. This broad conception of policy is used to best capture the experiences of organisations and individual whose 'policy work' encompasses both national and more local level policies and is concerned with ideas and narratives, as well as specific policies. Further detail on how the term 'policy' is applied within this thesis is in chapter five, however, for the purposes of the following three chapters which focus on

a 'policy history', a more specific definition is applied. The policy histories related and discussed in these chapters relate to national-level policy, primarily within England. This national policy includes specific policies, such as the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, but also includes the policies, guidance and practices of government departments or their agents. It also includes work to 'make' policy, such as consultations, debates and political statements of government and other political parties. Where these chapters refer to 'policy', this is referring to activities of government or other legitimate authorities in relation to widening participation and/or social mobility. Where use of 'policy' differs from this application within these chapters, this is specifically noted.

In making use of the terms 'widening participation' and 'third sector', this thesis is applying terminology that, at least in policy, could be considered dated. Over the period since 1997, which is the starting point of this thesis for exploring the involvement of TSWPOs in policy, there has been considerable flexibility in the application of both terms in policy and in practice contexts and they have been largely replaced in policy by 'access and participation' and 'voluntary and community sector' respectively. In both cases, this thesis uses a broad definition for each term, which will be outlined further at the conclusion of each chapter. Rather than seeking to find essential definitions, this thesis considers the linguistic flexibility and politically flexible applications of these terms as important characteristics that help explain how the organisations studied have been able to survive and even thrive in changing political contexts. These chapters therefore highlight shifts and disputes over the meanings and values held in each of these terms over this period as an essential part of understanding policy influence for organisations operating in these policy fields.

2.2 Widening participation

In England, uses of 'widening participation' as a term, whether in policy, practice or academic contexts, generally relates to increasing either the *volume* or the *proportions* of particular student groups participating in some form of higher education. In national

policy, it has tended to suggest both an increase in the overall volume of students AND diversification in terms of the demographic characteristics of those students (e.g. age, social class, ethnicity etc.) or their mode of study (e.g. part-time, foundation degrees, distance learning, modular and transferable study). Both 'widening' and 'participation' as terms in this context have tended to be flexible and often ambiguous in their definitions, with the verb 'widening' having encompassed both expansion and diversification of HE and 'participation' having meant both access to and 'successful' engagement with HE. This conceptual flexibility means that both the creation of new models of HE and/or changing the proportions of particular social groups within an institution have been considered different facets of national WP policy. The application of the term 'widening participation' in policy has been criticised for its inconsistency, ambiguity and encompassing sometimes conflicting agendas (e.g. Archer, 2007; Layer, 2005; Thomas, 2001), as is demonstrated in the following chapter. Of particular note for this research is the tendency for particular facets of widening participation, such as a focus on the point of access to HE, to dominate a popular understanding of the term and the interests of media and politicians. As is noted later in this chapter, this applies to the 'fair access' sub-strand of widening participation policy which concerns some of the larger TSWPOs discussed in this thesis.

In national policy terms, widening participation (WP) is most often associated with the 1997 – 2010 New Labour Government (Burke, 2012; Greenbank, 2006). However, this association can conceal the extent of cross-party consensus on the need to widen participation, justified by economic and/or social justice arguments. Many of the origins of widening participation work and policy in this period can be traced back to the expansion and market-driven approaches of earlier governments and, since 2010, widening participation has remained on the political agenda in a recognisable form, outlasting many of the initiatives it was initially associated with. The first half of this chapter examines how widening participation policy in England has developed over time, including the changing economic, social and political arguments for it continuing to be a focus of successive governments. It looks at the development of widening participation policy and its enactment over five stages, from initial HE expansion to

massification and regulation. The time frames indicated for each stage are not intended to be definitive but mark notable shifts in approach or policy context. This chapter also addresses two questions relevant to the organisations studied in this thesis – that of responsibility for widening participation and a long-term view of WP policymaking since 1997.

2.2.1 Expansion, massification and the market (1963-1997)

The 1963 report on 'the long-term development' (Robbins, 1963:1) of higher education, led by Lord Robbins, marked an important stage in the history of English higher education in 'exploding the notion that only a tiny minority were capable of benefitting from higher education' (Barr & Glennerster, 2014: xviii). Although concern with access to education in policy could alternatively be dated back to the 1944 and 1945 education acts, or even earlier, the report's explicit statement that 'it is highly misleading to suppose that one can determine an upper limit to the number of people who could benefit from higher education, given favourable circumstances' (Robbins, 1963: 50) set expectations about rights of access to higher education and the potential pool of participants that have endured in policy and been a significant aspect of the report's legacy (Layard, 2013). However, it is important to note that the report backed the expansion of higher education not on the sole basis of a right to education but on the basis of economic necessity, with the growth of a highly skilled workforce seen as a contributing factor in national prosperity. These dual imperatives for expansion of national economic prosperity and individual rights and benefits remained part of arguments for expanding and then widening higher education, though with changing emphasis on which should drive policy and funding.

Over the 1960s, the HE enrolment rate moved from 5% in 1960 to 14% by the end of the decade (Davies, 1994), much of this within new polytechnics and colleges of higher education, rather than the established university system. Acute financial pressures, particularly following the 1973-5 recession, and a political climate in which government was increasingly inclined to view higher education as the same as any

other public service slowed growth and stabilised the HE participation rate (Shattock, 2012). The election of a Conservative Government in 1979 that favoured market solutions as the most efficient way to allocate resources marked the start of major changes to relations between the HE sector and government (Greenbank, 2006). HE policy in the early 1980s focused on efficiency, declining student numbers and setting expectations that expansion could only occur at a lower cost to government. By the publication of the 1987 white paper 'Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge' support for expansion of the HE sector was framed as an economic need in which HE should 'take increasing account of the economic requirements of the country' (DES, 1987:2) to ensure its own survival.

A major expansion in student numbers and the age participation index between 1988-1997 pushed English HE from an elite to a mass system in a decade (Bathmaker, 2003) and far greater numbers of women, ethnic minority and older students entered higher education during this period (NCIHE, 1997). However, as in the 1960s, much of the expansion took place within polytechnics and colleges, not the university sector which remained more socially exclusive in its student body (NCIHE, 1997). In an attempt to rationalise the pricing of HE and to push universities to compete with the polytechnics and FE colleges who were delivering the HE expansion deemed necessary in policy, the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act abolished the binary divide by enabling polytechnics to gain university status. This opened up capacity for places, resulting in major growth in the number of first degrees being awarded from 77,163 in 1990 to 243,246 in 2000. This move was heavily framed in economic terms, expecting the development of a system driven by demand not only from suitably qualified students but also the demands of the economy and the needs of government and employers. The desired 'cost effective expansion' would be created by 'greater competition for funds and students' (DES, 1991:12). Although 'widening access' was noted in plans to give polytechnics university status, this was not considered in terms of challenging the social composition of the existing universities but in terms of enabling expansion of former polytechnics who would extend their 'distinctive emphasis on vocational studies and widening access' (DES, 1991: 14).

The abolition of the binary divide through the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act also established a unitary funding body for higher education, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which would later become a key overseer of both nationally and university-led initiatives until its demise and replacement in 2017. The new and more direct relationship with government solidified by the act made HEFCE less of a 'buffer' between the HE sector and government than its predecessors, casting it instead in a broker role. Nonetheless, its management of the priorities set by government played an important role in shaping widening participation policy and policy enactment within universities for years to come. HEFCE's mission statement explicitly outlined a remit for the funding council around encouraging 'diversity in the provision of higher education, a widening of access and greater opportunities' (Davies, 1994: 5). Diversity of provision was key here, as HEFCE now oversaw 81 universities and 50 colleges, the majority not from the 'old' university sector, and it was charged with preserving their institutional autonomy (Davies, 1994).

Although abolishing the binary divide brought polytechnics, 'old' universities and colleges together under a common banner of 'university' and a single funding council, there was not an expectation that the mission of widening participation would look the same for all parts of the newly created 'sector'. Nor was widening participation the preserve of only the university sector, with colleges of FE often providing higher education through validation and partnership arrangements. For these different parts of a higher education sector, there were different incentives for widening participation and different definitions according to their context. Historically, widening participation in the 'old' universities had comprised of part-time provision for adult learners, often delivered through separate departments and representing only small numbers within an institution (Layer, 2006). Polytechnics had brought a more vocational approach to the provision of higher education, offering more part-time and flexible provision that attracted more 'non-traditional' students. FE college provision was often rooted in local demand, serving the needs of local employers and students. Initially, there was

an expectation that these different 'parts' of the sector would meet the different needs of widening participation through their different approaches. However, this did little to challenge the composition of the pre-92 university sector and preserved a hierarchical view of HE provision. It became common to talk about 'pre' and 'post' 1992 institutions (with very little said about colleges of FE), with the job of widening participation largely seen as the function of the 'new' parts of the combined sector.

Growth in HE provision over this period was often accompanied by significant political disputes over source of funding and unit of resource. The initial expansion of HE in the 1960s was rapidly considered to be unsustainable due to the cost being covered by the state (Shattock, 2012). Later phases of expansion pushed for both a reduction in the cost of HE provision, with lower amounts of resource offered by the state to deliver HE, and a shift beginning in the late 1980s away from a grant-based system to greater financial responsibility on the individual student. The focus of a Conservative government on efficiency and using market mechanisms did not address university concerns about an ever-shrinking unit of resource. The abolition of the binary divide also fuelled debate about the 'value' of degrees, with much of the expansion of HE still being delivered by 'new' universities. In many ways the divide was still very much present, including in terms of widening participation where the challenges and solutions were seen very differently dependent on HE providers' position in the wider sector; widening participation in one area could be seen as a threat to another. The pressure to reform HE funding and further determine state involvement in shaping the emerging HE market led to the decision to commission Lord Dearing to examine the issues in 1996. The subsequent Dearing report, published in 1997, was a major review of the sector which included a close examination of widening participation that would set the focus for future WP work.

2.2.2 WP as national concern (1997-2003)

Several researchers have identified 1997 as a pivotal moment in the development of WP policy (e.g. Greenbank, 2006; Burke, 2012), with the election of a new Labour

government promising 'education will be our number one priority' (Labour Party, 1997) and the publication of two major reports on further and higher education. The first, published in June, was the Further Education Funding Council's Committee on Widening Participation, commonly known as the Kennedy report for its chair, Helena Kennedy QC. The report was positive about the potential for widening participation and called for recognition (and particularly financial recognition) of the role played by further education in delivering on 'lifelong learning' – an idea central to many of Labour's commitments on education policy. The second was the report of the Commission on Higher Education led by Lord Dearing, which similarly emphasised the need to develop a 'learning society'. Both reports emphasised the importance of widening participation on both social justice and economic grounds, the need for national coordination to achieve this and the active role that government and education providers could play in tackling low progression rates. These reports more closely defined the 'problem' of widening participation and made a case for a coordinated state intervention as a solution.

Many of the recommendations of the Dearing report played a major role in shaping the emerging widening participation agenda in the late 90s and early 2000s (Stevenson et al., 2010). In particular, its emphasis on low progression rates from those in lower socio-economic groups and the suggestions that the determinants of low participation are 'poor qualifications, low aspirations and poor decision making' (Greenbank, 2006: 146) established aspiration, particularly in relation to social class, as a recurrent motif for WP work over the next decade. The report's suggestion that the solutions to under-representation may lie in the inreach and outreach activities of individual universities (NCIHE, 1997, 107-108) also helped to establish these activities as part of the mainstay of widening participation work. However, the Labour Government did not accept all aspects of the report, deviating significantly in their approach to HE funding, where they introduced up-front tuition fees of £1000. These included a means tested element to address concerns that the policy would deter poorer students but was still described by some as entirely contradictory to new Labour's aims of fairness and widening access (Callender, 2002). Controversy about fees and their relation to the widening access

agenda would become an ongoing challenge for the Labour Government and its successors, playing an important role in shaping widening participation activity, some of which would be seen as attempting to offset the impact of student fees.

Multiple approaches to widening participation emerged in the late 1990s, with oversight of institutional and national WP activity now included as an official aspect of HEFCE's remit. Both core and initiative-based funding was managed by HEFCE, who from 1999 required all institutions to develop and submit widening participation strategic plans. Many activities were based on existing practice and included activities pre and post-HE entry. National activity with young people, particularly that designed to encourage 'aspirations', was developed including the DfEE 'Excellence in Cities' programme and activities like summer schools, piloted by the Sutton Trust and the University of Oxford in 1997. Funding and activity began to coalesce around the idea of 'collaborative' approaches, though there was still an expectation from HEFCE and government that different institutions would likely take different approaches to widening participation. The 1999 announcement of the government's intention to ensure that 50% of young adults go into some form of higher education (BBC News, 28 Sept 1999) provided a focusing of the widening participation agenda, with the emphasis on young people and a clearer target focused on HE entry. The following four years then saw the introduction of successive national collaborative and cross-departmental initiatives working, at least in part, to meet this target, finally merging in the form of 'Aimhigher', a nationally funded but locally coordinated widening participation outreach programme.

Alongside the development of a fledgling widening participation project that saw roles for both the state and universities and was concerned with the whole sector, another strand emerged concerned primarily with England's 'top' universities. This was not new, as a concern with the social exclusiveness of some institutions had been of interest to politicians and the media for some time, but this interest had not generally transferred into government intervention or to policy. In May 2000, the Sutton Trust published a report highlighting the low proportions of pupils from state school and

'less affluent social classes' within 13 'top' universities (as determined by an average of newspaper league table rankings). The publication of the report coincided with the political controversy of the Laura Spence affair, as the then Chancellor, Gordon Brown, publicly criticised the decision of Magdalen College Oxford to not award the high achieving state school pupil a place. The resulting row kept debate over institutional autonomy, admissions processes and the concepts of 'fairness' and 'equality' in relation to university access on the political and media agenda into the summer of 2000. After the re-election of a Labour Government in 2001 and a newly formed 'Department for Education and Skills', there was a notable addition to the government's goals on widening participation:

> By 2010, increase participation in Higher Education towards 50% of those aged 18-to-30. Also, *to make significant progress year on year towards fair access*, and to bear down on rates of non-completion. (DfES, 2001, own emphasis)

By the 2003 White Paper, 'fair access' replaced widening participation as the headline phrase to sum up the government's ambition to address 'the social class gap in entry to higher education', though, as the follow up paper in April 'Widening participation in Higher Education' demonstrated, this was not a shift away from existing work but a change in terminology relevant to contemporary political concerns. The White paper introduced controversial 'top-up' fees and consequently a focus on the point of entry, fairness and measures to counterbalance the potential deterrent of additional costs to the student were paramount to the political argument for their introduction. The use of 'fair access' in both papers encompassed widening participation work, including that of Aimhigher and additional funding for universities to recruit and support 'non-traditional' students, whilst enabling the government to suggest that it would not 'unfairly' burden students or universities. However, as commentators at the time pointed out (e.g. Bekhradnia, 2003) and the separate targets on widening participation in the DfES strategy suggest (DfES, 2001), widening participation and fair access are not wholly compatible agendas and can lead to contradictory strategies which do nothing to challenge traditional divides (Harrison, 2011; Jones & Thomas, 2005).

2.2.3 Aimhigher, fair access and student lifecycle (2004-2011)

The 2004 Higher Education Act brought in major changes for higher education and for widening participation work. The introduction of higher fees from 2006-07 brought in by the Act was intended to lead to differential pricing that would reflect 'quality' and encourage institutions to respond to national economic and student needs. (McCaig, 2018). However, despite government warnings of a negative impact on student recruitment, this aspect of market signalling failed to develop, as nearly all institutions charged the full £3000 fee (Harrison, 2011). The introduction of fees did little to dent the expansion of HE in general but also failed to achieve the regulated and planned market environment that the government had anticipated would improve and support sector growth.

In addition to 'top-up fees' the Higher Education Act also introduced an access regulator in the form of the Office for Fair access (OFFA) and its head, the Director of Fair Access, to whom institutions charging higher fees were required submit and have approved an 'access agreement'. Access agreements were initially expected to cover 'the fee limits an institution intends to set and the measures it intends to take to safeguard and maintain fair access' (OFFA, 2004: 5), with a strong focus on universities providing bursary support and delivering outreach activity (Clarke, 2004). OFFA's remit, although covering the whole sector, included specific instruction to focus on those institutions 'whose records suggest that they have furthest to go in securing a broadly-based intake of students' and that these institutions particularly might need to concern themselves with 'raising aspirations' (Clarke, 2004: point 2.1).

The changing environment of fees and OFFA scrutiny on the access activities of 'top' universities brought about increasingly different approaches to widening participation within the sector. Although the fee increase brought in by the 2004 Higher Education Act did not lead to differentiation in fee pricing, a market of sorts began to emerge in bursary provision and clear distinctions emerged between the type of widening participation activity conducted by different types of universities (McCaig & Adnett,

2009). Pre-1992 institutions, with small numbers of students from low-income backgrounds, were in a position to offer generous financial support to potential non-traditional students. Post-1992 universities focused instead on retention and curriculum development, confident that they were meeting benchmarks for entry rates of under-represented students and unable to offer a comparable financial support offer across their whole population. Both invested in outreach, though the activities of pre-1992s were geared towards encouraging or supporting students partly on a track to HE to apply to a more selective institution than they might otherwise have done (McCaig, 2010). Consequently, it fell to the post-1992 institutions to bring more students into the system, not least to address losing potential students to the encouragement of pre-1992 universities.

In addition to the widening participation efforts of individual HEIs, there emerged a national programme of WP activity, delivered through the 'Aimhigher' programme. Aimhigher brought together strands of existing activity developed under the DfEE, HEFCE and the LSC and ran from 2004-2011 under a regional model overseen by HEFCE's. Regional partnerships were guided to primarily work with young people 13-19 and to focus on aspiration and attainment, aligning the programme with the government's targets to ensure 50% young HE participation (HEFCE, 2004: 12). Aimhigher partnerships delivered a range of widening participation outreach, including mentoring, tutoring, summer schools, university visits and student ambassador programmes. They also supported the development of progression agreements and compact schemes, work-based learning, work placements and vocational progression routes, sometimes working alongside the new 'Lifelong Learning Networks', funded from 2004 to support vocational progression routes (McCaig et al, 2006).

Over its seven years of operation Aimhigher was celebrated for the creativity and strength of its local partnerships and criticised for its inconsistent targeting and the limited evidence of its success (Doyle & Griffin, 2012). The programme struggled to reconcile the contradictions in new Labour policy, which wanted both to increase participation through the creation of 'meritocratic pathways' that would meet the

needs of the economy and to create an HE system that would support social justice (McCaig & Bowers-Brown, 2007). The potentially separate priorities of fair access and widening (or increasing) participation that were embedded from its inception, also contributed to shifts in emphasis over the life of the programme, away from mature learners and vocational routes to a focus on attainment and progression to particular institutions (Waller, Harrison & Last, 2015). During the programme's development, it was subject to greater and more vocal demands to produce 'evidence' of its impact. Although participation amongst Aimhigher target groups did increase over the course of the programme (HEFCE, 2013) it was not possible to link this to such a varied programme of activity and there were limited mechanisms in place to track participants. Much of the impact claimed by Aimhigher was based on qualitative research, small scale studies and short-term outcomes – not fitting the government's 'pragmatic, but possibly reductive preoccupation with "what works"' (Doyle & Griffin, 2012: 77).

This period saw an increasing preoccupation in media and policy with the 'fair access' strand of widening participation, with this becoming tied to a growing focus on social mobility. Although HEFCE during this period tended to treat 'fair access' as a subset of widening participation, focusing instead on the whole sector and on collaborative solutions, politicians and other influential bodies repeatedly raised concerns about the composition of the student bodies at 'top' institutions. The Schwartz report on Fair Admissions, in 2004, and the Sutton Trust's 2005 report on intergenerational income mobility both made an explicit link between access to 'elite' HE and diversity in 'elite' professions (Admissions to Higher Education Review, 2004; Blanden, Gregg & Machin, 2005). Two years later, prompted by Alan Milburn, later to become the first 'social mobility tsar' under the Coalition Government, the first of many debates on social mobility in the House of Commons took place. Although the debate covered welfare, housing and labour market reforms, education and access to higher education also featured as examples of where progress on social mobility had or could be made. As with widening participation, although discussion of what qualified as 'social mobility'

was often diverse, there was also a preoccupation with access to the 'top' and individual success, rather than on systemic and widespread change.

From 2009, social mobility and widening participation became more closely aligned in policy with the publication of the *New Opportunities. Fair Chances for the Future* White paper. This pointed to the role of higher education as a developer of human capital, providing a route for bright but disadvantaged young people to gain access to more lucrative employment and contribute to the economy. Students with the 'most potential' (Cabinet Office, 2009: 63) and WP work targeting access to the most selective universities featured heavily as examples. The paper established a panel on 'fair access to the professions', chaired by Alan Milburn. Reporting later in 2009, the panel addressed a broad range of issues but framed its recommendations within the 'notion of a State that empowers citizens to realise their own aspirations to progress' (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009:9), explicitly stating that 'in the end social mobility relies on individual drive and ambition' (2009:8). Despite the report covering the roles of employers and training providers, as well as making recommendations relevant to the whole university sector, a focus on universities and individual success is prominent in the government's response to the report.

> 'we are asking Sir Martin Harris, the Director of Fair Access, to consult Vice Chancellors and advise the Government by Spring 2010 on further action that could be taken to widen access to highly selective universities for those from under privileged backgrounds – and to ensure that measures for wider access are prioritised most effectively and do not suffer in a time of greater fiscal constraints' (DBIS, 2010: 31)

This preoccupation with certain institutions and their role in a social mobility agenda would be picked up by the incoming Coalition Government in May 2010, who stated that that they would judge the forthcoming review of higher education against 'the need to increase social mobility' (Cabinet Office, 2010: 31).

2.2.4 Social mobility and HE responsibility (2011-2017)

Early higher education policy under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government was dominated by issues of funding and framed within the context of a programme of austerity prompted by the 2008 financial crisis. Funding for Aimhigher, Connexions and lifelong learning networks were terminated in 2011 with limited evidence of success and the greater responsibility now placed upon institutions to deliver widening participation given as official reasons given for ending the Aimhigher programme (Atherton, 2012). Responding to the 2010 Browne review of HE funding, the government introduced maximum fees of £9000, again with the intention of encouraging institutions to differentiate themselves on price. Again, nearly all institutions charged the maximum fee and further attempts to develop a market based on pricing through modified student number controls also failed to produce the desired result (Bekhradnia, 8 May 2014).

Although government attempts to create a market based on fee pricing were not successful, the shift towards the student as consumer, with funding following student choices, was still significant for the development of a market and for widening participation specifically. It also created a change in the role of HEFCE which, now no longer able to steer the sector through its grants provision, increasingly took on the role of 'consumer champion' (Milburn, 2012) and regulatory body. Institutions were already competing over bursary provision and participating in different types of widening participation activity according to their market position (McCaig & Adnett, 2009) but the removal of sector-wide activity and student number controls restricting expansion and disincentivising contextual offers made this a more prominent feature of work in the sector. The move towards a model of individual institutional responsibility was further emphasised by plans for a stricter and better resourced OFFA that would hold universities to account for WP institutional targets.

This period saw further emphasis placed on universities' role in social mobility, with the first report of the newly formed Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission

focusing on HE. The 2012 report called for universities to do more 'to widen

participation and make access fairer', seeing these as complementary agendas,

intended to be tackled by different parts of the sector (Milburn, 2012:2). Although the

report considered the role of the whole sector and of government policy, it put

particular emphasis on 'highly selective universities' 'as they more than other

institutions, provide pathways into many of the most powerful and lucrative roles in

society' (Milburn, 2012:17). There was some resistance to this focus from the sector,

with OFFA and HEFCE producing a jointly written *National Strategy for Access and*

Student Success which stated that:

> …much emphasis has been put on increasing access to the
> professions as a prime mechanism for increased social mobility. This
> has often been translated at the HE level to securing greater access
> to more selective institutions for people from disadvantaged
> backgrounds. But social mobility is broader and more fluid than this,
> and the wider sector and students, as well as highly selective
> universities, all contribute. (OFFA & HEFCE, 2014a:7)

Although organisations concerned with the whole sector attempted to maintain a

broader view of widening participation, public and political pressure was often focused

on the 'top' universities, with the issue of non-participation framed as a combination

of poor student choices and limited effective action by universities.

Recognising some of the contradictions in policies which judged universities by

individual performance but also expected them to act in support of a national

objective to widen participation across the sector, policy documents and public

debates increasingly emphasised the need for collaborative structures that could

'maximise the impact and coverage of their [universities'] access work, reduce

duplication and recognise the contribution institutions make to widening access

beyond their own student intake' (OFFA & HEFCE, 2014a: 10). In 2014, funding of

£22m over two years was allocated to create a 'national outreach network'. The

resulting National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) scheme funded 34

regional and four national networks from Dec 2014 to Dec 2016. The evaluation of the

scheme concluded that these aims were met but that the collaborative model faced

many challenges, in part due to the power imbalances within networks and the residual 'inter-institution culture of competition' (Stevenson, McCaig & Madriaga, 2017: 6).

There was emphasis placed on the importance of evidence and evaluation in widening participation in this period. The 2011 social mobility strategy outlined that government would be taking a 'ruthlessly evidence-based' approach (Cabinet Office, 2011:4), highlighting the requirements of the economic climate to 'do more with less' and an increasing focus on 'evidence-based policy' within education that had been developing since the 1980s (Grek & Ozga, 2010). The lack of evidence for Aimhigher and widening participation more broadly was widely criticised for several years (e.g. Gorard et al., 2006; Doyle & Griffin 2012), leading to increased pressure and more detailed expectations around evaluation from OFFA (OFFA, 2013). Access agreements, alongside support from HEFCE and OFFA, were intended to create a greater focus on monitoring and evaluation (Bowes, Thomas, Peck et al., 2013; Wardrop, Hutchins, Collins et. al., 2016) but persistent issues with access to data, interpretations of guidance and evaluation capacity resulted in inconsistent approaches (Bowes et al., 2013). In 2016, the Social Mobility Advisory Group assembled by Universities UK, made the proposal for a national evidence exchange, addressing a popular concern that not enough is known about 'what works' in widening participation (Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016).

Although HE was not a major battleground for the 2015 general election, the newly elected Conservative Government made an early commitment to widening participation in July 2015 centred around doubling the proportion of disadvantaged students in HE from a 2009 baseline. This was combined with commitments to introduce a 'teaching excellence framework' (TEF) that would incentivise universities' focus on teaching quality and a drive to ensure 'value for money'. These formed the basis of proposals for major changes to the regulation of HE and government involvement, with market principles at the heart of mechanisms for change. Within this new context, widening participation was addressed in three ways: firstly by the

expectation that an emphasis on teaching quality as a distinguishing factor in student choice might favour teaching-only providers who had attracted and supported greater numbers of widening participation students through HE and could continue to do so; secondly through the creation of the NCOP, targeted around 'gaps' in HE participation; and finally through regulatory requirements of a new Office for Students (OfS). These measures were intended to work towards more participation that would not be achieved by 'market forces alone' (DfE, 2017:77).

2.2.5 Regulation and collaboration (2017-2021)

The 2017 Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) again advanced the gradual movement towards a fully marketised HE sector, bringing in risk of failure and exit for institutions (McCaig, 2018). It also was a significant increase in regulation, creating the Office for Students to replace the functions of OFFA and HEFCE and regulate the sector through conditions of registration. To address widening participation specifically, a role of Director for Fair Access and Participation was created within the OfS and institutions wishing to charge higher level fees were required to submit, have approved and be operating with an 'access and participation plan'. In the years since it began operation in January 2018, the OfS has developed its strategy on widening participation, focusing on identifying and regulating provider progress on addressing 'gaps' in access and participation (OfS, 2018). Changes from previous approaches to regulating widening participation include: setting national targets on access and participation; a move to five year access and participation plans; greater emphasis on provider self-assessment and use of data; the publication of a national access and participation dataset; and the imposition of 'specific conditions' for individual providers. In comparison with OFFA, which was sometimes referred to as a 'toothless' authority (Harrison, 2011), the OfS has used its position to impose specific requirements on institutions in areas where they want to see greater progress or feel institutional analysis has been insufficient.

The OfS have taken an approach to access and participation regulation that involves extensive use and monitoring of data to assess performance. This includes use of

targets, both at national and provider level, as part of regulation, encouraging providers to set targets which align with the OfS' key performance measures or a set of accepted metrics. They have also put significant emphasis on the importance of 'evidence' for guiding the approaches of individual providers and collaborative partnerships. In 2019, in response to the recommendation of the UUK social mobility advisory group, OfS funded an 'Evidence and Impact Exchange'. Later established as a charity and affiliate 'what works centre', expected to be self-funding from 2023, Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) works towards the OfS aim of 'eliminating equality gaps' through the 'generation, synthesis and dissemination of high-quality evidence about effective practice in widening participation and student outcomes' (TASO, 2021). This focus on targets led to a perceived increase in the scale of ambition for widening participation within institutions but also raised concerns about narrow parameters of success that can encourage competition between institutions and a focus on 'quick wins' (Nous, 2021).

Alongside the OfS' regulation of access and participation in individual universities, it has overseen the development of the national collaborative outreach programme (NCOP), rebranded as 'Uni Connect' from 2019. Launched in January 2017 under HEFCE and transferred to the OfS in 2018, the first phase of NCOP involved 29 funded partnerships delivering outreach activity to pupils in years 9-13. The programme was successful in reaching pupils and geographical areas specified by area-based targeting measures but faced challenges in making a distinctive offer to schools and colleges and in rapidly developing both delivery and evaluation capacity (CFE, 2019). The programme has continued with funding extended, albeit provisionally, to 2025. However, it has been required to adapt to changing policy contexts, now being tasked with also working with adults and delivering with lower levels of funding as emphasis has again been placed on institutional responsibility and on lifelong learning models.

At the time of writing (February 2022), elements of HE policy are still pending government decisions on the future of HE funding. A full response to the 2019 Augar report on post-18 education and funding was repeatedly delayed, first by the financial

implications of Brexit and then the Covid-19 pandemic. The final response from government in February 2022 has led to a freeze in fees and an extension of the repayment period for graduates. Consideration of post qualification admissions has also been dropped. In addition, consultations on measures including a new cap on student numbers, minimum eligibility requirements for HE access and funding, reducing fees for foundation years, a national scholarship scheme and development of a lifelong learning entitlement. Many of the measures have been condemned by groups working in access and participation, including several of the TSWPOs mentioned in this thesis (e.g. NEON, 25 Feb 2022; Johnny Rich, 24 Feb 2022). Reductions in funding, the imposition of minimum entry requirements, caps on student numbers or expectations around HE provision could have a significant impact on how HEPs approach and deliver widening participation. In November 2021, a new Director for Fair Access and Participation, John Blake, was appointed, and new guidance on access and participation issued by the Department for Education. Although full guidance from OfS to HEPs is still pending, the guidance from the DfE signals that a 'refocusing' is needed. It suggests that a greater focus by HEPs on 'prior attainment in schools' is needed, and that the OfS should focus on an 'enhanced regulatory regime' to address 'concerns that too many students are currently recruited to low quality courses with low completion rates and poor graduate outcomes' (Zahawi, 23 November 2021). This focus on 'low quality courses' is also reflected in an OfS consultation on 'student outcomes and teaching excellence' published in January 2022, which sets out proposed metrics to assess HEP performance (OfS, 2022). Although WP has increasingly moved towards a student lifecycle model in which success and progression outcomes are monitored alongside access targets, this may mark an important shift for WP work in some institutions which has often sat within external facing teams within HEPs, such as recruitment and admissions.

Interviews for this PhD were conducted between May 2019 and June 2020, which was a time of significant upheaval for those working in widening participation. Interviewees noted concerns about meeting new regulatory requirements for universities, a potential changing landscape in post-18 funding and a government seemingly

increasingly hostile to universities and to widening participation. A broader tense political climate concerned with Brexit, leading to the calling of a snap election in December 2019, and turnover in the position of Minister of State for Universities also added further uncertainty to the position and funding of widening participation work. The first half of 2019 saw a raft of publications around access and participation from the OfS, including confirmation of the evidence and impact exchange (later TASO), publication of access and participation datasets, deadlines for the first five-year access and participation plans and guidance for phase 2 of the NCOP programme. As a consequence, interviewees, and particularly those within TSWPOs, were adapting to a rapidly changing landscape for funding and uncertainty about OfS would exercise its regulatory powers. There were also concerns about the appetite and support for widening participation work in a context where government priorities appeared to be focused elsewhere. The questions of TSWPO policy influence addressed by this PhD, although framed over a longer period, therefore has to be placed in a context of some policy uncertainty at the time of interviewee's reflections. For some, the contemporary policy environment was seen as threatening to the continued survival of their organisation's work. For others, there was an element of disengagement from policy that was still in the process of development and from a government that was seen as unresponsive to issues of HE participation.

2.3 Who widens participation?

One of the developments in widening participation policy, particularly since 1997, are shifts in emphasis of responsibility for widening participation and a balancing act of responsible and involved parties. As the HE market has developed in England, widening participation policy has increasingly framed WP work as the responsibility of individual institutions concerned with their own customers, with government as regulator. However, there has also been recognition of the limitations and disincentives within an HE market that can work against addressing inequalities at a national level (OfS, 2018) and of earlier causes of educational inequalities (HEFCE, 1996), shifting responsibility away from individual institutions towards government and schools. In addition to

those with direct responsibility, policies have also articulated suitable supporters and partners for widening participation work in the form of employers, schools, colleges, local authorities, training providers and third sector organisations. These too have shifted over time, as organisations have become more or less influential and as policy priorities have changed. Identifying some of these shifts in *who* widens participation provides the context for understanding how organisations outside of those directly responsible (e.g. through regulatory or legal requirements or through contractual relations) have come to be important parts of the WP landscape.

The Dearing report was significant in specifically articulating that both government and universities had a role to play in encouraging participation in HE. Prior to this point, HEFCE had taken the position that although universities could play some role in widening participation 'the question of increasing the participation of students from social groups III to V [those from families in non-professional occupations, noted as underrepresented in HE] may not be one which the HE sector can address because it requires action at an earlier stage of the educational process.' (HEFCE, 1996). Following the report, widening participation more clearly became part of HEFCE's remit and, by extension, became the responsibility of the institutions to which it awarded funding. However, although individual institutions were expected to articulate an approach to widening participation in line with HEFCE and government guidance, HEFCE and national policy documents suggested that these approaches would be diverse and in line with institutional priorities. It was also expected that collaboration would play an important part in many initiatives, particularly those funded by government, such as the Aimhigher programme. Early guidance for Aimhigher suggested that area steering groups should include: Further education; Higher education; Schools; Work-based learning providers; and Local Education Authorities. Additionally, stakeholders were expected to include 'schools, further education colleges, work-based learning providers, higher education institutions, local education authorities, voluntary organisations and Connexions partnerships' (HEFCE, 2004:3). Although institutions were responsible for WP, this was often as part of a collective effort and there was emphasis on both individual and national widening participation outcomes.

This emphasis on diverse and collective approaches began to shift between 2004-2010 under the direction of the newly created OFFA. Greater scrutiny on outcomes of activity and evaluation became part of access agreement monitoring, making the steps taken by institutions themselves more important as they sought to demonstrate the value of their contribution. Working in partnership, although still framed as desirable in OFFA guidance, was more challenging for institutions wanting to demonstrate impact on their own student intake. OFFA's role was given more prominence in policy following the introduction of higher fees and the removal of Aimhigher funding, developing its own targets and more detailed expectations of institutions' access agreements. The regulator took a more active role in shaping institutional approaches, setting expectations around evaluation, collaboration and targeting, and emphasising threats to funding and reputation should institutions fail to comply.

From 2010, although the focus of HE policy was on the actions of institutions and the regulator, the increasingly alignment of HE entry and success with social mobility meant that there was interest in collaboration and from other bodies within or associated with government. The newly founded Child Poverty and Social Mobility Commission and the Cabinet Office both took an active interest in the business of universities, commissioning reports and proposing initiatives to address access and participation. The alignment with social mobility and a 'lifecycle' approach to WP also meant that connections between universities and other organisations, particularly employers and schools, were being proposed and encouraged, in part to replace some of the connections lost with the end of Aimhigher funding. In 2014 OFFA updated its definition of collaboration in its guidance to universities to include 'further education colleges (FECs), other HE providers, employers, third sector organisations, schools, colleges, training providers, local authorities and so on.' (OFFA, 2014: section 32) and put renewed emphasis on 'collaborative targets'. This partly reflected practice already taking place within the sector, as the activities of third sector organisations and businesses, in collaboration with universities, featured strongly in the reports of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (2009), the report by Sir Martin Harris, Director of OFFA, on access to highly selection universities (2010), the Child Poverty and Social

Mobility Commission report on universities (2012), OFFA & HEFCE's National Strategy on Access and Student Success (2014) and the UUK Social Mobility Advisory Committee (2016).

Despite the seeming growing prominence of non-HEIs and particularly TSOs in policy documents during this period, it is important to note that these developments are framed in three ways: firstly in terms of a broader agenda around social mobility, in which universities are necessarily only part of the picture; secondly, in terms of a growing interest in student outcomes, in which employers and professional bodies become an important reference point; and thirdly, references to non-HEIs delivering WP objectives are suggested as individual examples of best practice intended to guide HEIs, not as whole system approaches or alternatives. These references to other organisations/interested parties within policy documents also sit within a wider framework of policies that move towards greater regulation of HEI activity and a stricter role for a regulatory body overseeing this activity; individual institutions and the regulator that oversees their work are still those responsible, even if not delivering directly themselves. Particularly for private and third sector delivery organisations, their role in partnerships is framed as contractors, rather than as leading members.

The current emphasis in WP policy is on the responsibility of individual institutions, guided by the strong regulation of the OfS. However, it is also commonplace for interested and relevant parties to be consulted on policy changes and to be considered valuable partners. This is particularly the case for third sector organisations, who are referenced frequently as experts in WP and invited by OfS to engage with policy and WP activity delivery. Policy documents and statements by the OfS also often reference the large number of delivery providers, third sector and private, who are carrying out WP activity, including outreach, student support and evaluation, on behalf of institutions. These organisations, though not deemed responsible for policy outcomes, are an acknowledged part of the system that delivers it. In a slight shift from OFFA's list of possible collaborators, the OfS guidance to institutions on access and participation plans also suggests that 'students' and student representative bodies should be

consulted and engaged as partners in access and participation work. This may reflect the increased framing of customers as 'consumers' and the alignment of policy with metrics of student opinion like the National Student Survey, though it also follows a long-held expectation that students will be consulted in access agreements.

2.4 What does it mean to talk about WP policy?

Widening participation, though largely a concern within HE policy and governed by the regulatory structures associated with it, is not confined to a single government department or policy goal. In being closely associated with social mobility and economic prosperity, it has attracted attention from multiple parts of government including departments for education, for employment and from the Cabinet Office. As a consequence, although it is possible to talk about widening participation as a sub-strand of HE policy, it has been open to political intervention from other policy areas. In some cases, these connections between policy areas have been invited to support consistent responses to an issue which is cross-cutting in its problems and solutions, in other cases, these efforts have not joined up with the direction of policy being taken by leading bodies like HEFCE or OFFA. The involvement of multiple ministers, departments and independent bodies, has led to several challenges in enacting WP policy. These include a narrow focus, with many ministers engaged only in the fair access strand of WP, different measures of disadvantage or of social mobility being applied and understood within different areas of policy. In some cases, these different understandings and metrics can work against each other, creating a challenging environment for those working in WP who may be attempting to reconcile the interests of schools, HEPs and employers, whilst working towards their own understanding of what constitutes successful widening participation. These multiple understandings of widening participation and what WP work should be achieving within different areas of policy is relevant to this thesis because, particularly for TSWPOs do not have the parameters of HE policy very clearly regulating their activity, being actively involved in WP policy does not necessarily equate to being actively involved in HE policy beyond this. The WP policies of the Social Mobility Commission,

the Cabinet Office or the DfE, and of individual employers and education providers, can be as significant to TSWPOs in achieving their mission as national policy affecting HEPs.

2.5 Defining widening participation

As indicated at the start of this chapter, this thesis takes a broad definition of the term 'widening participation', encompassing the multiple and changing definitions of what qualifies as widening participation in policy and practice contexts. For the purposes of this thesis, all policy and work that has been termed widening participation/widening access or works towards a goal of broadening who participates and benefits from higher education, is considered part of 'widening participation' as an area of policy and practice. This includes work that could also fall under policy areas of social mobility, equality, diversity and inclusion. However, it is important to note that there are contradictions within this all-encompassing definition. There are different and competing discourses of widening participation within policy which point to different problems and different solutions in widening participation. Jones and Thomas (2005), and similarly Gorard et al. (2006), identify three different discourses 'academic' (or in Gorard's definition, 'Access'), 'utilitarian' and 'transformative', each of which have been drawn upon by policy makers and by practitioners. The 'academic' discourse seeks to attract 'gifted and talented' young people to higher education, identifying lack of aspiration, motivation and information as 'barriers' to their participation. This strand of discourse encompasses assumptions about the deficit of young people, families and communities and leaves the structure of the HE system and its judgements of merit largely untouched. The 'utilitarian' perspective takes a more structural focus in arguing that HE (and by extension, learners) should be responsive to the 'needs' of the economy. This suggests that forms of HE and curriculum should change but, in practice, often still constructs learners as deficient and in need of remedial interventions. The lesser used 'transformative' discourse, which has its roots in adult education and lifelong learning, suggests wide-ranging structural change is needed that is responsive to and informed by under-represented groups. In practice,

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national policy tends to draw heavily on the first two discourses, with the transformative discourse applied more in academic contexts and in relation to curriculum and institutional cultures. These multiple discourses are important to note here as, although one might be used in the development of a policy, those enacting it may be drawing on others in how they understand and frame their work. This fluidity of widening participation as a term and its ability to encompass multiple understandings has implications also for understanding influence on widening participation – what might be considered a shift in discourse or policy emphasis by one organisation or individual can be seen as consistent with previous policy or discourse by another.

It is also worth noting that many definitions of widening participation focus on it as a practice, not as a concept, and so widening participation can be shorthand for particular practices such as outreach activities, mentoring or academic support. This understanding of widening participation as doing is important for third sector organisations whose activities in themselves might be described as widening participation activities but, depending on who they are targeted at and how they are delivered, can actually be working towards very different understandings of widening participation. When considering the impact of TSWPOs on widening participation policy and practice therefore, sometimes this is at an institutional or even sector-wide level, such as the adoption of mentoring as a major activity in WP outreach, but does not necessarily lead to national-level policy change.

2.6 Summary

This chapter outlined how widening participation policy has developed over several decades and its close ties to other areas of policy, particularly economic and social mobility policies. It identified some of the tensions within WP policy, such as those between collaboration and competition and between institutional and collective responsibilities. I have also highlighted how these tensions and changes in WP policy over time present some challenges to considering the question of influence on policy,

with WP policy often being incremental and repetitive, rather than a linear response to a clearly defined issue. In outlining how governments have framed and approached the issues of widening participation, this chapter provides the basis for understanding how emerging widening participation organisations since 1997 relate to policy. Third sector organisations have been part of widening participation work throughout this period but shifts between institutional responsibilities and collaborative outreach have presented different threats and opportunities to their work. They have increasingly been supported, at least symbolically, by policy makers, but although enactors of WP policies, they are rarely indicated in policy documents as responsible or accountable for the outcomes of these. The scope of their influence appears to be as interested parties and deliverers, rather than as necessary components of policy delivery.

The following chapter presents a similar account of third sector policy over the same time period, again providing the context for understanding the emergence and position of TSWPOs in relation to policy. It also examines the emergence of third sector organisations within education more broadly and how they have sought to influence education policy. The outlines presented in both of these chapters will then be brought together in chapter four, which will look at the emergence of the specific organisations that are the focus of this thesis and the circumstances that have shaped their emergence, development and understanding of their social missions.

Chapter three: The third sector policy context

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the development of widening participation as an area of policy and practice, with an emphasis on those areas in which TSWPOs have been most involved. This chapter looks specifically at the notion of the 'third sector' and how this has been 'made up' within policy and particularly within education policy. The policy and conceptual developments of the third sector described here provide the context for understanding how particular types of organisations have come to have certain roles and expectations defined for them within policy and by policy makers. Taken together with the previous chapter, it provides the basis for understanding the emergence and policy engagement of third sector organisations within widening participation, which will be explored in more depth in chapter four. As noted in the previous chapter, definitions of the third sector are often fluid, changing over time and according to context and hence this chapter first explores how it has been conceptualised in policy before turning to examine the purpose and consequences of these different definitions for practice and policy engagement.

This thesis uses the terminology of 'third sector' particularly, rather than associated terms such as voluntary action or civil society, because the political idea of the 'third sector' and the policy responses to such a sector form an important part of the context of many organisations covered by this research. Just over a third of organisations identified within this research were founded during the 'enabling environment' of new Labour third sector policy. A further half of those founded after 2011 have close connections to organisations founded within this period, including receiving start-up funding or sharing staff with these pre-existing TSOs. Although not 'current' terminology in the UK, nor a term that organisations will necessarily identify with, it best represents the policy environment and concepts of the sector that were present when the TSOs this thesis is concerned with emerged. It is reflective of a particular period of policymaking in England where alternatives to the more conceptually

established public and private sectors were being explored and encouraged through investment and policy change. The rise of the prominence of the 'third sector' also coincides with the rise of 'widening participation' as terminology for a particular policy problem. Even though both terms have fallen out of use within policy, they are both broad and inclusive definitions of what they intend to describe, widely recognisable beyond the time period and context in which they came to prominence.

This chapter follows the structure of the previous chapter in first examining the development of the third sector as a focus of policy and then exploring questions relevant to the topic of this thesis specifically. It sets out how the third sector has been addressed within policy over three stages before examining the particular forms of third sector organisation that are most relevant to TSWPOs – social enterprises and 'hybrid' organisations. The chapter then examines the involvement of the third sector in education policy, taking a global view to explore how researchers have examined the phenomenon of non-state actors in education policy in different contexts. These studies have particular relevance for the study of TSWPOs, touching on some of the same organisations, individuals and networks. Finally, the chapter concludes by outlining how the perspectives on the third sector explored in this chapter have relevance to their emergence and engagement with WP policy and by detailing how the concept of the third sector is applied within this thesis.

3.2 Emergence of a 'third sector'

The notion of a third sector presupposes both the existence of a coherent grouping that could be considered a 'sector' and the existence of clearly definable and separate first and second sectors, usually taken to be public and private. In fact, both of these suppositions are often refuted by academic definitions and by those deemed to be part of such a sector. It is not the purpose of this thesis to identify that such a sector exists or to test how its many definitions apply to the organisations studied here. Instead, this chapter aims to present how understandings of the sector have changed over time, particularly in policy, and to show how these changes contribute to how

TSWPOs identify, shape and perform their roles in WP policy and practice. Most attempts to define the sector acknowledge the difficulty of capturing all facets of a continually changing sector and the contextual embeddedness of any definition. Nonetheless, definitions of the sector are important, in part, because of the political arguments that they have been used to justify. This chapter takes a 'sedimentary' approach to understanding the sector (Alcock and Kendall, 2011), exploring the various values and forms of action that have contributed over time to making up what came to be known as the third sector and has now moved on to other definitions. It pays particular focus to definitions and the 'making up' of the third sector within policy, which provides some of the frameworks for the emergence of the organisations studied within this thesis. By examining in detail the 'particular constellation of political and cultural forces' (Alcock & Kendall, 2011: 455) in which the 'third sector' has emerged in the UK, it is possible to better understand how the organisations studied within this thesis relate to one another, to government and to policy.

This account begins in the later 20th Century to capture developments in policy most relevant to the organisations being studied. However, it is important to note that voluntary organisations and voluntary action has a far longer history and that, in the UK, the formalisation of relationships between these forms of action and the state are closely tied to the development and role of the welfare state. As the principle of universal social insurance and welfare, emerging from the 1942 Beveridge Report, positioned the state as the central provider of welfare, many voluntary organisations repositioned as an extension to this provision. Over successive governments, and particularly Conservative governments in the 1980s, the idea of a voluntary 'sector', able to complement and supplement the work of the state, slowly emerged amongst policymakers and from organisations and individuals positioning themselves as representing the 'sector's' interests (6 & Leat, 1997). This notion of a 'sector' was not a cohesive one however, nor was it widely recognised in policy, where there remained a focus on the 'public' and 'private' sectors into the 1990s (Kendall, 2000). Interest in voluntary organisations was also largely focused around supporting voluntary action or in developing capacity for some organisations to function in a broader market-based

approach to providing public services. As such, consideration of a 'voluntary sector' was as a fringe to mainstream policy making. It was a change in government in 1997, from Conservative to new Labour, that significantly developed this notion of a sector and particularly a 'third' sector, framed as an alternative or partner to public and private sector provision.

3.2.1 The third sector and the third way (1997-2010)

The concept of the 'third sector' evolved rapidly under new Labour, in part informed by Third Way politics (Somers, 2013). Third way political philosophy rose to political prominence as part of new Labour, which sought to find and communicate a more centrist position that did not solely rely on a concept of either an enlarged or minimal state. Adoption of a third way was intended to serve as a break from public service provision that relied on the state (as under previous Labour governments) or on the market (as under Thatcherism), though its focus on blending private and public provision was not a new concept or practice in government (Alcock, 2010). Third way thinking called for a greater role for 'civil society' and 'the mobilization of citizens and communities' (Giddens, 2000: 4) to deliver economic growth and social benefits. Early references to a possible third sector under new Labour tended to use the terminology of the 'voluntary and community' sector but there was a steady move towards identifying this as 'the nation's 'third sector', working alongside the state and the market' (Home Office, 1998:9). The adoption of the terminology of the third sector was not only about acknowledging the role of what had previously been called the 'voluntary sector' but also a promotion of alternatives to the public and private sectors that were seen to be the preference of the left and right respectively. It was intended as a broad and inclusive definition that would capture the 'diversity of the sector' without the 'unwieldy' alternatives of 'charity sector' or 'voluntary and community sector' (NAO, 2006).

In theory and in policy, the relationship between the state and a third sector under new Labour was envisioned as a partnership, with the role of new Labour to

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'strengthen the range and quality of such partnerships' (Blair, 1998:14). This was formalised with the national Compact, developed in 1998 to provide a framework for relations between central government and third sector organisations. Similar compacts followed in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The national Compact set out a partnership relationship between government and the voluntary sector, with commitments on both sides. This was accompanied by restructuring of government engagement with the sector, with new formal interfaces through government departments and the creation of the Office of the Third Sector in 2006, and by financial investment. Over this period, a range of initiatives developed that sought to provide both horizontal (across the sector) and vertical (within specific policy fields or government departments) support for third sector organisations (TSOs).

In the early 2000s there was a rapid increase in the profile of third sector activity within government departments and in investment. A review led by the Treasury in 2002 and reviewed in 2004 and 2005 looked at the role of the voluntary sector in public service delivery, leading to large scale investment that would last in various forms until 2011. Funding focused heavily on initiatives to build capacity, particularly in relation to the ability to bid for public service contracts and 'modernisation' of leadership, governance and performance management in TSOs. (HM Treasury, 2002). These initiatives covered and supported a wide range of organisational forms, with a focus more on organisations than on voluntary action. There was a particular interest and a strong lobby within government for social enterprise, with specific support provided by the creation of the Social Enterprise Unit (SEU) within the DTI in 2001 (Alcock, 2010). This interest in organisations and particular organisational forms was also reflected in the legislative changes of this period, including the 2006 Charities Act and the creation of new forms of organisation, the Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) and the Community Interest Company (CIC). The development of CICs was significant as it created a new legal and organisational form for social enterprises, one that is explicitly 'hybrid' in combining accountability associated with financial performance with assurance of social benefit. Unlike pre-existing forms of

social enterprise, CICs have no requirement for democratic control or ownership (Teasdale, 2012). This particular interest in social enterprise is discussed further later in this chapter (2.3.7), as many TSWPOs identify particularly with being social enterprises, regardless of legal form.

The significant enthusiasm and support for the third sector within government during this period encompassed many, sometimes inconsistent, definitions of what the 'third sector' was and could be. These varying discourses about the sector across government departments were rarely contradictory but represented different aspects of the sector, with strengths combined to represent the whole sector, rather than recognising the tensions between, for example, a market orientation and a social purpose. In 2008, David Blunkett authored a paper on the Third Sector for the Fabian Society that emphasised the roots of the UK Third Sector in cooperative and mutual models and its ability to 'provide a voice for underrepresented groups' and create 'strong, active and connected communities' (Blunkett, 2008: 4). However, the commitment to volunteering and to democratic governance was less evident in social enterprise or public services strategy, which tended to focus on innovation and economic renewal. Although attempts were made within government to bring a greater cohesiveness to third sector policy initiatives, for example by bringing them together under the umbrella of the Office for the Third Sector, this did not resolve tensions between the diverse parts of the sector. Instead, this highlighted the different discourses in operation across government and threatened a bifurcation of relationships with the sector, splitting those larger and more well-resourced organisations engaged with public service delivery from the smaller and sometimes more politically disruptive organisations focused on civic renewal.

Despite enthusiasm from government and the continued emphasis on a 'partnership' with the sector in policy, relationships between government and the diverse organisations and forms of action that made up the sector were not straightforward. The closer relationship promised with government raised concerns for some about reliance on government funding and its implications for the independence of the

sector, particularly in its advocacy work (Alcock, 2016). Policy also tended to favour larger organisations capable of successfully bidding for funding, adding to a growing discontent that the Compact had not fulfilled its promise for working with the whole sector. Dissatisfaction with the implementation of the Compact led to it being refreshed in 2009, with an independent agency, the Compact Commission, established in 2007 to support implementation of the compact. This was an acknowledgement of concerns but did not wholly address some of the major issues around the complexity of relationships between government and the sector (Zimmeck, 2010). This, combined with the presence of multiple discourses about the sector from within government, made for a fragile partnership. The 2008 financial crash was a major challenge to this partnership and, although there was willingness on both sides to maintain commitment, reductions in funding threatened the security of the sector and its unity. This fragility of relations was then further challenged under a new government with its focus on austerity and a re-framing of the role of the state and the third sector.

3.2.2 Civil society and austerity (2010-2017)

The 2010 general election saw a higher profile for the third sector across political parties than in previous election campaigns. Under new Labour, several representative bodies for the sector had emerged and, alongside smaller organisations with charismatic leaders and grant making organisations, these were able to engage with lobbying and campaigning on behalf of the sector. All three major party manifestos referred to the sector, though to different degrees and in different ways, and all made positive references to social enterprise (Parry, Alcock & Kendall, 2010). Although broadly similar to Labour and the Liberal Democrats, the Conservative manifesto's use of language and framing of the third sector cast it in a slightly different role, under the banner of their 'Big Society' agenda. Instead of referring to the 'third sector', they used terms such as 'civil society' and 'community sector' to position sector organisations as a localised alternative to 'big government' and 'broken society'. This 'Big Society' concept was carried forward under the 2010-2015 Coalition Government, demonstrating some of the consensus and overlap between the Liberal Democrat

vision for more empowered citizenship and the Conservative desire for encouraging social responsibility.

The notion of 'Big Society' was a shift in the relationship between a third sector and the state, framed by the Conservative Party as an alternative to the 'big government' of new Labour. As such an alternative, it requires a reduction of the state, meaning that Labour's partnership model which blurs the lines between the public and private sectors was not sustainable. Instead, there are underlying assumptions that separation and support for an independent site of social action is more appropriate for building a 'Big Society'. Despite initial enthusiasm from government, over time the 'Big Society' concept became problematic, as it failed to gain traction either within government or with the general public as it was met with a mix of confusion, criticism and seeming indifference. Many of the initiatives taken forward under the Big Society banner had been commitments of the previous government, such as commissioning of third sector organisations to deliver public services, and the major differences were significant cuts in public services as part of the plan to reduce the public expenditure deficit. Consequently, the 'Big Society' was sometimes seen as convenient political rhetoric to obscure cuts to public funding and put the burden of social responsibility on individuals and voluntary organisations (Alcock, 2012).

Although viewed with suspicion by many in the sector, the Big Society was not wholly seen as a negative development (Macmillan, 2013). Some welcomed the change in terminology, particularly in favour of 'civil society' which suggested a greater level of civic engagement and a potential shift in social relations and public action (Alcock, 2012). There were also opportunities under this new and broad terminology for third sector organisations to articulate and campaign for their own agendas or to identify within it opportunities to advance their interests in civic engagement and independence from the state (Macmillan, 2013). However, the removal of many funding streams for the sector, the removal of many of the seats from the decision-making tables and the lack of visible and public support for the sector from government meant that these opportunities did not outweigh the overall negative

orientation of the sector to Big Society rhetoric. Over time, reference to the 'Big Society' was quietly dropped, having failed to either capture the imagination of the public or, in the context of funding cuts, to deliver on the creation of a more active and engaged local civil society.

This period was marked by an important shift in the position of a third sector vis a vis the state. Although still considered an important part of the delivery of public services, the expectation was increasingly that funding for the sector would come, not from government, but from society (Nicholls and Teasdale, 2019). Austerity measures reduced funding for infrastructure and new funding models were often based around social impact investment, with the creation of initiatives like Big Society Capital to attempt to encourage private investors to invest in charities and social enterprises. This focus on social impact investment was accompanied by a growth in charities also investing in impact measurement, partly to meet the demands of potential funders and a growing focus from government on economic measures of impact (Morley, 2016).

Austerity and approaches to welfare over this period had a significant impact on the third sector, with a combination of increased demand for services and major spending cuts creating political and financial challenges for organisations. Changes to welfare reflected a shift away from addressing the structural causes of poverty to a focus on notions of individual responsibility, with reduced benefits and increases in the use of sanctions (Brewis et al., 2021). At the same time, restructuring of the welfare state opened public services to the involvement of private for-profit and not-for-profit agencies. This was a supposedly increased role for the third sector, albeit as substitute rather than partner to the state, but there is little evidence of significant increase of welfare provision by voluntary agencies during this period (Bochel and Powell, 2016) and cuts to horizontal support for the sector created a challenging funding environment. The effects of austerity also created a political challenge for third sector organisations, as speaking out against the effects of austerity was increasingly interpreted by government as being too political. Opportunities to do so were

curtailed, first by the 2014 'Lobbying Act' and then by the 2016 introduction of 'anti-advocacy' clauses into grant agreements. For some, these represented a fundamental challenge to the role of charities as upholding people's rights and undermined the role of voluntary action in a democratic society (Brewis et al., 2021).

In 2015, a series of public scandals about the fundraising practices of major charities, as well as the collapse of Kids Company, a major youth charity in receipt of large amounts of government funding, fed into a critical narrative about the quality of leadership and governance within the sector. Public confidence in charities fell in 2016, largely in response to media coverage and often related to concerns about transparency in how charitable donations were spent (Populus, 2016). Concerns over fundraising practices led to the establishment of a new fundraising regulator for England and Wales in 2016 and the establishment of a select committee on charities, which reported in 2017. The findings of the report highlighted the challenging funding environment, particularly for smaller charities who struggled to access either the contract-style funding of the public sector or the encouraged social investment approach (Select Committee on Charities, 2017). The report also raised concerns about charity governance, calling on charities and infrastructure bodies to support with appropriate advice and training and for government to take action to support diversity of charity boards.

3.2.3 Post civil society (2018-2021)

A turbulent period for charities in the 2010s, with noted challenges particularly for small and medium charities and in terms of leadership and governance, prompted a review of relationships between the state and 'civil society'. In 2018 the government published its 'Civil Society strategy', outlining a role for government as 'convenor' of capacities within society to address societal problems. This was both a distancing of the state from the social sector and an ongoing shift of responsibility for social welfare away from the state. The strategy also outlined an ongoing commitment to a social investment model for funding civil society, despite little evidence that this produced

better outcomes (Wells, 2013). The strategy examined civil society as the producer of 'social value', with this then placing 'mission-led business' and 'social enterprise' as a core part of civil society. There was less focus on civil society as a 'sector' but instead on where social value can be created, with the private sector as an important driving force. The strategy made few firm commitments to investment, with much of this coming from dormant accounts and foundations. Although the strategy addressed a lack of interest and direction from government, the lack of specific commitments, very limited investment and a framing of the role of the state as market steward prompted concerns that the strategy was a continuing shift of responsibility for social support away from the state. In the context of continuing austerity and the looming potential impact of Brexit, the strategy placed civil society in the position of mitigating societal impacts, without additional support and investment.

The position of civil society in policy over this period has remained broadly similar, being publicly celebrated as significant in meeting the economic and social challenges of first Brexit and then Covid-19. During the Covid-19 pandemic, formal and informal organisations and voluntary action played prominent and often celebrated roles in meeting the economic and social challenges of a social and public health crisis. However, it also had a significant impact on the work of charities, increasing demand for their services and limiting their revenue streams (Chan et. al., 2021). As government has begun to look beyond Covid-19 in its budgets and planning, there are further risks for charities, with concerns about cuts to public spending and investment and increasing poverty, thereby impacting on demand for charitable services, volunteering and fundraising. There remain concerns within the sector that, although viewed positively in recent years, government demonstrates limited understanding of the sector and may not follow positive feeling with investment. As government potentially becomes more accessible, with both the development of digital means of engagement through necessity in the pandemic and an increased bandwidth for politicians now that the UK has formerly left the EU, charities are considering how they might influence policy in this climate.

3.2.4 The third sector as policy actors

The position of the third sector as a policy actor has taken many forms, including partner, advocate, advisor, contractor and agitator. These roles can be created and navigated by individuals and organisations but are often subject to the perceptions of those in government and the structures that support these roles. The previous sections outline how the third sector has been positioned within policy over time, as well as providing some indications of how policy has impacted the sector as a whole. They demonstrate how the sector moved from being perceived as disparate organisations interacting with a state to the strategic unity of a 'sector', albeit a complex, fragile and not particularly coherent one. Over this period, relationships between this often-changing sector and the state have shifted, away from a partnership to a more market-based model, with expectations that funding will shift from the state to society. The relationship between the third sector and the state and how this is framed within policy is an important aspect of how third sector organisations have been positioned as policy actors. Under new Labour, the construction of the 'third' sector was closely tied to third way politics and to the idea that, as neither part of the state or market, the third sector is somehow above or beyond ideological disputes (Kendall, 2010). As such, it was perceived as a pragmatic partner to government, capable of generating and translating 'informational ideas', which are not prescriptive or ideological but can be marketed simultaneously to different political parties (Williamson, 2014). This role for the third sector as 'mediator' of ideas was one championed by those within and close to the New Labour Government. In particular, Geoff Mulgan, co-founder of the Demos think tank, a 'third sector evangelist' (Williamson, 2014: 41) and appointed as the Director of Policy of the No.10 Policy Unit, described the sector as a 'laboratory for new ideas' (Mulgan, 2007). This role for third sector organisations was in line with the view of them as partner to the state and as being able to draw on the independence and supposed dynamism and efficiency of the private sector. Funding for social enterprise, for sectoral infrastructure and capacity building during this phase was often based on improving the efficiency of the sector and enabling it to be a testbed for new ideas or ways of working not deemed feasible within the architecture of the state.

With the election of Conservative-led and then majority Conservative governments, many of the positive perspectives about the potential dynamism of the sector were retained, as was support for 'ideas organisations', particularly the presence of individuals and organisations who could act in an advisory capacity to government. However, emphasis on reduction of the state and further extension of market principles in delivery of public services, as well as an austerity response to the financial crisis, created a shift in the relationship between state and third sector. No longer framed as partners, as policy actors the third sector's role in collaborating with the state in policy was framed primarily as providers or advisors. Although the sector's status as supposedly 'non-political' was longstanding, there was increasingly criticism levelled at organisations and individuals who were deemed to be too political. The collapse of Kid's Company, a charity favoured by some political figures, reinforced a wariness about the closeness of relationships between charities and politics. The comments of politicians and public criticism, particularly following fundraising scandals, also added to an atmosphere in which policy activity, whether campaigning or building relationships, could be deemed reputationally risky for charities. The introduction of the lobbying act and anti-advocacy clauses into grant agreements made this risk explicit, causing concern for many organisations. Yet this period of austerity and shift in welfare policies also created incentives for charities to be politically active, with social investment models of funding sometimes emphasising the importance of policy engagement for impact. Ultimately, a determining factor in the position of the third sector as policy actors has been the interest and capacity of government to engage with organisations formally outside the structures of policy. The crises of Brexit and the Covid-19 limited opportunities for engagement between government and third sector organisations, restricting financial relations, development of third sector policy and opportunities for formal and informal relationship building.

Throughout these changes in government, and the shifting relationship between state and the sector, there has been some consistency of support for organisations that embrace and support a market orientation and attempt to balance social and financial purposes. These organisations, often described as social enterprises but with more

recent support also extended to 'social business', are often framed as more effective at tackling social issues because of their pre-political status and perceived proximity to those issues. They are perceived to be politically neutral and practically focused, with the ideas they generate considered to be pragmatic rather than ideological. Within education particularly these perceived characteristics have supported an ideal view of the third sector as a natural site for the emergence of ideas and solutions for education policy and practice (Williamson, 2014). Many of the organisations identified within this research promote and draw on this perception of the third sector, structuring themselves as social enterprises or operating as both delivery and 'ideas organisations'. Their development has been supported by policy approaches to the third sector that favour these organisational forms and market models for social purpose organisations. Support for their development has also come from private sources, encouraged by government policy. The role for these organisations as policy actors, whilst guided by the relationship between state and the third sector, can be more specific to the perception of them as delivery and ideas organisations. Unlike third sector organisations who, under Conservative governments have felt restricted in their ability to take up campaigning positions, the pragmatic authority of social enterprises has tended to be framed positively. However, this also reflects the expectation that these organisations are inherently not ideological and are about means of delivering on policy rather than challenging its purpose or focus. Understanding how social enterprise particularly has been framed in policy is therefore significant in understanding how TSWPOs' positions as policy actors.

3.2.5 Social enterprise

The position of social enterprises as organisations has sometimes been identified as one of competing logics, attempting to balance social mission with business principles. However, this balancing position also enables them to draw ideas, practices, legitimacy and resources from different fields, making social enterprises difficult to define as organisations and as a set of practices (Gidron & Hasenfeld, 2012). The chameleon nature of the social enterprise concept has meant that it has had broad political

appeal, able to fit in with neoliberal and market-based approaches and with those who believe in co-production and mutualism. Globally, interest in social enterprise as a solution to entrenched social problems is prevalent (British Council, 2016) and several social enterprises form part of global education policy networks seeking reform and delivering education (Ball & Olmedo, 2011).

The UK has amongst the most developed support structure for social enterprise in the world, much of it having developed under new Labour and support for a mixed economy approach to delivering social benefits. New Labour set out a specific role for social enterprise as government partners who could and should contribute to policy objectives (DTI, 2002). Somers (2013) describes the support for social enterprise under new Labour as creating 'state sponsored' social enterprise, with its objectives set by government through policy statements, rather than by community. This was a move away from some of the democratic and governance principles tied to organisational structure that formed part of historic UK and European definitions of social enterprise. An interest in social business as a dynamic and efficient form of third sector activity, continued to be supported under Conservative-led governments who lauded the potential of the private sector to produce social value (Bennett et. al, 2019). Under the Coalition Government, social enterprise was framed as needing to be freed from reliance on the state, being better able to innovate and deliver social value in a true market (Nicholls & Teasdale, 2017).

Under all political parties there has been an ongoing support for 'social investment' and the encouragement of private financing of social enterprise to create a market. This has been accompanied by a broader adoption of financial language and models to assess social impact, with social impact reporting becoming mainstream within the third sector and particularly social enterprises (Morley, 2016). The concept of 'impact measurement' is particularly relevant to social entrepreneurship, where there are expectations of 'borrowing' from the private sector and of being able to demonstrate greater effectiveness than other social purpose organisations (Nicholls, 2009). The quantification of social outcomes and the adoption of the language and financial

modelling approaches of the financial sector has also been supported by government policies which have attempted to encourage social enterprises to prepare and compete for investment by appealing to the practices and norms of potential investors (Morley, 2016). In addition to top-down influence, the development, often by those with experience in financial sectors, of models of social investment which emphasise maximising social value, often measured in quantitative outcomes, have informed the adoption and mainstreaming of impact measurement practices (Morley, 2016).

3.2.6 Hybridity and boundary spanners

Social enterprises are often considered to be 'hybrid' organisational forms, borrowing from and blending different sectors in their structures and ethos. Hybridity can also involve blending of approaches from within a sector, with social enterprises sometimes considered to be blending 'the distinct third sector traditions of philanthropy and mutualism' (Aiken, 2010: 156). A tendency towards hybridity in organisational forms and functions has been noted in research on the third sector, particularly in the context of developing markets for public services and the promotion of 'innovation' as a solution to complex social problems (Billis, 2010). Hybridisation is not necessarily a new feature of the third sector but has been explicitly encouraged through funding and legal structures in the UK in recent years (Harris, 2010), particularly during the period when many TSWPOs were founded. Encouraging the adoption of business practices, drives for 'professionalisation' and funding structures that reward a market orientation have all been features of third sector policy in the past two decades, pushing TSOs towards embracing private and public sector practices, whilst also being expected to retain a distinctiveness as social purpose organisations.

The study of hybridity within the third sector has often focused on the challenges and opportunities that it presents, as organisations reconcile or manage in tension competing logics from different fields. For social enterprises, who are reliant on commercially generated revenue, pressures from the market or dominant funders can encourage them to diverge from their main purpose or mission (Cornforth, 2014). This

can be seen as an issue of accountability, as organisations are accountable *for* both social and business outcomes and accountable *to* a range of stakeholders, including beneficiaries and investors. This can present unique governance challenges to reconcile and prioritise these sometimes-competing accountabilities (Ebrahim, Battilana & Mair, 2014). Organisations manage their hybridity in different ways, from integrating different logics or ignoring or compartmentalising them in organisational structures, leading to a variety of different practices and structures within hybrid organisations and challenges in making generalisations about the experience of organisational hybridity in different contexts (Cornforth, 2014).

Organisational hybridity has also been associated with the concept of 'spanning boundaries', through which organisations can bring together elements of different sectors within their own work and also explicitly connect different sectors as part of their functions. Being positioned as a 'boundary spanner' can enable organisations and individuals to access authority and legitimacy across different fields. Medvetz's examination of Think Tanks in the US as '*constitutively hybrid* organisations' (2008: 5. Original emphasis) demonstrates how such organisations are able to draw on the 'forms of authority conferred by the more established institutions of academic, politics, business and the media' (2008: 9). By choosing to operate and finding its value in a space *in between* these established authorities, the think tank takes on a mediating role where it can mobilise resources from related fields, without being constrained by the tight definitions of these fields (Medvetz, 2012). This can create a position for think tanks, such as Demos in the UK, where they can act as mediators and generators of ideas in such a way that can gain political and media attention (Osbourne, 2004). Williamson (2013b) argues that this role as a mediator of ideas is adopted by new hybrid organisational forms in the UK, specifically in the form of organisations like National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts (NESTA), Demos and the Innovation Unit. These organisational hybrids act to mediate new ways of thinking about educational policy and pedagogic innovation and are 'politically mobile' (2013:10), contributing to new forms of education governance through cross-sectoral policy networks.

3.2.7 The third sector in education

The involvement of the third sector in education in England is complex, not least because a three-sector model – public, private and third sectors – ignores a long history of mixed provision and blurred boundaries in education. It is misleading to suggest that charity involvement in education is a new phenomenon or, on its own, represents a shift in approach to how state education is delivered. However, what has altered in the past three decades is the emergence of market opportunities for non-state organisations to form part of state education and the development of market logics as a form of governance within education provision. Within this framework, the involvement of the third sector is part of a broader pattern of marketisation of education, particularly where this sector is seen as adding something unique or lacking in existing state-run education provision.

The presence and involvement of non-state actors in education policy and provision has become a focus for researchers exploring a shift from government to governance in education policy. This shift is sometimes conceptualised as a move from a hierarchical mode of governing in which the state is the source of authority to a polycentric model with multiple interdependent actors (Ball & Junemann, 2011). Ball and Junemann (2011) describe this as new configurations of state authority, with new interdependencies in a heterarchical model of heterogenous mutually independent organisations. These new configurations, developed in the UK over the last 30 years, allow for the involvement of a new and diverse range of actors in various stages of education policy, from idea generation to enactment (Savage & Thi Kim Anh Dang, 2021). Although sometimes framed positively, at least in terms of potential, this mode of governance has been critiqued for its opacity, with it often unclear 'what may have been said to whom, where, with what effect and in exchange for what' (Ball, 2008: 761).

In this context of governance through networks, understanding whose interests are represented in the formation of education policies and how policy ideas travel has

been a focus for researchers of education policy in the UK and internationally. Within this, several have focused on 'third sector' or hybrid organisations and on philanthropy as a specific model of non-state engagement with education policy. Much of this research has focused closely on the networks and relations that make up heterarchical network governance in education, identifying the interests represented, power relations and influence within them and how policy ideas appear to transfer within and between networks nationally and globally. Whilst the emergence of new organisations and networks are not a definitive replacement for state authority in education, they do represent the fluid landscape in which new policy ideas and relations between state, economy and civil society are being blurred, with philanthropy providing a vehicle for processes of destatization that 'offers a degree of public legitimacy not yet available to for-profit providers' (Ball and Junemann, 2011: 659). Within the UK, researchers including Ball (e.g. 2008; 2011; 2012; 2017) Ball and Junemann (2011; 2012), and Williamson (e.g. 2012; 2013; 2013b; 2014) have examined the growth of edu-business, of philanthropy and of third sector actors in UK education policy and practice. They note the support offered under new Labour for third sector ideas organisations and indicate that, with this support, 'the third sector has established a series of educational 'problems' for rectification and positioned itself to provide solutions to these problems' (Williamson, 2012; 778).

Outside the UK context, researchers including Reckhow (2016); Hartong (2016); Hogan (2016a); Viseu & Carvalho (2018) have examined the involvement of third sector actors in national and local policy, and researchers including Williamson & Hogan (2021), Olmedo (2017) and Ball (2012) have also examined how these networks extend internationally, contributing to global policy mobilities. The lack of transparency in these networks and their shifting membership and relations makes drawing conclusions about the influences exerted within them difficult, hence many researchers focus on the contribution of these networks to the policy ideas that circulate and become legitimised within them or on the technologies of governance, knowledge and regulation enacted by members of these networks. Although the precise origin of these ideas and technologies is not always apparent, with many within

these networks espousing similar ideas and methods, it is nonetheless possible to identify where they contribute to education policy and its enactment in specific contexts. In the US, Reckhow points to the convergence of philanthropic funding in education around a narrow set of ideas and a small number of organisations, which are then able to act as 'jurisdictional challengers' to state education provision (Reckhow, 2016). Although this has the effect of amplifying 'new voices' in education policy, it comes at the expense of other, less well resourced, voices and can legitimize particular policy solutions. There are indications that there are common discourses in philanthropy around the purpose of education (Reckhow, 2016) and particularly around notions of disadvantage, merit and enterprise in the UK (Ball & Junemann, 2011). These shared ideas and associated activity of philanthropists can narrow political debate, based as they sometimes are on the experiences and viewpoints of a small number of wealthy patrons for whom these concepts have particular significance.

Research into non-state actors in education is still developing, with consideration given to the methods most effective for studying the complex networks of actors and the movement of ideas within and between networks (e.g. Hogan, 2016b; Savage, 2020). Most attention has been focused on large, international and private organisations who have been the direct architects of policy initiatives or act as think tanks but there have also been explorations of smaller, third sector organisations and of small-scale policy initiatives. Although no research has yet examined WP policy, examinations of education policy networks in the UK and internationally touch on some of the organisations and individuals discussed within this thesis, particularly the Sutton Trust, Teach First/Teach for All, the EEF and Impetus (e.g. Olmedo, Bailey & Ball, 2013; Ball and Junemann, 2012). Within these studies, these organisations and the individuals linked to them are connected to policy networks and to dominant ideas in education policymaking, with suggestions that they are playing a role in legitimating and transmitting these ideas as part of their activities. In some cases, particularly research examining philanthropic activity, there are connections made between the status of these organisations as charitable or philanthropic and their ability to shape policy,

pointing to their 'anti-political' (Williamson, 2014) status or to the 'social capital' of philanthropists (Allen and Bull, 2018). The 'elite' status of many of the policy actors that form part of the 'new governance' in education, is also raised by many other researchers, who note the exclusiveness of education policy networks and their tendency to rely on existing connections and similarity of ideas or dispositions (Thompson, Savage & Lingard, 2016).

Existing research focuses heavily on the concept of the policy network and on the relationships and the structure of these networks as facilitating policy transfer. As such, the focus is on many forms of non-state actors, rather than examining the potentially unique positions of third sector organisations within these structures. These studies are also often contextualised within a shift from government to governance at a global scale, rather than examining policy activities within a specified policy field in which governance may take different forms. Williamson particularly has identified a need for 'further inquiry into the participation of the third sector in public education' (2013b:10) and for drawing 'attention to the ways certain policy actors operate through and within powerful policy networks, in order to pose questions about the potential influences that such interrelationships produce' (2016: 12). This thesis therefore builds on this existing research into third sector organisations within education policy by exploring what happens *within* networks and how a specific type of actor, in the form of TSOs, interprets and acts within their policy context. Drawing on these previous explorations of policy networks in education as a global phenomenon, it examines policy actors within networks to understand *how* the activities of these policy actors shape policy and how they navigate the differential power relationships that exist within these networks.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the policy context that has come to 'make up' the third sector and provides the background to the emergence of third sector organisations focused on widening participation. It has outlined how the concept of the 'third sector'

is a fluid one, closely connected to the policies of new Labour and to third way politics, and how shifting definitions of the sector in policy have represented different political orientations to the relationship between state and society. This examination of the 'third sector' policy context has provided an account of how policy has shaped state and sector relations, moving from a supposed model of partnership and an 'enabling environment' (Somers, 2013) under new Labour, to a more contractual and non-interventionalist approach under coalition and Conservative governments. It has also highlighted the continuity of approach to the third sector, particularly in terms of support for market-based approaches to supporting the sector and producing social value. The example of continuing cross-party support for social enterprise provides one example of how the 'third sector' and its' activities have managed to encompass a range of political ideologies. This status of the third sector as not only an object to be directed by policy but also an 'ideational arena' and supposedly 'non-political' space is also outlined, as this informs the position of third sector organisations as policy actors.

This chapter has offered a concise overview of the third sector in policy, focusing on the policies, time periods and organisational forms that are most relevant to the focus of this thesis – TSWPOs in England. As TSWPOs have not been the focus of prior research this thesis has identified their status as social enterprises or otherwise 'boundary spanning' organisations and their presence within education policy networks, adopting similar practices to 'ideas organisations', as most relevant. The following chapter will explore these facets of the third sector in greater detail, with particular reference to TSWPOs, their practices and their involvement in policy.

This chapter has also provided an overview of literature examining the involvement of non-state actors in education policy. Although not always specifically focused on the third sector, this research has established the significance of a shift from government to governance in understanding policy influence in education and the value of exploring networks as a means by which to understand the influence of policy actors within education, including from the third sector. This thesis draws on these ideas and hence chapter five offers a further examination of the concept of policy networks. It

also outlines how, although the exploration and significance of networks forms part of this thesis, this is not a policy network study. As outlined above, this thesis seeks to build on policy network research by examining policy shaping within networks, with a focus on the rationalisations and policy activity of specific forms of actors within them.

Chapter four: The emergence of TSWPOs

Chapters two and three examined the policy environment in which WP became a social concern and the third sector came to be a site of innovation for social problems in education. Taken together, they provide the context for the emergence of the organisations that are the focus of this thesis. Chapter two described how WP policy has developed with reference to dual social justice and economic imperatives, sometimes as a joint project of state and HEPs and increasingly as the responsibility of providers. Chapter three then outlined how the 'third sector' came to be made up in policy, first as a partner to the state and then an alternative in a mixed economy of welfare, including education provision. It described how some third sector organisations, particularly social enterprises and hybrids, have been perceived by policy makers and the roles they have been encouraged to take on. This chapter then looks specifically at organisations considered to be part of the third sector who operate, at least partially, within a vertical field of widening participation policy, designated 'third sector widening participation organisations' (TSWPOs) for the purpose of this research. It provides a definition of these organisations, an account of their emergence and describes their interaction with WP policy to date. The account presented here draws on the records of TSWPOs themselves, particularly annual reports, their own research and websites, and on policy documents and media coverage related to WP. A full list of these documents is available in appendix vi. Many of the details referenced here are matters of public record and can be found multiple in public-facing organisation publications or websites. Where details can be attributed to a particular source, they have been, but where they are an amalgamation of details from public records, documents and sources have been grouped by organisation in appendix iii to enable easy referencing.

Within policy documents referenced here, third sector organisations have remained on the fringes of government approaches to widening participation. They are rarely mentioned directly in policy before 2009 and even after this there is little explicit endorsement or incentive given to involve them in WP work. Given the direction of WP

policy which, with the introduction of higher fees, has moved towards emphasising the role of individual institutions in widening participation, the absence of TSOs is not particularly surprising. TSWPOs have not represented a viable alternative to institutional responsibility in scale or scope (despite some arguing otherwise e.g. Teach First (2016), who suggested that funding could be given directly to charities working on widening participation) and to define or endorse specific roles for them in policy could detract from a focus on WP as an institutional issue. However, the lack of inclusion of TSWPOs in the letter and structures of policy does not mean that they are wholly absent from policy nor does is it necessarily indicative of a lack of interest or engagement on their part, as this chapter will demonstrate. Nonetheless, it is important not to overstate the significance of third sector involvement in widening participation in terms of policy change. What is evident from policy documents and the statements of key figures like the Director of Access and Participation at OfS, is that some TSWPOs are considered valuable stakeholders in the delivery of widening participation and that their involvement in policy discussions is encouraged and expected. This chapter therefore concludes by looking briefly at the different roles that these organisations appear to be taking on in this context, with reference to research literature examining similar organisations and contexts. This then provides the basis for some of the concepts operationalised within this research, which are explored in Chapter five.

4.1 Third Sector Widening Participation Organisations (TSWPOs)

As noted in the previous chapters, definitions of both the 'third sector' and 'widening participation' are often multiple, changeable and context specific. In both cases, I am using inclusive definitions in my applications of these terms throughout this thesis, recognising that their use changed in policy and practice over the time period studied and that my parameters for these terms may not wholly match with those of organisations and individuals included within this research. Nonetheless, I have set some parameters on these terms to identify those organisations whose activities and engagement with policy I am aiming to understand. I have termed these organisations

'third sector widening participation organisations' or TSWPOs. This establishes that I am looking at 'organisations' or a formally constituted group of people with a particular purpose. I have selected organisations based and registered in England, as there are separate policies relating to both regulation of charities and widening participation in devolved nations. Beyond this, it is the 'formal constitution' and 'purpose' which provide the parameters for TSWPOs.

> Purpose: I am researching organisations reasonably expected to be active in understanding and engaging with widening participation policy at national or institutional level. All TSWPOs indicate that part of the purpose of their organisation is to widen participation in HE. This may not be their only purpose or may be one aspect of their purpose but should form an established part of their work. I am applying a definition of WP that is aligned to the expectations that are placed on universities – that they diversify entrants, have parity of achievement within HE and that they address career outcomes – and involves some 'target group(s)'.

> Formally constituted: I am interested in organisations that share similar organisational forms and, in each case, operate as an organised group of people with a common purpose. As such, all TSWPOs have a legally recognised organisational form and do not make profit for shareholders. This excludes some for-profit deliverers of WP activity, such as Rare Recruitment, and organisations which did not have their own legal status at the start of this research, such as Aimhigher West Midlands and the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON). This excludes organisations currently in formation, informal practitioner or student networks, or 'arms' of organisations which might be separate in the work that they do but are not clearly financially or legally independent of another body.

For this chapter and for initial stages of this research, these broad definitions were applied, with some specific exceptions. Universities, students' unions, schools and royal societies have all been excluded from categorisation as TSWPOs. Whilst these are formally constituted and may have progression in education as a primary purpose, the requirement to carry out WP work is often part of their regulatory structures and it is not uncommon, at least in the case of schools and universities, for them to be excluded from consideration as third sector because of their ties to the state and regulatory bodies. Tighter definitions than those used here was applied to interviewees, to narrow these to the most active organisations with a large proportion of their work focused on WP. This is discussed further in chapter six. In short, whilst all organisational interviewees are people within TSWPOs, not all TSWPOs qualified as sites for organisational interviewees.

An initial search for active organisations undertaken in November 2018, for which further details are available in chapter six, identified 32 organisations that fit these criteria. By the conclusion of this research, this grew to 37 organisations, with the addition of seven new or newly constituted organisations and two no longer active. There were several other organisations identified as part of this process and within interviews who have, at times, been involved with delivering or funding widening participation work. There were also a small number of for-profit organisations with a sole interest in widening participation and a small number of registered charities who appear to be inactive. Some of these are referenced within this chapter, as they form part of the changing field of organisations and individuals working within WP and engaging with WP policy. However, the findings identified in this thesis relate to the circumstances of particular organisations in both mission and organisational structure and not to all organisations referenced here. To avoid confusion, these organisations are therefore referred to here and in later chapters as widening participation organisations (WPOs). A full list of identified organisations is listed in appendix x, with categorisations. TSWPOs are referred to by name throughout this chapter and findings chapters but interviewees and connections with the organisations that they work for have been anonymised within the findings.

In part due to the interest of this thesis in widening participation as a specific an area of policy, identifying third sector organisations delivering or with an interest in WP work prior to the adoption of the term 'widening participation' within policy in the early 1990s, is extremely challenging. It is evident from accounts of WP work prior to 1997 that charities and community organisations were involved in working with universities on adult education, developing curriculum, and establishing access routes for students (Aldridge, 1999). However, few of these were delivering on a national scale, nor were they concerned with widening participation as it would come to be defined in policy in the late 1990s - as focusing on young participation and access to higher education specifically. As a consequence, the account of TSWPOs that follows focuses on three phases of TSWPO development, starting from 1997. It is worth noting that several organisations who would later become active in widening participation work were delivering activities prior to 1997 that would form part of the later repertoire of outreach activity, such as tutoring and mentoring, but they were not yet articulated as such. These include the now-named Villiers Park Educational Trust, who delivered educational courses for disadvantaged young people from a centre near Cambridge and the Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE), which still acts as a membership organisation for widening participation practitioners, though the roles of those practitioners have changed considerably since its emergence from its origins as a network for continuing education staff in polytechnics. The activities of these organisations are picked up within later phases.

4.1.1 The first organisations (1997-2008)

Established[1] during this period: Sutton Trust (1997); Helena Kennedy Foundation (1998); Scholars for Educational Opportunity (2000); IntoUniversity (2002); Brightside

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[1] 'Establishment' is taken to be the point at which the organisation was operational in delivering activity, rather than an official date of charitable or organisational registration. These dates are largely taken from organisations' own accounts of their history or, where this is not available, from charitable registration records. Several of the organisations in this research have registered more than once as charities, spent several years as organisations too small to require charitable registration or were

(2002); Generating Genius (2005); The Social Mobility Foundation (2005); Children's University Trust (2007); Debate Mate (2007); The Access Project (2008).

This first phase saw the establishment of several organisations whose missions specifically aligned with the newly articulated issue of widening participation, as concerned with entry to university for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. One of the earliest of these is The Sutton Trust, founded in 1997, still the largest and most explicitly politically active of the TSWPOs identified in this research. These early organisations were mostly led by philanthropists and education professionals with a personal or professional interest in the issue of HE access and with access to private funding. As government developed national initiatives focused on increasing attainment, offering careers guidance and 'raising aspirations', often with a focus on 'partnership', these also provided a source of funding for growing organisations with similar aims. The majority of organisations focused on delivery, though approaches varied widely from providing internships to community-based tutoring, with some also concentrating efforts on raising awareness of specific issues such as access to professional routes or financial support for refugee students.

In this phase there were multiple conceptions of what might be considered 'widening participation' work amongst TSWPOs but a tendency for many to focus on access to the most selective universities, courses and professions in their mission. The Sutton Trust, founded by education philanthropist (latterly Sir) Peter Lampl, was the first such organisation. Lampl was particularly concerned that the routes to social mobility that he had accessed - a grammar school education and study at Oxbridge - were increasingly closed to students from 'non-privileged backgrounds' and founded the Sutton Trust 'to improve educational opportunities for young people from non-privileged backgrounds and increase social mobility' (sirpeterlampl.co.uk, n.d). Similar concerns prompted the founders of the Brightside Trust, a group of entrepreneurs

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embedded within other organisations and hence the dates used here may not match other records of their formal charitable or organisational status.

with backgrounds in pharmaceutical industry, to attempt to address the provision of advice and guidance to young people with respect to medical careers. There were also several organisations founded to focus on access to career pathways. Many originated from the city of London, with support from major city employers or the Mayor's Office. Examples include SEO London, focused on supporting ethnic minorities into city professions; Making the Leap, who began working with unemployed people from Brent; the Brokerage Citylink, focused on young people from London state schools; and The Social Mobility Foundation, founded in 2005 to provide access to internships for 'top' students from 'low income' families. Although these organisations were often not, at first, explicitly about HE entry except as a necessary entry point for a professional career, they increasingly moved towards focusing on access to HE in their activities.

There were also TSWPOs founded by education professionals during this period, a phenomenon Ball (2007) notes within the development of the education services market in the early 2000s, where the ideas and experience of former education managers could be repurposed outside the public sector. The approaches to WP in these cases tended to be more local and community based, such as 'IntoUniversity', founded in 2002 by a group of friends with backgrounds in education and with financial backing from the Sutton Trust; and the Children's University Trust founded in 2007, led by a former teacher and leader of the Wythenshawe Education Action Zones. The involvement of former teachers in leading new education initiatives began to be explicitly encouraged by the education charity and teacher training provider, Teach First, during this period as a way to keep former teachers engaged with their mission. Support from Teach First was instrumental in the foundation of several TSWPOs, including the Access Project (2008), In2Science (2010), Future First (2010), The Brilliant Club (2011) and Future Frontiers (2013).

Under new Labour, widening participation in HE was one of several areas of government focus that related to progression in education. An overlap developed between different education initiatives, with some TSWPOs becoming involved in WP

following involvement in activities like the government's 'gifted and talented' programme, founded in 2002 to enhance the educational development of students identified as particularly developed in one or more ability areas. This was the case for Villiers Park in the early 2000s, as its programmes made connections between universities, teachers and students to 'raise standards' and enrich education provision in schools (Villiers Park, 2002). Following the interests of its university partners and the direction of the Excellence Challenge national initiative, Villiers Park's work increasingly focused on access to HE and pupil attainment, eventually becoming a major part of its activity provision. Enthusiasm for WP, as well as the existence of funding from government and from philanthropic organisations like the Sutton Trust and Brightside, who both ran grants programmes in the early 2000s, provided opportunities for similarly aligned organisations to develop their activities with HE progression in mind. Some moved their focus elsewhere in the early 2010s, as these funding sources diminished significantly or disappeared altogether.

The political profile of TSWPOs during this period was limited, as most organisations were set up to deliver activity and not as representative or lobbying organisations. However, their delivery work did attract political attention, with the summer schools trialled by the Sutton Trust in 1997 becoming the inspiration and model for a national summer school programme (Sutton Trust, n.d.) and Brightside's e-mentoring platform being used extensively by Aimhigher partnerships, with some support from HEFCE. Support from government for these initiatives extended to small amounts of funding but stopped short of official endorsements or large-scale direct funding. There were exceptions to this delivery focus however, particularly the Sutton Trust and the Helena Kennedy Foundation (HKF). Founded by Dr Ann Limb CBE, then Principal of Cambridge Regional College, to 'make a practical contribution to government policies on social justice, widening participation in education and equality & diversity' (HKF, n.d.) the HKF funds bursaries for FE and adult education students progressing to HE and campaigned on issues relating to HE access, most notably on financial support and access to HE for asylum seekers from 2005. The Sutton Trust, from its foundation, has also focused its efforts on a lobbying role, partly achieved through its programme of

research. Lampl and the Trust developed a considerable public and political profile over this period, with Lampl writing in The Times and the Telegraph and the Trust gathering several favourable mentions in the Lords and Commons from 1997 onwards. They were seemingly regularly consulted in an advisory capacity and also collaborated with government on summer schools and careers guidance initiatives (Hansard HC Deb., vol. 458, cols. 483-491, 15 Mar 2007). Lampl's close relationships with government ministers and the media contributed to this profile, and he received an OBE in 1999 and a knighthood in 2003 for his work in access to HE. The Trust and Lampl were also invited to act in an advisory capacity to HEFCE as it developed the 'Excellence Challenge', the forerunner of Aimhigher (DfEE, 2000: 20). They further established their reputation for raising issues around university access with the publication in 2000 of a report looking at 'Entry to Leading Universities'. Their 2004 report 'The Missing 3000', which identified several thousand suitably qualified school leavers each year who did not enter highly selective universities, can be considered the conceptual basis of the 'fair access' strand of widening participation (McCaig, 2015) and has been frequently cited in education policy (e.g. HEFCE & OFFA, 2014; DBIS, 2016). The Trust later expanded this research aspect of their activities, commissioning research alongside seed funding organisations aligned to its mission.

During this period there were few references to third sector organisations within national WP policy documents. However, in line with government interests in 'sharing responsibility' in education (DfEE, 1998) and involving the 'voluntary and community sector' in public service delivery, there were references to the involvement of voluntary or community organisations in decision making and delivery as part of initiatives like Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities or the Connexions information, advice and guidance service (e.g DfEE. 2000). In some cases, the partnerships created for these initiatives became the basis for Aimhigher partnerships (HEFCE, 2004). Although voluntary organisations were mentioned as possible partners in plans for these initiatives and, later, for Aimhigher, their involvement appears to have been conceived of as either a continuation of existing partnership arrangements or as a way to harness specific expertise. For example, the 1999 White paper *Learning*

to Succeed suggests voluntary organisations as valuable partners for post-16 education because they are 'particularly well placed to contribute their expertise in key areas such as tackling social exclusion and in the education and training of those with special or basic skill needs' (DfEE, 1999: 40). Within Aimhigher and similar initiatives, TSWPOs were engaged for specific areas of work deemed suited to their expertise and interests but did not tend to lead the direction of such work in the way that other partners like schools and local authorities were encouraged to (HEFCE, 2004).

In the work of HEFCE, and of OFFA from 2004, there was also little reference to TSWPOs. Guidance issued to universities on WP did not make reference to the activities of TSWPOs or suggest them as potential partners. There were some exceptions, including the Brightside Trust, whose e-mentoring platform was referenced frequently by HEFCE at conferences and reports on mentoring (e.g. HEFCE, 2009). However, it was made clear that Brightside were not the only provider of mentoring platforms and that Aimhigher partnerships and institutions were free to choose which platforms they adopted to deliver the mentoring strand of work. OFFA also made reference to supporting the Frank Buttle Trust (latterly Buttle UK), whose Quality Mark was an endorsement of HE institutions activities to support care leavers into HE, though this was again not specifically endorsed (OFFA, 2008; 2012).

As identified in the previous two chapters, this period saw the development and emergence of WP as a policy concern, alongside support for a third sector as partner to the state in delivering practical solutions to complex policy problems. In this environment, several TSWPOs were founded that aligned closely with how issues of WP were articulated within policy, particularly around access to the most socially exclusive institutions, courses and professional careers. These early TSWPOs took a range of approaches, though university and careers outreach and educational enrichment activity was a common feature of their work. As with how the third sector was framed in policy more broadly, their approaches were seen as working in partnership with government aims but, in the case of WP, were not an integral part of delivering on policy objectives. These policy objectives were framed as the

responsibility of government and, increasingly, individual universities. As a consequence, although there was some funding available that helped to align some organisations with initiatives like Aimhigher, initial funding often came from private sources who had specific concerns around access to elite professions and institutions. During this period, the Sutton Trust established itself as the leading TSWPO, gaining recognition for its blend of research, lobbying and activity delivery that primarily engaged with high status institutions. The ability of the Trust and its founder to access and engage media and politicians provided a blended expertise in practice and research that was attractive to politicians seeking easily packaged and pragmatic policy solutions to education policy problems (Ball & Exley, 2010).

4.1.2 TSWPOs emerging in policy (2009-2013)

Established in this period: Saturday Club Trust (2009); The Bridge Group (2009), In2Science (2010), Future First (2010), The Brilliant Club (2011), up2uni (2011), Arts Emergency (2011), Accelerate and Access Foundation (2012), UpReach (2012), Causeway (2012), StandAlone (2012), My Big Career (2013), Future Frontiers (2013), NNECL (2013).

The publication of the 2009 report on Fair Access to the Professions marked a shift in the visibility of TSWPOs in policy, including consultations, public debates and within policy documents. The report was launched at IntoUniversity's North Kensington Centre and included references to several TSOs as examples of good practice, including four TSWPOs, and consultations by the panel included Brightside, the Sutton Trust, the Social Mobility Foundation and IntoUniversity. It also explicitly endorsed the activities of TSWPOs, recommending that government 'scale up its support to third sector organisations providing soft skill development for young people' (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009: 71). The inclusion and focus on TSWPOs was, in part, because the report was concerned with a broader idea of social mobility than just access to HE and, as a consequence, universities were not the major party considered relevant or responsible. Beyond the Milburn report, TSOs were also increasingly acknowledged in

education and social mobility policy as not only acting in supporting 'expert' roles but driving change (Cabinet Office, 2009: 21). This opened up opportunities for TSWPOs to be more directly engaged in WP policy, something that several of them were already seeking, and also created scope for more specific endorsements of TSWPO activity by government bodies.

The formation of the Bridge Group in 2009 was, according to its founders, partly a response to frustrations within the sector that those 'on the ground' were not being 'heard' by policy makers (Interview, Tessa Stone, Dec 2019). Its founding members were drawn from TSWPOs, professional associations and universities, coming together specifically to influence the development of policy and strategy around social mobility and HE. The Bridge Group focused their efforts on making high profile connections, hosting their first event in November 2010 at Google HQ in London (the first ever public event to be held there), attended and including an address by the newly appointed 'social mobility tsar' Alan Milburn. Their first report was launched in May 2011 by Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, and subsequent years saw them being invited to contribute to the work of both Clegg and Milburn in their respective roles leading on social mobility.

It was not only the Bridge Group that had an appetite for engaging with policy during this period, as demonstrated by the engagement of several TSWPOs with both the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions and the 2012 report 'University Challenge: How Higher Education Can Advance Social Mobility', also led by Alan Milburn. The growing interest in social mobility from the government, combined with the prospect of both higher HE tuition fees and the end of the Aimhigher programme, presented an opportunity and threat to TSWPOs. An increasing number of TSWPOs appeared to follow the approach of the Sutton Trust in both publishing research and engaging with political figures to disseminate their work, including the Bridge Group, Future First and UpReach, who were all referenced as sources in policy documents during this period (e.g. Milburn, 2012; OFFA, 2013b).

The Sutton Trust continued with its blend of research and programme delivery, particularly around social mobility and school and university admissions. Its reports continued to be referenced in political debates, including over school admissions, teaching, higher education and academisation (e.g. Hansard HC, vol. 538; Hansard HC, vol. 569). It was increasingly referred to, both in and outside the Trust as a 'do tank', blending expertise and practical delivery. Its work and status as an expert organisation on education and social mobility appears to have extended across the political spectrum, with both the Conservative Prime Minister and Labour leader of the opposition voicing their support for the Trust on its 15-year anniversary in 2012 (Sutton Trust, Nov 2012). The Sutton Trust's position as an expert organisation seemingly brought the Trust closer to government in this period. In 2011, in combination with Impetus Trust, the Sutton Trust won a £125m Department for Education bid to establish a grant making charity that would award funding to and evaluate projects using 'bold and innovative methods to boost the attainment of disadvantaged pupils' (gov.uk, 1 April 2011). The resulting Education Endowment Foundation, together with the Sutton Trust, became the government's designated 'what works' centre for education in 2013, and has continued to focus its work on generating evidence through evaluation of 'high-potential' education projects. Although legally and financially separate from the Sutton Trust, the EEF is described as the Trust's 'sister' charity, with significant overlap in staff and board membership and a joint relationship to government through the 'what works' centre. The Sutton Trust also developed its links with OFFA in this period, with its then Director of Research and Policy and later CEO, joining OFFA's newly established advisory board in 2011 (OFFA, 2015).

Although some TSWPOs did experience a heightened political profile during this phase, for most this did not come with funding. With the election of a coalition government implementing a programme of austerity from 2010, many sources of funding for supporting both the third sector and widening participation activity disappeared. Some TSWPOs, like the Sutton Trust, had direct relationships with some universities as funders that they were able to maintain but many organisations shifted from a few

large funders to several smaller-scale funders in individual universities, with a corresponding increase in uncertainty and commitment of more resources to fundraising. Several of the organisations founded or sustained during this period operated around a model of sold services, basing their funding model around appealing to schools and employing a 'dual bottom line' model of social enterprise. They offered delivery of outreach or educational activities to schools, universities or both. The Brilliant Club, for example, offered schools programmes of university style tutorials to selected pupils, combining these with trips to university partners who would also offer small amounts of funding and access to postgraduate students who would act as tutors. Similar models were used by Brightside, The Access Project, Future First, UpReach, Causeway and Future Frontiers, many of which marketed themselves specifically as social enterprises, also engaging with social enterprise networks such as those set up by the Guardian newspaper or the School for Social Entrepreneurs (e.g. Wilkie, 3 Feb 2012). Several of these organisations received seed funding for their programmes from Teach First and/or the Sutton Trust. The amounts of funding provided were small but relationships with these organisations could and did lead to other funding opportunities, through their networks of schools and universities as consumers for the services provided by some TSWPOs. The funding and networking opportunities provided by Teach First and the Sutton Trust however were limited to a small number of select contacts, often shared between the two organisations (Hill, 2012). Both made clear indications that their support was only available to those within their networks, with Teach First funding only initially available to Teach First trained teachers and Sutton Trust funding encouraged 'by invitation' (Third Sector, 7 Feb 2012).

Part of the development of a sold services model was owed to the creation of 'academies', government funded schools operating independent of local authority control in 2000. This created a small number of schools able to exercise full control over their expenditure and curriculum who were encouraged to take 'innovative' approaches in deprived areas. When, in 2010, the Academies Act enabled schools to convert to academy status, this accelerated an ongoing process of development of

education services, now sold to individual schools and academy chains, rather than provided by or facilitated by a local authority (Everitt, 2020). Particularly for TSWPOs who had been founded by former teachers or those connected with Teach First, relationships with schools or academy chains presented an opportunity for them to market their services to academies looking to distinguish their educational offer. Many academies were in economically and socially deprived areas, having been pressured to convert as previously 'failing' schools, meaning that some of their goals aligned with the activities of TSWPOs around education progression and increasing pupil attainment. The introduction of pupil premium in 2011, a ringfenced payment made to schools to support the attainment of 'disadvantaged' pupils, also provided a specific funding stream that could be used to buy in the services of TSWPOs who focused on attainment raising and encouraging educational progression, such as The Brilliant Club or The Access Project. The Brilliant Club's services specifically were mentioned by Ofsted as an effective use of this funding (Ofsted, 2015). Although this model of service provision did provide a potential source of funding for several TSWPOs during this period and later, as with working directly with individual universities, it created challenges in often being a short-term financial commitment and requiring significant resource to manage relationships with several small funders (Interviews, Former TSWPO CEO; TSWPO CEO). For organisations looking to scale up their work, this funding stream was unstable, with tight margins. This instability provided a catalyst for some organisations to seek a greater public profile to support their work, encouraging potential funders to approach them, and to pursue other more long-term sources of funding, such as through philanthropic grants.

This phase saw a marked rise in visibility for TSWPOs, though more in the broader field of social mobility than in widening participation specifically. The precarious environment for widening participation work during this phase, particularly in terms of the removal of national funding and a shift towards focusing on social mobility and fair access in policy, was met by an increased interest from TSWPOs in raising their public profile, including within policy. Organisations during this period often adopted a sold services model, enabled by the expansion of academies and alignment with agendas

around social mobility and encouragement of 'innovative' approaches to increasing attainment of pupils in deprived areas. Access to networks that supported social enterprise in education also appears to have been an enabling factor for some of these organisations to become established, as was access to schools or universities as direct funders. In contrast to the previous phase, almost no funding came from government, nor were there philanthropists wholly backing single projects, potentially as a result of the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis and changing political climate in the form of the 2010 election and formation of a coalition government.

4.1.3 The WP market for TSWPOs (2014-2017)

Established in this period: CoachBright (2014); Oxbridge Prospects (2015), Project Access to Top Universities (2016); Universify Education (2016); First Star Scholars (2017).

The publication of the joint OFFA and HEFCE Strategy for Access and Student Success in 2014 noted that 'Higher education providers, schools, colleges, communities, employers and, where appropriate, the third sector need to collaborate effectively and strategically' *(*OFFA & HEFCE, 2014a: 8). From 2014, in its guidance to universities on the production of access agreements, OFFA also updated its definition of collaboration to include third sector organisations as potential partners (OFFA, 2014b). As OFFA moved to encouraging universities to set collaborative targets from 2015, this was a notable shift in the status of third sector organisations within OFFA guidance, from previously unrecognised to jointly responsible for delivering on WP targets. Encouragement for universities to engage with TSWPOs also came from other sources, with the Social Mobility Commission's 2014 State of the Nation report stating that

> 'Third sector schemes, such as IntoUniversity and the Brilliant Club, are all
> trying to improve the grades of disadvantaged students and increase
> the awareness of the higher education options. Universities and schools
> should continue to support these types of programmes and ensure robust
> evaluation' (Child Poverty and Social Mobility Commission, 2014: 223)

These encouragements and shifts in language from OFFA and HEFCE were largely representative of existing practice within the sector, with many universities already having entered into partnerships with organisations like IntoUniversity and The Brilliant Club by 2014 (Access agreements, 2014-15 e.g. Nottingham, King's College London). However, competitive pressures between institutions and increasing scrutiny from OFFA during this period made working with TSWPOs as partners and promoting this an increasingly attractive proposition for some universities. For selective universities particularly, references to TSWPOs in their access agreements appear to have been part of establishing credibility for their work, with organisations mentioned in the 2009 and 2012 Milburn reports often referred to by name, in contrast to other nameless 'charities' mentioned. In contrast to universities, many TSWPOs had a positive public profile with OFFA and political figures, particularly in terms of demonstrating their impact and value for money. TSWPOs and other TSOs are also frequently referenced in terms of their expertise and capacity to reach target groups. Royal Holloway's 2017/18 access agreement makes this point 'Much of Royal Holloway's outreach activity is delivered in collaboration with other providers to ensure that the intended target groups are reached, and to provide value for money' (Royal Holloway, 2016). As OFFA was stressing the necessity of collaboration, requiring collaborative targets from 2016 access agreements, TSWPOs offered universities the opportunity to collaborate in ways that did not require them to navigate relationships with their competitor institutions. In a context of a shrinking young population and pressure on all institutions to succeed in a competitive marketplace, navigating collaborative relationships between institutions without the additional funding and structures of national programmes like Aimhigher was increasingly challenging. The challenges of competition were noted even where collaborative funding was available, such as in the case of NNCOs (Stevenson, McCaig & Madriaga, 2017).

The status of some TSWPOs within policy during this period was further enhanced, with selected TSWPOs now regularly invited contributors to consultations and reviews of social mobility policy (see appendix...). Several were involved in the Universities UK 2016 Social Mobility Advisory Group and were called to give evidence to the All-Party

Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Mobility, which published its first report, 'The Class Ceiling', in 2017 (APPG on Social Mobility, 2017). Significantly for the Sutton Trust, they were appointed Secretariat to the APPG in 2015, a role they have held ever since, with the potential to act as gatekeepers for suitable forms of evidence to be presented. The involvement of TSWPOs also extended to invitations to discuss the structures and regulations that should govern university widening participation activity, such as the OfS Regulatory Framework for Higher Education (OfS, 2018). This engagement with policy went two ways, with some TSWPOs being invited to engage with consultations and TSWPOs also beginning to organise to represent their views to government, to OFFA and to HEFCE, often through the media. In November 2015, following the publication of an HE green paper which proposed the creation of the Office for Students and a new Director for Fair Access role, some TSWPOs publicly commented on their concerns that WP may be slipping from the government's agenda, with several also responding to the public consultation (e.g. Shukla, 16 Nov, 2015; Sutton Trust, 3 Dec 2015).

Some organisations also began seeking a higher profile for their work and ideas through other means, including publications, awards and conferences. In 2015, The Brilliant Club partnered with King's College London to host their first annual conference, which featured a speech by the Director of Fair Access urging universities to make faster progress on widening participation and generated press coverage in several mainstream news outlets (e.g. BBC News, 8 July 2015). In the same year, The Brilliant Club won the Guardian Charity Award and IntoUniversity were chosen as the charity partner for the Times Higher Education Awards. In 2017 and again in 2018, Brightside partnered with the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) to produce two publications showcasing a range of suggestions for widening participation policy and practice (HEPI, 2017; 2018). These efforts by TSWPOs, whether conferences or publications, often referenced not only their own work but provided opportunities to make connections to political figures or to represent ideas about widening participation policy and practice. They were not explicitly political or controversial but frequently engaged with questions about WP policy, rather than focusing on practices.

It is important to note that engaging with and gaining a public profile was not a feature for all TSWPOs in this period. It is consistently the same organisations who appear to have a presence in policy and in the media – The Sutton Trust, Brightside, IntoUniversity, The Bridge Group and upReach, with occasional involvement from The Access Project and the Social Mobility Foundation. Smaller TSWPOs and those particularly reliant on school relationships do not appear consistently, nor do they engage with explicit policy activities such as responding to public consultations (see appendix..).

Although this period did see more explicit encouragement in policy documents and guidance for the work of TSWPOs, this was still largely through individual relationships between universities or schools and individual TSWPOs. These arrangements were often insecure, based on short-term commitments of funding. National projects, in the form of National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) running from 2014-2016, and the National Collaborative Outreach Project (NCOP) from 2017, were still funded through HEPs, meaning that TSWPOs were not essential partners and were often engaged more as contractors than long-term deliverers, again leading to fears of financial instability from TSWPOs (Interviews Trustee TSWPO; CEO TSWPO). However, both NNCO and NCOPs also provided growth opportunities for TSWPOs, particularly to expand outside of London, where most were founded. Within NNCOs, 15 of 34 consortia engaged with local partners, including third sector organisations. The structure of NCOP in particular, being expected to set up and deliver on targets rapidly in order to ensure continued funding, provided an incentive to newly founded consortia to work with established organisations. Some consortia have also felt that the targeting of the programme has been an enabling factor in working with partners, particularly third sector organisations (OfS, 2019). Across 29 NCOPs, 47 charities were involved in the first 2 years of delivery (OfS, 2019), though these mostly appear to have been as sub-contractors or contributing members, rather than involved in design or steering the programme. Several TSWPOs appear to have viewed the NCOPs as an important commercial opportunity, with some consortia describing feeling 'bombarded' by offers from TSOs (OfS, 2019). NCOP has provided some TSOs with a

very significant income stream (Causeway received 82% of its income from NCOP in 2018/9) but also a precarious one as established consortia started to move away from contracted activity in the second phase of the programme from 2019 (Interviews Trustee, TSWPO; CEO, TWSPO).

During this phase, a small number of established TSWPOs began to receive larger grants from philanthropic foundations, specifically the Esme Fairbairn Foundation, the Garfield Weston Foundation, The Dulverton Trust, the Wolfson Foundation and Impetus-PEF (charitybase.uk). Many of these had been making grants to educational charities for several years, with all being prior or current funders of the Sutton Trust, but now appear to have been focusing some of their funding around social mobility initiatives. This was particularly true of Impetus-PEF, whose model includes not only providing funding but attempting to increase the 'effectiveness' of the organisations they fund or 'partners'. This 'venture philanthropy' model was gaining in popularity more broadly and, in some cases, includes encouragement for organisations to consider their impact in terms of long-term and sustainable change, which includes looking at influencing their policy environment (Ball, 2008; 2017). Impetus-PEF was formed through a merger of two venture philanthropy organisations in 2013, combining the Impetus Trust, co-founders of the EEF, and The Private Equity Foundation, formerly managers of the UK's first social impact bond focused on outcomes for young people not in education, employment or training. One of its first investments as a merged foundation was The Brilliant Club, followed the next year by The Access Project. Both joined IntoUniversity, who Impetus had funded since 2007, following an introduction from the Sutton Trust. As part of its support of all three organisations, and several other similar TSOs, Impetus has encouraged collaboration for all to engage with policy, including putting out joint commentary on areas of WP policy (e.g. Impetus, 23 June 2017).

This phase involved a more public profile for some established TSWPOs, with clear indications of their involvement in policy discussions and debate. Several developed closer relationships with government and political figures through participation in

consultations and providing platforms for political figures. There were also funding opportunities presented by the creation of national outreach programmes and by the challenges of inter-university collaboration for TSWPOs to offer their services to universities and schools. Funding for WP was still primarily held by HEPs, both as a result of their accountability for access work as part of higher fees and in the models of funding distribution for national projects like NCOP. However, there were increasing calls for some of that funding to go indirectly to TSWPOs as part of access agreement spend or to establish more direct models of government funding for access and success initiatives (e.g. Milburn, 2012; Teach First, 2016). However, even for larger organisations this funding was precarious, with some becoming heavily reliant on short-term funding arrangements with universities or government funded projects. Those with connections sought alternative funding arrangements, particularly from philanthropic foundations who were taking an increasing interest in widening participation and social mobility work. Many of these took a venture philanthropy approach, encouraging greater engagement by funded TSWPOs in policy or in demonstrating impact. The engagement between TSWPOs and policy in this phase appears to have focused around sharing ideas and encouraging government and universities to see them as viable and credible deliverers of WP work.

4.1.4 Collaboration and policy action (2018-2021)

Established in this period: The Elephant Group (2018); AccessED (2019); TASO (2019); Zero Gravity (2020)

By the time the Office for Students officially opened in 2018, TSWPOs were established as part of the organisations expected to play a role in delivering on WP targets and as valuable contributors to discussions about the future direction of widening participation policy. Both the outgoing and incoming Director of Fair Access and Director of Access and Participation respectively, made reference to the 'vibrant' third sector (Milward, 5 Mar 2018; Ebdon, 26 Mar 2018) as part of the landscape of organisations to deliver on WP policy. From 2018, their embeddedness within the

activities of the sector was also reflected in their increasing membership and active participation in several networks, including the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) and National Educational Opportunities Network (NEON). Since 2018, the most established organisations with a profile in policy through engagement with consultations and policy networks continued to engage closely with the Office for Students but there was a shift away from focusing solely on HE in organisations' focus. The social and political climate during this phase was heavily influenced by the crises of Brexit and then Covid-19 and, on a more local level, by a regulatory regime focused on targets and supporting a competitive HE market. TSWPOs extended and adapted their approaches as a result, to support continued funding and to secure their positions.

By the early 2020s several TSWPOs had a history of several years' participation in consultations on social mobility and HE policy, along with established networks that supported political and media engagement. The announcement of the Augar review of post-18 education funding, as well as subsequent leaks and interim reports prompted some of these more established TSWPOs to release a joint statement in November 2018. The statement, signed by six charity CEOs, called on the government to protect widening participation funding and to not impose a cap on student numbers. This position was reiterated in an updated statement in February 2019, now signed by eight TSO CEOs and by the CEO of the Russell Group. This group formed into the Fair Access Coalition, a coalition of nine organisations (seven TSWPOs, one WPO and Impetus) subsequently also making statements around A-level grading in 2020 and around fair admissions in 2021. The statements made by this group were initially around funding, something that presented a direct threat to their own income, but their 2020 statement on A-level grading was a direct call to government to take specific actions around calculating student grades, particularly to protect young people from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds. This was a response to the circumstances surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic in which young people were unable to sit final exams and had their grades calculated by a mix of teacher predictions and a nationally applied algorithm to combat grade inflation. The algorithm was scrapped following significant controversy and public outcry, including from TSWPOs. Their 2021 commentary on fair

admissions was more speculative, offering broad principles for designing a fair admissions system but not calling for specific action.

The increasing focus of the OfS on outcomes and targets for HEPs was supported by several TSWPOs who, drawing on measures of impact taken from the charity sector, have been keen to emphasise their own skills in evaluation (Interviews, TSWPO CEO; TSWPO Trustee). Prompted by the necessity of proving impact to funders, particularly funders themselves concerned with demonstrating 'impact' through quantitative measures of progress, as well as alignment with the work of organisations like EEF, TSWPOs have built up a reputation as effective evaluators, with some offering their evaluation services on a consultancy basis to other organisations (e.g Brilliant Club, Bridge Group). This reputation and practice extends beyond the foremost organisation in this space, the Sutton Trust, with organisations like upReach also being contracted to deliver research for the Social Mobility Commission, the Bridge Group partnering with the SMC to deliver employer toolkits and the Brilliant Club delivering workshops on evaluation for practitioners. A small number of TSWPOs also developed 'advisory groups' or similar activities in this period, engaging academics and other 'experts' in both steering the work of the organisation and, on occasion, feeding into research and evaluation work (e.g. Bridge Group, n.d.). The establishment of an 'evidence and impact exchange' by OfS in 2018 also led to the creation of a new independent organisation, Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO). TASO's funding from OfS was specifically designed as an initial grant, with the expectation that the organisation would become a self-funding charitable organisation. This model of 'incubating' 'state sponsored social enterprises' (Somers, 2013) is similar to that applied to the Behavioural Insights Team, initially funded by the Cabinet Office, now jointly owned by the Cabinet Office, NESTA and employees and a co-founder of TASO. TASO took on the aims of OfS as its charitable mission and is designed to be self-funding from 2023 (TASO, n.d.).

Over the course of this research, which began by searching for organisations in 2018, several organisations initially identified as focused on access to higher education have

shifted their focus towards work with employers and to employment outcomes. Even the Sutton Trust have recently moved away from largely concentrating on HE as a route to social mobility to also promoting employer-led routes such as apprenticeships. In the early phases of this work some organisations like My Big Career framed their work around issues of access to higher education, seeing access to HE as a major step towards social mobility and career success. As government policy towards HE and social mobility appears limited on resources, organisations have moved their focus towards initiatives that focus on the role that employers can play. Employers have been encouraged by initiatives like the social mobility awards and the social mobility index, set up by TSWPOs Making the Leap and the Social Mobility Foundation respectively, to demonstrate their commitment to addressing the socio-economic mix of their organisations. The Bridge Group, in particular, have worked closely with the Social Mobility Commission and with major employers to produce an employer toolkit outlining measures that they should take within their organisation (Socialmobilityworks, 2022).

The development of TSWPOs in this phase has been both a continuation of previous work, with increased focus on policy and impact work, and a shift away from a focus on universities. Some TSWPOs have become more publicly outspoken, grouping together as TSOs to make statements on education policy and practice. Their status as organisations with particular expertise in evaluation (Harrison et. al., 2018) has been solidified during this period, extending beyond the activities of the Sutton Trust to a range of TSWPO evaluation activity. However, maintaining engagement with policy and with WP work has been challenging for several organisations during this period, some of whom have adapted their activity as the funding and policy environment has moved away from a focus on HE entry. Despite this, organisations focused on HE access and success continue to be set up, with strong support for a charitable or social enterprise structure as a viable approach to solving WP policy problems ranging from access to HE to supporting transition to graduate professions.

4.2 The roles and activities of TSWPOs

The account of TSWPO development and engagement with policy in the previous sections provides an overview of TSWPO activities and trends in four phases. These phases do not neatly align with policy developments in third sector or WP policy but reflect trends within both, including the shifting emphasis of responsibilities in WP policy and a broad enthusiasm and commitment from government to applying market principles to education and to the charity sector. There are also other trends in policy making and in governance, particularly in relation to delivering social benefits, that appear to also be reflected in the activities of TSWPOs. Many of these have been identified in previous chapters but not explored specifically in relation to the activities of TSWPOs. The following sections therefore examine some of the roles and activities of TSWPOs in relation to three connected trends: the development of governance through networks; the role of 'ideas organisations' in policy; and the development of 'impact measurement'.

4.2.1 TSWPOs in policy networks

In recent years researchers have drawn attention to TSOs as significant actors in education 'policy networks' (e.g. Ball, 2012; Williamson, 2014). They offer an account of how education policy increasingly involves 'networked governance', where configurations of organisations and individuals are creating 'new sites of influence, decision making and policy action' (Ball, 2008: 761). Governance through networks, as a legitimate model of 'doing' policy, has particular relevance for the WP policy arena. The issue of 'social mobility', with which WP has been closely associated, has been described as a 'wicked' policy problem which, in theory, requires the sort of collaboration and solutions associated with policy networks (Ball & Junemann, 2011). HE policy making, often split across government departments, has also tended to be formed over long periods of interaction with multiple sources in and outside government (Shattock, 2012), suggesting the existence of networks is a feature of HE policymaking. Within WP work, networks are also a common feature, with universities

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creating their own regional and mission-group based WP networks such as those developed by the Russell Group or Linking London, and the continuing development of practitioner networks such as NEON, FACE and the more recent PURSUE network for working class practitioners. There have also been several policy focused networks, including those coordinated by the Bridge Group, by Teach First and by Impetus. It is notable that these networks have included the input of political figures such as the Director of Fair Access and the Chair of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, and that events hosted by them have included policy announcements, suggesting that these may be significant sites for policy ideas.

Within policy networks, organisations and individuals who can make connections across sectoral boundaries, can shape and legitimise discourses and offer practical solutions, can be highly influential in shaping policy. TSOs, in particular, can create roles for themselves within these networks that take advantage of their public image as 'non-political or pre-political' (Rose, 1999:188) and in some ways 'better' than alternatives in the public or private sectors, whether ethically or in terms of structures that make it more effective at tackling social issues (Macmillan, 2015). They are also often able to draw on their construction as 'hybrid' organisations (Billis, 2010), something seen particularly in the formations of organisations like the Sutton Trust, a self-described 'do tank', and TASO, a government-incubated yet independent organisation. Some explicitly hybrid organisations, such as think tanks or 'edu-businesses', have found that spanning boundaries is a strength of their work, with their 'indistinction' offering opportunities to draw on the authority and resources of their parent fields in varying configurations (Medvetz, 2012). TSWPOs and others are identifying the role of 'connector' as part of their function within WP, as this comment by Anne-Marie Canning, formerly Director of Social Mobility at King's College London and now CEO of The Brilliant Club, illustrates:

> ...charities can be galvanising and drive a faster pace of change within the widening participation ecosystem, as they act as trusted connectors between schools, businesses and universities. (Canning, 2018: 38)

Even beyond their individual 'boundary spanning' construction, over the past twenty years, and particularly since 2010, TSWPOs have become prominent in both participating in and coordinating the many different forms of policy network that make up network governance in WP. These include, for example, sector networks and membership bodies usually comprised of university staff, such as the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON), and more formal consultation and working groups, such as the Universities UK Social Mobility Advisory Group (see appendix iv). They have also been active in setting up their own networks, such as the Bridge Group's 'Fellows' programme, and several run cross-sectoral conferences and events featuring involvement from civil servants and government ministers. Teach First, a prominent actor in global education policy networks (Ball, 2008), has coordinated one of the largest formal cross-sector networks, the 'Fair Education Alliance', who campaign on and devise solutions to education issues including WP. The Sutton Trust, in its role as secretary to the Social Mobility Commission and All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility, also has a coordinating role, with some authority to act as a gatekeeper to engagement with policy discussions.

Whilst policy networks can open up policy making to more groups and individuals, they can also increase its opacity as it is often unclear 'what may have been said to whom, where, with what effect and in exchange for what' (Ball, 2008: 761). Policy networks can also be exclusive, with some types of organisations excluded and many networks formed largely on the basis of prior relationships and similar ideologies (Ball & Junemann, 2011). Within WP, many policy networks and sites of influence are seemingly closely connected with many long-standing alliances. This is the case for TSOs as well as universities, as around half of TSWPOs identified for this research have close financial and personal links to one or both of The Sutton Trust or Teach First. There is also some convergence around funding, with just seven organisations receiving sometimes overlapping grants from major UK philanthropic foundations and trusts. This convergence of philanthropic funding around particular issues and to small numbers of organisations has been observed in education philanthropy in the US, where funding is increasingly going to organisations acting as 'jurisdictional

challengers' to state education provision (Reckhow, 2016). Although the concept of 'jurisdictional challengers' is of less relevance in the UK HE arena, as TSOs are working outside the established domain of WP as being enacted by universities, they present a challenge to how WP has traditionally been 'done' by universities. Funding also favours those organisations engaging with research and lobbying at national level (Reckhow, 2016). Although this has the effect of amplifying 'new voices' in education policy, it potentially comes at the expense of other voices and can legitimize particular policy solutions. In the US and the UK, there are indications that there are common discourses around the purpose of education and particularly around building evaluation systems of teacher quality in the US (Reckhow, 2016) and notions of disadvantage, merit and enterprise in the UK (Ball & Junemann, 2011). These shared ideas and associated activity of philanthropists can sometimes serve to narrow political debate, based as they sometimes are on the experiences and viewpoints of a small number of wealthy patrons for whom these concepts have particular significance. In WP, this can have implications for who is seen as a 'worthy' target for activity and what is seen as a successful outcome, as seen in the convergence of funding around the issue of 'Fair Access'.

4.2.2 TSWPOs as 'ideas organisations'

In a context of networked governance, in which expertise and ideas outside government are routinely sought and valued, there have been opportunities for individuals and organisations to translate knowledge and provide 'simple messages that can easily be understood by politicians, policy makers and the public' (Ball & Exley, 2010: 153). UK policymaking has seen an increasing presence of ideas organisations, such as think tanks and 'public policy labs', as well as demand for organisations and individuals who can act as policy 'experts' (Ball & Exley, 2010). In this space, there are indications that some third sector organisations are positioned or are positioning themselves to operate as 'mediators' or 'catalysts, brokers, and fixers of new ideas' (Williamson, 2013: 5), linking media, public and political interest in generating and presenting ideas. Although this is a space generally occupied by think tanks, there are

also many, like Williamson's example (2013) of NESTA, registered charities who do not consider themselves think tanks. The Sutton Trust, referred to as a 'do tank', appears to play a 'mediator' role in its research activities, co-funded programmes and promotion of policy ideas such as a lottery for school and university admissions (Sutton Trust, 27 Feb 2014). Other TSOs in WP similarly appear to also be seeking to invite media and public engagement with their ideas, such as Brightside, whose former-CEO regularly wrote opinion pieces for the Huffington Post, WonkHE and The Guardian, and who have co-produced publications with the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), an independent think tank.

Even within policy structures which might appear to exclude TSWPOs as major players, being neither stated subjects or enactors of policy, there are still indications that their expertise is valued and that their opinions are consulted when designing policy. They have been frequently named as expert witnesses or panellists for reports on widening participation and social mobility, including 'Unleashing Aspiration' (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009); 'University Challenge' (Milburn, 2012) and the final report of the Universities UK Social Mobility Advisory Group (Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016). Several were also named as advisors on specific policies and strategies including The National Strategy for Access and Student Success (OFFA & HEFCE, 2014) and the OfS Regulatory Framework for Higher Education (OfS, 2018). Representatives from TSWPOs have also acted in advisory and supporting capacities on bodies such as HEFCEs EQUALL board (DfEE, 2000) and OFFA's advisory group (OFFA, 2015). Several interviewees for this thesis have also referred to being 'called in' to the Cabinet Office or the DfE (and other iterations) to participate in discussions about WP policy under Labour, coalition and Conservative governments. The expertise and opinion of WP TSOs also appears directly through the form of citations of TSWPO research in policy. References to Sutton Trust research are commonplace in WP policy documents but research by upReach, the Bridge Group and the Social Mobility Foundation are also referenced (OFFA & HEFCE, 2014) and TSWPOs have been commissioned directly by the Social Mobility Commission to undertake research relevant to their work (SMC, 2019).

Even where TSWPOs may not seem to be presenting or advocating for particular courses of action, their status as well-networked pragmatic experts creates opportunities to validate or disseminate ideas about policy. As participants in policy networks, which allow 'new voices, sources of authority and discourses into policy thinking' (Williamson, 2013:3), third sector actors are arguably contributing to both generating and legitimising policy problems and solutions (Ball & Junemann, 2012). TSO involvement in shaping discourses in WP can be seen in the case of the Sutton Trust and the notion of 'fair access' as a valid and significant policy problem. Initial policy approaches to WP primarily (though not exclusively) focused on access for all young people to all forms of HE. However, from around 2000-2010, despite HE policy still including national outreach initiatives and funded expansion of alternative HE routes, both public and policy debate became increasingly focused on the participation of young people at the most selective universities and courses. Many policy documents and issue statements set out by TSWPOs and universities take the evidence of the need for this focus to be research published by The Sutton Trust which focused on entry to 'leading' universities (e.g. DBIS, 2009; Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009). This research has also been seen by some as the conceptual basis for the notion of 'fair access' as a separate strand of WP relating specifically to entry to selective institutions and courses (McCaig, 2015). Although The Sutton Trust were and are not only organisation interested in this strand of WP, the research and associated media activity they coordinated was high profile and enduring. It attracted discussion in both houses of parliament and the measures that they used within the research, which identified 'top' UK universities as either the 'Sutton Trust 13' or later, the 'Sutton Trust 30', were picked up by universities, government, media and TSOs as recognisable categorisation for determining 'elite' HE institutions, suggesting a certain authority conferred by their use.

4.2.3 TSWPOs as evaluators

Ozga (2008) and Ball & Exley (2010) have suggested that governance through policy networks has also required a shift in the types of knowledge needed to govern. In

education, this has been seen in the adoption of metrics as a supposedly ideologically neutral and effective 'political technology' to both determine and monitor policy problems (Grek & Ozga, 2010). In this context, the type of knowledge produced and presented by TSOs has particular advantages as the third sector has been seen as a 'pragmatic' ally to government, removed from ideological debates (Kendall, 2011). Many TSOs in WP are closely aligned to the 'what works' approach enthusiastically adopted by government, positioning them to offer the sort of pragmatic and politically neutral types of 'evidence' most favoured by government. This has led to close partnerships with government, including The Sutton Trust co-founding the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), the government's 'what works centre' for education, and the close involvement of organisations like The Bridge Group with the affiliate 'what works centre' for WP. Outside these government collaborations, TSOs are also active in promoting their approaches to evidence and innovation, such as through the Brilliant Club's 'research seminar series' or Causeway's 'Ideas Labs'. In contrast to university WP activity and programmes like Aimhigher, which have been regularly criticised for poor evidence and evaluation, TSWPO approaches, which include commissioning external evaluations and favouring quantitative assessments of impact, have been widely praised by policymakers. The approaches to evaluation and to disseminating evaluation favoured by TSWPOs have aligned closely with trends on evaluation in education and in the charity sector, including collaborations by upReach with the Behavioural Insights Team, and adoption of measures like 'social return on investment' or NESTA's 'standards of evidence'.

TSWPOs have established a reputation as effective evaluators, with both the 2009 and 2012 Milburn reports referring to the work of third sector organisations being 'well-evidenced'. Evaluation and promotion of evaluation has formed part of the work of TSWPOs for several years, partly prompted by necessity of attracting funding, making them more well versed in the language and practices of evaluation, even if facing many of the same challenges as HEPs (Harrison et al., 2018). Evaluation and production of 'evidence' has also formed a core part of the work of several TSWPOs, particularly the Bridge Group, whose 2016 report for the Civil Service examining socio-economic

diversity in its 'fast stream' programme was sent to major employers across England with an endorsement from the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General. From their initial origins as a policy network, intended to provide a 'voice' for the sector to government, the Bridge Group now describes itself as a 'non-profit consultancy' that helps 'organisations and others to build the evidence base needed to make change' (Bridge Group, n.d). Network events, convening and dissemination still form part of its work but it is its expertise and reputation in working with data that sustains it financially. The Brilliant Club also offers research consultancy as part of its portfolio of activities and upReach has developed a suite of data tools for individuals and organisations around contextual recruitment that support its income. Both upReach and IntoUniversity have also been commissioned by the Social Mobility Commission and Cabinet Office respectively to carry out bespoke research projects. Data and evaluation has therefore become a core part of the business for many TSWPOs in recent years (McCaig, Rainford & Squire, 2022).

4.3 TSWPOs as third sector policy actors

This chapter has examined the development and activities of organisations identified as TSWPOs since 1997. It has focused particularly on aspects of their development that relate to policy and to the policy contexts of widening participation and the third sector. It has also identified how these organisations have been dealt with within policy and what their status might be considered to be as policy actors. It has identified particular roles taken up by these organisations, specifically as experts, mediators, evaluators and ideas organisations, and that this is partly facilitated by their participation in networks that form part of how policy is 'made' within education. It has identified where they have fed into the validation or construction of policy, through their participation in formal and informal processes of consultation and evidence gathering. For two organisations in particular, the Sutton Trust and the Bridge Group, it has also identified where there have been more direct links between its activities and specific policy initiatives, including the creation of a national summer schools programme and the promotion of an employer toolkit for social mobility.

However, even in these cases, there are not many clear indications of TSWPOs taking up detailed policy positions or, where they have, that these have had any influence on policy formation. Despite this, for some of these organisations, there is an active interest in engaging with policy, even where this policy may not be directly related to their activities. It is also clear that, despite a challenging funding environment for many TSWPOs, this has not stopped an appetite for their development, with new organisations focused on widening access continuing to be founded and finding ways to fund their work. In more recent years, there has been both greater integration of TSWPOs into the work of widening participation though delivery of national programmes and participation in practitioner networks, and also attempts to distinguish themselves, coming together to make policy statements and emphasise their roles as expert organisations and connectors. Beyond the account provided here, which is largely based in policy documents and the public presentations of TSWPOs through their websites, annual reports and press engagement (references and appendix vi), this thesis is seeking to understand how and why these organisations have sought to engage with policy. It aims to uncover the interpretations and strategic decision making behind their actions and how they have interpreted their policy environment. In doing so, this thesis aims to understand how particular forms of organisations can and do become policy actors and in what ways they feel they can have influence. This extends some of the analysis and research presented here, which looks at these organisations as part of a system, to examine the practices and motivations of individuals as a means by which to understand policy action at an organisational level. The following chapters therefore examine how it is possible to study organisations at this level, how to understand policy and policy actions in this context and sets out the parameters and design of this research.

Chapter five: Concepts

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have provided an overview of the organisations that are the focus of this thesis, and of the policy context in which they are working and have worked over the past two decades. This and the following chapter describe and explain the design of this research, first looking at the concepts and theories employed within this study and then the methodology and methods applied. There are multiple approaches to the study of policy and to the study of organisations and hence this chapter clarifies the positions taken within this research and situates them in relation to research addressing similar questions of policy influence and policy actions. In setting out the concepts and theories that have been relevant to the design and interpretation of this research, I also articulate where this thesis contributes to the study of policy, of influence within policy networks and of enactment. By employing an understanding of policy as authority, expertise and order and using this as a framework to explore policy actions and their influence in context, this thesis makes a theoretical contribution to the study of policy, and particularly to the study of policy influence within networks. This thesis also demonstrates the value of examining policy as enactment, as well as text, for exploring the influence of those acting within policy networks.

This chapter explores two concepts – policy and enactment – one theory, in the form of field theory, and additionally 'policy networks', which have been applied as both concept and theory but are used here more conceptually i.e. the existence and structures of such networks is not used to make explanatory claims about the behaviours of actors within them. The application of these concepts and theories should be placed within the wider methodological framework of this thesis which draws on interpretive policy analysis, underpinned by a critical realist ontology. A further explanation of the interpretive policy approach and how this relates to the study of policy and policy networks is therefore included within discussion of these

concepts. For each of these concepts/theories, a description and a brief explanation of how they have been applied in similar research is combined with an articulation of their relevance to this research topic and questions. This chapter concludes with an explanation of how these concepts work together within this research.

5.2 What is policy?

There are many varied approaches to studying policy, with the choice of method and approach often stemming from assumptions about what policy *is*, what it *does,* and how it can be understood. This thesis uses a definition of policy that indicated that, in its broadest sense, policy can be understood as 'a structured commitment of important resources' and therefore is relevant not only to government but also to other structures including organisations, discourses and technologies of rule (Colebatch, 2005). Public policy, as what governments choose to do or not do, is the starting point of this thesis, but this includes acknowledging the complexity of 'government' as a composite of diverse activities and interests, not distinct from the 'public'. In using an interpretive approach to studying policy, I focus not on policy as text but on the 'meanings that policies have for a broad range of policy-relevant publics' (Yanow, 1999: 8). In an interpretative approach, policy is not a specific document or course of action, nor is analysis of policy limited to intent and structure. Instead, the focus is on interpretation and understanding as a means to understand actions, and outcomes. This contrasts with views of policy as an object or structure created by government, which focuses primarily on intent, outcomes and change. Instead, particular attention is paid to the mechanisms and processes that make certain policies thinkable. This thesis particularly draws on a view that 'policy cannot be treated simply as an object, a product or an outcome but, rather, as a process, something ongoing, interactional and unstable.' (Ball, 2017: 9).

An interpretive view of policy analysis is intended to recognise the complexity of policy and to acknowledge the importance of meaning making to understanding how policy is 'done'. However, recognising this complexity presents challenges in then attempting to

analyse it, whether as text, actions or ideas. This thesis draws on the work of Hal K. Colebatch (2002; 2006; 1999) in defining policy, and particularly on a description of policy as composed of 'authority, order and expertise' (2002), to address some of this complexity. In Colebatch's description, policy is not reducible to these three elements but these offer a means by which to understand how policy is done. They are elements common to multiple definitions of policy, which emphasise the need for authorised decision makers, for ordered structures and for relevant knowledge or 'expertise'. Colebatch therefore draws on varied definitions of these concepts, focusing on their functions within policy rather than on specific forms. Expertise or expert knowledge is one basis for participation in the policy process, where policy is seen as a process of skilled problem solving (Colebatch, 2002). Authority functions to legitimate a policy idea. It gives standing and a 'right' to participate to actors within policy, framing policy action to 'make it easier for some people, and more difficult for others' (Colebatch, 2002: 27). Finally, order is the capacity to 'make' policy happen and what structures actions as part of policy. Further examination of these elements and how they function within widening participation policy specifically, forms part of chapter nine of this thesis.

Colebatch examines the elements of authority, order and expertise, not as fixed and essential components, but as fluid and interacting, being relevant to different policies at different times. For example, 'expertise' is not a neutral concept. Authority is often a factor in determining which knowledges are designated as expertise in policy. Order, through the presence of committees or processing of consultation is also often needed to access and legitimise expertise within policy. These elements can form different configurations for different policy context. A controversial policy might require more and different elements of expertise to one that has political consensus. Examining policy in this way allows for assessment of both policy and politics, or the social conditions in which policy is thought, becomes authorised and is communicated. Colebatch's description of policy is intended as a practical guide to understand and analyse policy in action, rather than as a definition of policy. It is applied within this thesis as an explanatory framework, as in drawing on commonly understood and

practical experiences of how policy is done, it maps closely to how those seeking to shape policy frame their own actions and those of others. It is therefore a relevant framework for exploring the idea of influence as practice.

5.3 Policy enactment

One further approach adopted within this thesis to establish what is relevant to the study of policy, is the application of the concept of policy 'enactment'. Analysis of policy is frequently concerned with understanding the outcomes or the effects of policy, particularly public policy and particularly policy change. Understanding what happens when a policy becomes encoded into text and artifacts, and then moves to become practices, is sometimes examined as a process of 'implementation'. This implies a relatively straightforward process in which intentions and meanings of policy are transmitted into the practices and structures they are directed at. Success of implementation is often considered in terms of whether policies produce desired outcomes, with barriers to implementation including unclear communication or resistant structures. In education policy, the concept of 'enactment' has been advanced in recent years as a more effective concept for capturing the complexity of policy in action. In contrast to implementation, enactment is an ongoing process that does not begin with a text and have a fixed end to assess against a policy aim. Enactment is 'messy, incomplete and a form of interpretation and intersubjectivity in action' (Maguire et. al., 2015: 487). Enactment, studied often in terms of how schools respond to and create policy, is intended to capture the subtlety of power relations involved which are often layered and interactive. Enactment establishes policy as continually contested and subject to different 'interpretations' and 'interpretations of interpretations' (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012). Examining how policy ideas become contextualised practices through interpretations requires that attention be paid to which interpretations are privileged and how interpretations are developed and constrained by individual, social and structural factors.

The concept of enactment within widening participation policy has begun to be explored by researchers who have explored the varying interpretations and practices of widening participation in UK HE (e.g. Evans et. al., 2019; Rainford, 2021). The application of the concept of enactment in these studies is particularly relevant given the autonomy given to institutions and to practitioners in enacting WP policy. These studies draw attention to the importance of institutional and individual context in interpretations of WP policy and to the significance of this in reproducing deficit discourses and institutional hierarchies. These studies highlight how hierarchies of knowledge and of esteem within HE, discourses of 'aspiration' and personal dispositions all shape national and institutional enactment of policy, with the potential effect of limiting the scope for social justice interpretations of widening participation to be enacted. Thus far, there have been no explorations of WP policy as enacted by TSOs but many of the conditions identified in existing studies within universities are also present for TSWPOs. This thesis therefore builds on this existing work to apply the concept of studying WP policy as enactment to a different but similar context.

5.4 Policy networks

Used as both 'metaphor and model' (Knox et al., 2006), the concept of the network is appealing in its flexibility and seemingly widespread utility, finding application across a range of disciplines, including policy studies. Despite its utility, the 'network is neither a neutral not an uncontested concept' (Hay, 1998:38). This is certainly true of approaches to examining 'policy networks', where there is ongoing debate about the value of network ideas in research and researchers have variously drawn upon actor-network theory, social network analysis, ethnography and organisational theories to construct descriptive and explanatory models. In this thesis, networks form part of how TSWPOs attempt to influence policy and they also form part of why they take specific approaches. The presence of policy networks and the power relationships within them are seen as significant by interviewees and hence this is discussed and analysed in Chapters seven, eight and nine. This thesis therefore draws on ideas of policy network analysis advanced by policy scholars including Rhodes (1997), Marsh

(1998), and Hay (1998), using these as a means by which to understand policy actions within networks and the flow of policy ideas. In this conception, networks are fluid and changing and whilst they have structure and structuring properties relevant to these actions and the flow of ideas, unlike some studies of policy networks, the intent is not to focus on the network to make claims about the properties of policy networks in themselves. This is similar to Ball's application of policy networks to the study of education policy mobilities, in that the policy network is used as 'a descriptive and analytic term, rather than in any normative sense' (2008: 749). Contrary to Ball's application however, this thesis does not intend to address networks as an object of study in themselves but aims to build on the work of Ball and other researchers using 'policy network ethnography' to explore actions within networks and how those within them see networks as relevant (or not) to their policy activities.

Policy network analysis in the UK has developed from adaptations of US models of policy networks and is 'one way of analysing aggregation and intermediation; the oligopoly of the political market-place' (Rhodes, 1997: 9). Networks are variously defined as 'links between actors within a particular policy domain' (Marsh, 1998:3), 'a cluster or complex of organisations connected to one another by resource dependencies' (Rhodes, 1997:37) and are 'strategic alliances forged around a common agenda (however contested, however dynamic) of mutual advantage through collective action' (Hay, 1998:38). In focusing on the network, policy network analysis is looking at 'the institutionalization of power relations both within the network and within the broader socio-economic and political context' (Marsh & Smith, 2000: 6). Whilst scholars agree on the presence of policy networks as a condition of modern policymaking, particularly those who see modern policymaking as involving 'network governance', distinctions arise in agreeing on the significance of such networks and their explanatory potential in determining policy outcomes. Some applications of policy network analysis focus on analysing the network itself, including resource dependencies and the 'strength' of relations. Others focus on how ideas move within and between networks and the actions that make some networks 'successful' in making policy. Several researchers have pointed out a tendency for policy network

analysis to be descriptive, rather than analytical, seeing this as reducing the explanatory potential of the network concept (e.g. Dowding, 2001). For policy sociologists, such descriptive approaches are not necessarily a weakness, as the intent is not to establish causality in a relatively linear process but to examine conditions of policymaking in a messy and complex one. This is the position taken within this research.

5.5 Field theory

'Fields' are collections of relations in which actors are orientated towards each other and share common understandings about the purpose of the field, relationships to others and rules governing legitimate action within the field (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). It is possible to talk about many different collections of relations as fields, including organisations, family groups and professions. In this thesis, I am concerned with a field as 'actors who consider each other relevant with regard to specific professional or specialised practices' (Krause, 2018: 5) and, more specifically, with a 'policy field', or meso-level bounded structures which highlight roles and relationships among organisations and individuals 'carrying out a substantive policy and programme area'[2] (Sandfort, 2010: 637). Within a defined field, actors with varying resources compete for advantage (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), both as individuals and collectively in groups. In any given field, the rules establishing legitimacy can vary and can be contested, changing over time. Different approaches to studying fields have variously emphasised their ability to establish 'norms' and taken-for-granted assumptions which govern behaviour or have emphasised the symbolic divisions and contestations within them, with different assumptions about the capacity for actors to exercise agency within a field. In either case, there is an assumption that

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[2] Sandfort's definition is used here as although her model is constructed as a means for exploring relations in a particular geographical and political space, it is applicable to how the field of widening participation policy is understood as specific to the UK and partially structured by public policy. It is Sandfort's development of this understanding of field, rather than her specific policy field framework that is applied here.

'social action is best explained by reference to actors' location in the field' (Barman, 2016: 44). Paying attention to fields involves paying attention to power relations and how positions are allocated and contested within them. Field theory has been a common analytical approach for exploring collaboration, strategic action and development of specialised practices in the third sector, with associated insights around the role of individual actors, production of hierarchy and 'framing' of organisations' work, which are relevant to this study.

Particularly relevant to this study is also the view of fields as layered or 'nested', with hierarchies between as well as within fields (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011). The organisations selected for this study operate within at least two policy fields – that of widening participation, as it links to their organisational purposes, and that of the 'charity' sector, as it links to their organisational structures. They may also consider themselves part of or connected to other policy and/or practice fields and sub-fields, such as social mobility, education, welfare and social enterprise. Policy fields have been categorised as 'horizontal' (i.e. related to the sector of its ownership – public, private, etc. – in this case the 'third sector') and 'vertical' (i.e. industry or activity area, in this case widening participation), partly to explore policy and policy action in the context of accumulated choices which can enable and constrain particular options (Kendall, 2003). Kendall argues that it is 'vertical' policy fields which are most significant for policy actors where 'to a significant degree, their beliefs and actions are shaped by the specific policy legacies that exist in particular fields, and the experiences and relationships they accrue while situated there' (Kendall, 2003: 11) and hence this thesis focuses primarily on the circumstances and relations within the policy field of 'widening participation'. As Kendall also argues, doing so enables better assessment of the relative contribution and nature of the sector as a policy actor. However, in considering fields as layered and shifting, it is possible to explore TSWPOs as actors within multiple fields, and to explore how these interact.

5.6 Applying a 'relational' approach

There are important distinctions within and between various network and field theory approaches with regards to structure and agency and their relative importance in determining actions, however, I am not applying a specific framework to this research but using these concepts networks as they have been applied to the study of policymaking and to organisational studies as tools for understanding social action in this context. This thesis takes a relational approach, working from the premise that actors and their practices are oriented in relation to each other or to a shared conception of what is 'at stake' (Emirbayer and Johnson, 2008; Macmillan et al., 2013). Applications of network and field concepts focus on relationships, rather than entities, and call for researchers to pay attention to specific elements of social relations, including power, historical structures and dependencies. I apply both networks and fields in this context because of the complexity of relations relevant to TSWPOs and how they describe their actions. Considering only the characteristics of the field in which TSWPOs operate fails to describe fully the power relations and historical structures most relevant to them, many of which extend beyond a single field. This is particularly relevant given that the field relevant to this research, that of widening participation, appears contested and could be considered emergent. Similarly, looking only at the networks in which TSWPOs are active can focus attention on particular networks and relations, rather than acknowledging the multiple and layered networks and potential networks that exist in this space and enable or constrain actions. This thesis takes the view that there are multiple relations which shape the policy actions of TSWPOs in this context but that these cannot be explained only by references to the specific field in which they are acting, nor only by the relations captured in one or even multiple networks. Examining both provides an explanation for action that is sensitive to multiple and overlapping relations and provides a more dynamic view of the changes in relations over time that have particularly affected TSWPOs.

5.7 Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the concepts and theories that have guided this research. It has outlined how policy is understood within this thesis and situates this research within the context of other relational approaches to studying policy, policymaking and organisations. The following chapter, examining the research design, describes how these concepts have been operationalised to answer the research questions identified in chapter one.

Chapter six: Research design

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how the concepts addressed in the previous chapter have been operationalised in this research within an interpretive policy analysis approach. It first offers an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of this study, namely an interpretive policy analysis approach with critical realist underlabouring. I also outline my own positionality, with reference to how this changed throughout the study and practices of reflexivity in my research design. This chapter then looks at identification of research questions, definition of the objects of research and methods utilised. Ethical considerations in relation to these methods and the conduct of research are explored. Finally, this chapter outlines the analysis process, providing the context for understanding the findings following chapters.

6.2 Theoretical approach

This study is grounded in a policy sociology approach (Ozga, 2019), which involves an understanding of policy as enmeshed in politics and social context. This approach has been applied particularly within education sociology to examine issues at both macro and micro levels, with attention paid to the historical and social conditions of policy. This approach is compatible with a critical realist (CR) meta-theory, which stresses the need for a social ontology linking structure and agency (Cruickshank, 2003). Although CR does not advocate particular methods (and often encourages a plurality of method), 'depth' is an important feature and CR research requires that a 'detailed and focused approach is necessary to understand the specific causal connections and dynamics associated with the phenomena under study' (Parr, 2015: 196). In implementation and methods, an interpretative policy analysis approach has therefore been used, which similarly emphasises a methical depth of exposure to the wide variety of research-relevant meanings (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013). This involves document analysis, interviews and observation for 'accessing local knowledge and

identifying communities of meaning and their symbolic artifacts' (Yanow, 2000: 31). These layered approaches are all consistent with both the conceptual understandings and theories identified within chapter five, and also emphasise the importance of considering positionality.

6.2.1 Critical realist meta-theory

Critical realism encompasses a range of philosophical positions that attempt to create a comprehensive post-positivist philosophy of science, founded on ontological realism, epistemic relativism and judgemental rationality. Ontological realism posits that there exists a reality independently of our knowledge of it, with critical realism drawing on Bhaskar's (2008) 'layered ontology' of three domains: the empirical, the actual and the real. The empirical relates to what we experience; the actual to what exists, regardless of our experience of it; and the real to the structures and mechanisms that contribute to the production of events in the world. These three domains provide a meta-theory for understanding human action and interaction, with the potential of developing theories to explain these. Adoption of a CR approach requires recognition that the objects of social science are both socially defined and socially produced and requires researchers to be 'ontological reflexive' in research and in advancing theory (Archer et. al., 2016).

The aim of CR is 'an historical inquiry into artifacts, culture, social structures, persons, and what affects human action and interaction' (Archer et al., 2016). CR accounts for the role of structures and gives consideration to the agency of individuals, upholding a subject/object distinction to determine the relations between structure and agency. It intends to examine causality critically, using partial regularities, facts and events encountered as a starting point for understanding mechanisms and contingent processes that cause them. Critical realism is not a single framework but collectively CR approaches are set apart from positivist approaches, which adopt a position of researcher neutrality, and strongly interpretivist approaches, which can reduce to the level of individual lived experience. Instead, CR argues that, through application of

theoretical and methodological tools, it is possible to develop and discriminate between theories that can inform us about external reality.

Within this research, CR provides the basis for the research design, which attempts to identify the actions of organisations and individuals alongside their agential deliberations. The emphasis placed both on interviewees' interpretations and those of the researcher, as well as the fallibility of both, is in keeping with CR, which sees interpretations as shaping agential responses and structured reasoning as a means to understand causal mechanisms. The adoption of a CR approach also maintains a dual focus on both structure and agency – i.e. TSWPOs and those within them are both shaped by and shaping their environment, including policy actions. A CR approach is also applied within data analysis in this thesis, which attempts to move beyond description or identification of themes to posit causal factors. A further description of the approach to data analysis is included within this chapter.

6.2.2 Interpretive policy analysis

Beyond adopting a CR metatheory, this research takes and interpretive approach to studying policy, which uses an abductive way of reasoning, moving between data and possible explanations in an iterative-recursive process (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). Interpretive approaches seek to understand the 'meaning and processes of meaning-making of social phenomena for actors' (Aukes, Luloff & Bressers, 2017: 3), seeing these as crucial to understanding policymaking and policy implementation. As such, this research is concerned with understanding the complex individual, social and institutional contexts in which varied discourses, values and material and human resources are deployed. The methods used in this study are therefore based on exploring the 'words and reasonings of communities or networks of policy actors' (Gale, 2007: 153) to understand how and in what ways TSOs are seeking to influence WP policy and practice. This approach does not reduce understanding to the interpretations of policy actors, taking a critical view of these and examining them in context. Interpretive policy analysis explicitly acknowledges the role and position of

the analyst, using systematic and rigorous methods to make claims about policy but not assuming that these are universal or objective. Much like CR, the purpose of interpretative policy analysis is to advance possible theories that can be tested and critically assessed.

Interpretative policy analysis generally uses a range of methods to gain exposure to a wide variety of meanings made by research relevant participants (Yanow, 2000). Often this begins with document analysis, including media reports, policy documents and organisational documents. These are used to build up an understanding of the context that can form the basis of conversational interviews with key actors. These may also be combined with observations or ethnographic approaches. The aim is to build up a picture of the range of interpretations and how these relate to the positions of different actors. This research uses a combination of document analysis and 'expert' interviews to achieve this. Further explanation of these methods and how they are linked to this approach are included in the methods section of this chapter.

6.2.3 Positionality

Both interpretative policy analysis and CR place emphasis on the position of the researcher and the need for reflexivity throughout the research process as an integral part of interpretation. An interpretive approach to studying policy argues that 'it is not possible for an analyst to stand outside of the policy issue being studied, free of its values and meanings and of the analyst's own values, beliefs, and feelings' (Yanow, 2000: 5). Reflexivity and the practice of reflexivity has therefore been an important focus within this research, particularly given that, by some assessments, I would be considered an 'insider' researcher. My position in relation to this research, comprised of my values, interpretations, current and historical professional and personal relationships to interviewees and subjects of study, has shifted over time. This changing position aligns with how I have negotiated the methodology of this research, as an 'elastic plane', potentially 'dynamic, contingent, dialogic and context specific' (Dunne, Prior & Yates 2005: 166). To support the ongoing and consistent review of my

position, I have adopted formal processes, including keeping and reviewing a research diary as 'scaffolding' to my own learning and to support reflexivity throughout the research process (Engin, 2011). This has included developing explicit 'position' statements and interrogating my own experiences and reflections on the organisations, events and individuals covered within this research. As part of the interview process, I also conducted a self-interview. This has not been included or formally analysed as part of the research but posing similar questions to myself as to interviewees formed part of developing my understanding of my position in relation to others within this research. This interview and diary were reviewed at the start and end of the analysis process.

Prior to starting this PhD I worked for 12 years as a 'widening participation practitioner', going from delivering activity with young people to, most latterly, managing a team and helping to shape institutional WP policy in a university setting. My research questions developed from a feeling that my 'reality' of working in widening participation was not reflected in research, as there was little reference to the interpretations of practitioners and none to the involvement of the third sector. The growing involvement of the third sector in widening participation was a theme within my own career, including being an early user of the Brightside e-mentoring platform as a practitioner, working alongside third sector organisations in delivery and being involved in some of the networks mentioned in this research such as NEON and FACE. Several of my former colleagues had more active involvement, including being founding members of TSWPOs. My involvement with third sector organisations has therefore been an integral part of my career and my understanding of how widening participation is 'done' in practice.

My curiosity in how organisations and individuals within them navigate the policy spaces of WP comes from my own experiences of being in leadership roles and moving between different types of organisation, often with very different understandings of WP. This has informed my particular interest in the negotiation of policy at different levels and in policy *enactment*, as this relates closely to my understanding of and

relationship to policy as a practitioner. My alignment with interpretative policy analysis and associated epistemological position, which values the words and reasonings of those involved in making policy, is also informed, in part, by my professional experience and my own understanding of how policy is made within institutions and at a national level.

In charting relationships between organisations in the early phases of my research, I also identified where I myself am linked to several of them. I am a part of the landscape I am researching, or rather, I was. By the phase of interviewing participants, I had already spent two years outside practice in a field which has undergone important changes in regulation and funding. As a consequence, only a small number of the actual participants in this research had any relationship to me personally, shifting the potential 'insider' power relations, and my knowledge as an 'insider' was already dated. I am, most accurately, a former insider, with that former status being significant in how others see me, how I see myself, and how I understand this research. I am not only a researcher but also an 'informant', drawing on my own experiences of and connections to this field. This has presented many opportunities, enabling me access to individuals who may not have engaged with research with an 'outsider'. It also gave me a common language and experience with interviewees, supporting building rapport and ease of conversation. This familiarity was also a challenge, as I had to find ways to distance myself from this research and to set boundaries with participants that were clear and reiterated that the academic nature of my research. It is important to reflect that my presentation of myself as former insider and interviewees' perception of me as familiar, may have been a factor in eliciting responses and the detail and sometimes confessional nature of those responses, including describing conflicts between different organisations or their doubts about the effectiveness of their policy work. Identifying and negotiating these challenges was a common theme of my research diaries.

Beyond my professional background and, albeit fluctuating, 'insider' status, it is also important to acknowledge that this research is shaped by my positionality in other

ways, including my own moral ethos and values. My own values, which are strongly egalitarian, have not always felt well aligned with the practice or focus of WP policy and practice. For me, it is the social justice imperatives of WP, and not the dual economic and social justice model expressed in policy, that take priority. This extends to a view of widening participation as rooted in reducing inequalities across society as a whole, rather than being about raising the fortunes of a select few most disadvantaged and/or deserving. These values were a motivating factor for me in pursuing WP as a career and shape how I assess what is of importance in widening participation work. Whilst many of my professional experiences have been alongside colleagues with similar values, seeing how others have negotiated tensions between their own values and those expressed within policy was a motivating factor in undertaking this research. This curiosity and my own experiences of navigating tensions in personal and policy values have also shaped my research questions and research design.

Setting out my experiences and the challenges and opportunities my positions have presented is part of a broader and ongoing commitment to reflexivity within my research. The reflections of researchers like Clegg (2012), Grek (2011) and Dean (2017) as well as those of fellow PhD students studying similar contexts (e.g. Rainford, 2019; Somers, 2013), has helped in understanding how others have approached the *practice* of reflexivity, though this feels like an ongoing process and commitment, even within the writing and communication of this research. It is important to note that embracing a reflexive approach, exploring and acknowledging my own position, interests and their relevance to this research does not however, mean that this research is designed to achieve particular ends or confirm an existing perspective. My reflexive approach within the context of interpretive policy analysis is intended to support the application of systematic, rigorous methods that recognise different interpretations, whilst acknowledging that these methods do not lead to universal, objective claims (Yanow, 2000). Where I feel it has been relevant I have made space within this thesis for discussing my place within this research, yet I am clear that I am not the focus and that the findings of this research are intended to go beyond presenting my interpretations

to building an explanatory framework that can be tested in other contexts and from other perspectives.

6.3 Research questions and parameters

6.3.1 Research aims

This study aims to understand how and in what ways TSWPOs are shaping widening participation policy and its enactment, with a view to examining the implications of this for the future possibilities of WP. It is concerned with understanding the practices and reasoning of TSOs within a specific policy and practice context, with a focus on their relationship to policy and enactment of policy. It is also about understanding *why* – what shapes TSOs relationships to policy in this field and what are the underlying logics and assumptions that inform their decision-making processes?

These aims can be achieved through the following objectives:

- Establishing the ways in which TSWPOs are actively seeking to influence policy and/or practice
- Examining the policy and practice context in which TSWPOs operate
- Examining how TSWPOs relate this context to their work and particularly their decision-making processes

No previous research has examined third sector organisations in widening participation as policy actors or enactors of WP policy. There has been research on the impact of activities designed or funded by these organisations (e.g. Lasselle, Kerr & Smith, 2009; Byrom, 2009), though with a focus on participants outcomes and with very limited references to policy or organisational context. Research on education policy actors has highlighted some organisations working within social mobility or school attainment relevant to this thesis (e.g. Ball & Junemann, 2011; Olmedo, Bailey & Ball, 2013; John, 2006), though the focus has tended to be on international education policy trends and on identifying relations between organisations that might explain policy mobilities.

There has also been recent research examining enactment in widening participation (e.g. Rainford, 2019), though this has looked at practitioners only within HEPs. This research, therefore, has needed to identify and define the phenomenon of third sector organisations in widening participation (as set out in chapter four) and focuses on research questions that explore their actions and their context, as these have not been covered elsewhere.

6.3.2 Research questions

1. How and in what ways are TSOs shaping policy and practice in relation to widening participation?
2. How is their relationship to policy shaping and being shaped by their status as charitable organisations in a 'third sector'?
3. What are the implications of this for the project of widening participation?

6.3.3 Identifying a TSWPO

As discussed in chapter four, I initially identified organisations that are relevant to these research questions by consideration of whether they fit two criteria: that they operate in an area of policy that could be considered 'widening participation' and secondly, that they are formally constituted in the same legal structures, specifically that of being registered charities in England. The first research task was to 'map the field' or identify how many organisations fit these parameters and explore how it would be possible to understand their engagement with policy. Mapping the field involved techniques of 'network ethnography' as applied by Hogan (2016b), Ball (2012) and others, though with the focus of identifying individuals and organisations, rather than the network and its operation. My own former involvement in this network was the starting point for much of this work. Hogan describes the role of the network ethnographer as 'cyberflaneur', using 'a new way of looking at social relations in changing times', using new technologies to become a well-positioned observer. Likening this to previous conceptions of the '*flaneur'* as someone who observes and analyses modernity, Hogan argues that the *cyberflaneur* is best placed to explore the

new spacialities of policy, particularly the global 'flow' of policy. The purpose of Hogan's *cyberflaneur*, in contrast to the network ethnographer as conceived by Ball and Junemann (2012) is that mapping the network is not the methodological 'end point' but the identification of the field for ethnographic study.

My own use approach to cyberflaneurie however, differs notably from Hogan's conception in two significant ways. Firstly, Hogan's flaneur is on the 'threshold', and 'can only enter part of the world they wish to study, where their analysis is largely ephemeral, fleeting and contingent' (2016b: 390). For me, my involvement with the field of study is not purely digital but results from several years working within it. My starting point for investigating networks are my own personal and professional networks. Whilst using internet searches and tracing financial, personal and professional connections between organisations revealed to me new organisations and new connections, the origins came not from the distanced observation of the detached *flaneur* but from a position of embeddedness. Secondly, most applications of network ethnography are concerned with tracing policy flows across global spacialities, seeking the connection of the global with the local. This study is solely focused on an English policy context, meaning that where networks do expand beyond national borders, these are considered the edges of the network – points of entry and exit but not a constituent part of the field.

I began by identifying organisations that I had come across in my professional experience or who had a public profile as being explicitly concerned with access to or success within university. Additional organisations were identified through either links with these organisations, links with universities or NCOPs (now called Uni Connect partnerships). I searched 2017/18 access agreements for partnerships or mentions of 'third sector' 'charity' 'voluntary' 'volunteering' and also examined NCOP planning documents for organisations named as partners. My search focused on finding active organisations but I also recorded organisations that have since ceased activities or have moved to focus on other areas of policy. I examined the membership of professional networks, including the Fair Education Alliance, NEON, HEAT or FACE to

identify individuals and organisations who are operating within the third sector. Finally, I searched the charity commission register for active organisations with 'widening participation', 'widening access' and 'social mobility' in their titles or charitable objects. These final searches produced large numbers of results, most relevant to physical access and mobility, so organisations were further examined through their websites or annual reports to see whether their work related to education progression, HE access and success or social mobility. These initial searches, taking place in November 2018, identified 32 organisations with a major interest in widening participation who were also registered charities. Of these, six were designated 'specialists' in that they were focused on widening participation to a particular profession or for a specific target group. These were not included as possible interview candidates as their policy work covered a broader range of policy fields than other WP organisations, which included engaging with very different policies and policy actors than other TSWPOs. Given the scale of this research it was decided to focus on organisations operating mainly within WP, leaving 26 organisations (see appendix ii).

Several other organisations whose legal status was not clear or whose participation in WP had been short term and not an explicit part of their mission were also identified in this search, as were organisations who had become inactive prior to November 2018. As some of these were closely related to or engaged with organisations covered in this research or had links to interviewees, I made the decision to designate these as 'widening participation organisations' (WPOs) or 'third sector organisations' (TSOs) to distinguish from TSWPOs who are the primary focus of this research. A full list of 51 organisations, their categorisation in November 2018 and a re-categorisation at the end of this research in November 2021, is included in appendix i.

6.4 Research methods

My research questions were concerned with understanding both the actions and reasonings of TSWPOs. Although organisations, in themselves, can be considered

policy actors, either as a collective of actors or as structures that enable or guide agentic action, this thesis considers TSWPOs as nested fields in which the individuals within them have the capacity to take strategic action based on their interpretations. This approach takes into account the structures of these organisations as fields and the structures of the wider policy field, as well as the interpretations of actors within them. As a result, the methods chosen were designed to explore multiple interpretations from a variety of structural positions.

Interviews, documentary analysis and observation are the central methods for 'accessing local knowledge and communities of meaning' (Yanow, 2000). The relevant 'community of meaning' here is that of WP policy making and enactment, with a specific emphasis on the position of 'third sector organisations' within this. Given limited sites for observation and the potential difficulties of gaining access to these, I chose to focus on interviews and documentary analysis as my primary methods of research. These approaches were refined during the process of research, responding to the practicalities of accessing relevant documents and the availability of interviewees. These methods were not wholly distinct phases, with document analysis informing the design of interviews and interviews and, in turn, leading to further identification of relevant documents and organisations.

6.4.1 Document analysis

At the outset, documentary research was intended to form a formal part of research and analysis. In particular, it was hoped that formal position statements from TSWPOs, as well as internal policy documents, could identify the positioning of organisations with regards to WP policy. However, it became apparent that even organisations with policy roles kept limited internal records and, due to changes in government and approaches to policy consultations, there were almost no records of responses to policy consultations or position statements issued by TSWPOs published by government. There were exceptions to this, with Fair Access Coalition members issuing public statements on their websites, and the Sutton Trust also publishing their

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responses to consultations on their website, but this did not apply to the majority of organisations considered within the scope of this research or those selected to be approached for interviews (see appendix iii for details of consultations and responses). It also became apparent, through interviews, that public statements were not a major part of how TSWPOs attempted to engage with policy. They were seen by many as ineffectual and not relevant to their interests. Examining documents produced by TSWPOs instead became part of understanding the approaches to policy highlighted in their interviews, including building relationships and cultivating a positive image in the eyes of their intended audiences. Examining a range of documents produced by TSWPOs connected to interviewees also provided information that prompted discussions in interviews about specific events, interests or relationships.

Documents and texts produced by TSWPOs used as part of this research to establish their history, engagement with policy, formal structures, policy activities and formal and informal relationships included: annual reports (both to the charity commission and for a public audience); websites (current and historical); published research; media reports; twitter feeds (both organisational and individual professional accounts); blogs; conference proceedings and reports; impact reports; and job/volunteering advertisements. These were not the same for all organisations, with smaller organisations producing far fewer documents in number and variety. Documents were rarely comparable, with variations even within reports to the charity commission. However, this variety provided an insight into the resources and positioning of organisations within this field. A list of documents used for those organisations shortlisted for interview are available in appendix vi.

In addition to documents produced by TSWPOs, a selection of policy documents from 1997 onwards were searched for references to the 'third sector', 'charities' and for the names of the 26 non-specialist TSWPOs identified as the focus of this research. Hansard records were also searched for references to these charities in any public debate. References to the Sutton Trust in Hansard were too numerous to review but were examined within debates explicitly about higher education policy. A series of

policy consultations on widening participation, higher education and social mobility were also identified, with responses to these searched for responses from and references to TSWPOs. These documents were used to develop a history of TSWPO involvement in policy, as presented in chapter four, and have also been used to contextualise the interview findings presented (appendix iii).

6.4.2 Interviewing

Interviewing is a common approach within interpretive policy analysis to access the 'words and reasonings' of policy actors (Gale, 2007). As this research is concerned with enactment and the range of individuals coding and decoding policies, accessing the interpretations of individuals in this way is particularly necessary, as there are few other ways to access these. This research used semi-structured interviews, with questions often tailored to the experiences of individual interviewees within a broad topic area. For example, individuals in different roles within a TSWPO were all asked about the structures of their organisations but more probing financial and strategy questions were directed at trustees than at delivery roles. This topic-based interview structure enabled interviews to be adapted to the knowledge, experience and interests of interviewees, whilst also ensuring that common themes were explored relevant to the research questions. For interviewees designated as 'policy experts', questions were more tailored to their specific careers and experience, with individual interview guides produced for each of these, again grouped around common topics. Copies of these interview topic guides are in appendices vii-viiii.

Interviewing those in positions of power in terms of their ability to shape policy or the direction of an organisation has often been referred to as 'elite' interviewing, with an associated body of practical and theoretical guidelines produced on how to approach these. In this case, 'elite' is generally referring to those in a position of authority or privilege, often those making executive decisions in an organisation. Although many of my interviewees were certainly 'elites', I did not approach these interviews from the position of conducting an 'elite' interview, as many of the approaches to these assume

a simplified model of power relations in which the structural position of the interviewee is of major concern (Smith, 2006) and interviewees are treated as objects rather than subjects of research (Selywyn, 2013). I am concerned with not only the structural position of interviewees that can enable and restrict their ability to shape policy, but also in how their interpretations of their position, informed by their values and experiences, shapes their actions. As such, my approach was to be mindful of power relations, both in the accounts provided by interviewees and within the interviewer-interviewee relationship, but to not assume their direction or their permanence. As noted by Walford, 'all interviews are about power and politics' (2012: 116) and a reflexive approach to power relations, although limited by the researchers' ability to know and define these, is helpful in a critical approach the production of knowledge (Smith, 2006).

Although I have not explicitly used an 'elite' interview approach, consideration of the structural and social positions of interviewees has formed part of my considerations of determining whose interpretations are relevant to my research questions. To support this I have drawn on the notion of 'expert' interviews, which aim to identify holders of 'expert' knowledge or knowledge that can become 'hegemonial' in certain contexts and 'structure the conditions of action' for others (Meuseur & Nagel, 2009). Expert interviews do not require a specific methodology but are developed on the basis of exploring 'the embeddedness of the expert in circumstances and milieus' (Meuseur & Nagel, 2009:25), which can include their institutional framework but may go beyond this to the many communities and practices from which knowledge and expertise as privileged knowledge emerge. In contrast with some conceptions of 'elite' interviews, experts can have both formative and/or interpretive power (Littig, 2009). Formative power is the authority to determine and define problems and solutions, generally held by elites who occupy positions that grant this authority, whereas interpretive power is the ability to establish terms and concepts for interpreting phenomena and recontextualising it. This aligns with this thesis' exploration of enactment, which similarly recognises these dual forms of authority that can shape how it is done in different contexts.

6.4.3 Identifying interviewees

Selection of interviewees was linked to two principles, that of exposure to 'the wide variety of meanings made by research-relevant participants of their experiences' (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013: 84) as part of interpretive research and on the concept of 'expertise' as a 'specific configuration of knowledge' (Bogner and Menz, 2009: 72).To achieve this, interviewees were sought from both within and outside TSWPOs, from a variety of TSWPOs and from a range of decision-making roles within those TSWPOs. Given that I have conceptualised power relations within this field in 'a relational and situated way' (Maguire, Ball & Braun, 2012), the focus was not solely on those traditionally viewed as 'powerful' but all of those involved in interpreting and enacting policy who have an 'institutionalised authority to construct reality' (Hitzler, Honer & Maeder, 1994, quoted in Meuseur & Nagel, 2009: 19). For example, this included those in policy and delivery roles within TSWPOs due to their ability to shape the practices and discourses of WP within their organisation and in the wider field. Interviewees external to TSWPOs were identified on the basis of their involvement in making WP policy, their knowledge of the sector and their personal and professional positions which make their interpretations relevant to actions taken by TSWPO. These included a former Director of Fair Access, a policy journalist, former civil servants and the CEO of an HE policy think tank. Interviewees within TSWPOs were identified first through their organisation and then in respect of their professional role within these organisations. An overview of this is presented in Figure 1 and a full list of interviewees and how they were selected is in Table 1 below.

To select organisations the websites (if available) of all 26 non-specialist TSWPOs and their records in the charities register for England were examined to identify their organisational mission, funding relationships and structure, any personal or professional links to other organisations within the field and any specific references to policy. This information was used to help draw up a categorisation of organisations, based on whether their work was primarily policy or delivery based and whether they were a small, medium or large organisation in terms of their most recent income as

reported to the charity commission in 2018. This categorisation was based on the income bands used in the NCVO Civil Society Almanac. From this list of 24 organisations who could be categorised, a sample of organisations was drawn. Five organisations were selected at random:

- One large, policy focused organisation (from a possible one)
- One large, delivery focused organisation (from a possible nine)
- One medium, policy focused organisation (from a possible two)
- One medium, delivery focused organisation (from a possible nine)
- One small, delivery focused organisation (from a possible three)

There were no small policy focused organisations at the time of this research.

Figure 1. Interviewees

Policy makers, advisors and experts						Trustee	CEO
Delivery TSO (Small)	Delivery TSO (Medium)	Delivery TSO (Large)	Policy TSO (Medium)	Policy TSO (Large)		Policy/External Relations	Delivery Manager
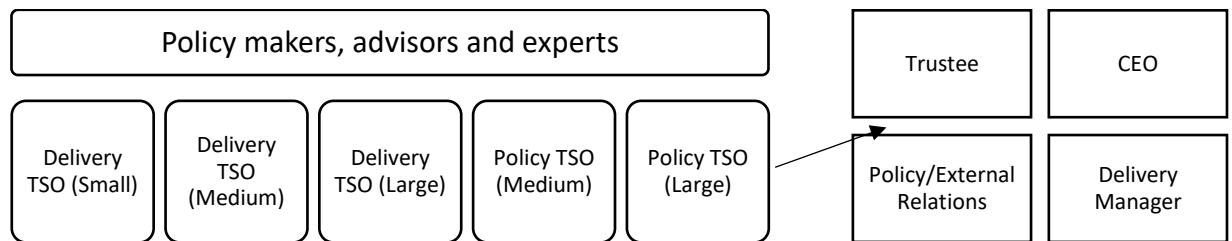
The designation of organisations as policy focused or delivery focused was intended to support the identification of organisations who may have different resources and orientations to policy work. However, although three organisations were designated as policy focused, all of these also delivered activity that was not directly connected to their policy work, and many of the delivery focused organisations also undertake some policy activity. This categorisation was based on what these organisations are 'known for' within the sector, and, over the course of this research, it became apparent that these labels and the levels of focus on policy and delivery shift in response to resource availability and the policy context. It also rapidly became apparent that the distinction between individuals 'inside' and 'outside' TSWPOs, and between different levels of decision making within organisations, was not an accurate reflection of the positions held by interviewees or how they saw themselves. For example, the former Director of

Fair Access had recently become Chair of Trustees of a WPO in the process of seeking charitable status. Similarly, the CEO of one large policy focused TSWPO was also a Trustee of another large delivery focused TSWPO. Only four of a total 19 interviewees ultimately ended up only fitting within one category, with most being both insiders and outsiders to TSWPOs at varying point in their careers, and several having roles in more than one TSWPO. Nonetheless, these initial attempts to ensure a range of perspectives did result in interviewees drawn from a variety of structural positions and served to illustrate how closely connected the field of TSWPOs is.

Attempts to access a range of interviewees were hampered by practical constraints. In the first instance, gaining access to employees and trustees within organisations often required going through CEOs, meaning that these interviews could not be scheduled until after CEO interviews had taken place. In some cases, and particularly in the delivery organisations, there were no policy focused roles and CEOs were reluctant to identify or approach trustees for interview requests. This meant that these interviews were the last to be scheduled and, when the Covid-19 pandemic led to a suspension of research, some of these had not yet taken place. At this time, organisations and individuals were under significant pressure due to not being able to deliver their activities during the pandemic and short-term funding contracts. Although contact was maintained with some potential interviewees, they did not respond to requests to reschedule interviews online and the decision was taken to not pursue these in light of the pressures they were under. Only one interview, held online, took place after the start of the pandemic with the CEO of a WPO. As it became apparent that interviewees were rarely talking from a single position in terms of their professional roles or their organisational affiliation, the relevance of these to sourcing a diverse sample became less significant, as there was a spread of roles represented, albeit skewed towards senior leadership positions and not across the organisation as originally intended. A full table of interviewees, the role that they were selected for and their other current or previous roles is provided below. The final list of interviewees represented 19 individuals connected to nine different TSWPOs and two WPOs.

Table 1: Interviewees

	Selected as	Additional roles
1	Policy expert	Trustee, Medium Delivery TSWPO; CEO, WPO
2	Policy expert	Trustee, Large Delivery TSWPO
3	Policy expert	CEO, Medium Policy TSWPO
4	Policy expert	CEO, WPO
5	Policy expert	Trustee, Medium Policy TSWPO; Director, TSO
6	Policy expert	Former CEO, Large Policy TSWPO
7	Policy expert	Trustee, WPO; Trustee, TSO
8	Policy expert	
9	Policy expert	Director, TSO
10	Policy expert	CEO, Large Delivery TSWPO
11	Policy expert	Former CEO, Large Delivery TSWPO; Former Trustee, Medium Policy TSWPO; Former Director, Large Policy TSWPO; Former Trustee, Large Delivery TSWPO.
12	CEO, Large Delivery TSWPO	
13	CEO, Medium Policy TSWPO	Former Trustee, Medium Policy TSWPO
14	Trustee, Medium Policy TSWPO	Director, Large Delivery TSWPO
15	Policy Role, Medium Policy TSWPO	
16	Delivery Role, Medium Policy TSWPO	Former Trustee, Medium Policy TSWPO
17	Delivery Role, Large Delivery TSWPO	
18	CEO, Large Policy TSWPO	Trustee, Large Delivery TSWPO; Trustee TSO
19	CEO, Medium Delivery TSWPO	Trustee, TSO

6.4.4 Conducting the interviews

Interviews were conducted between May 2019 and July 2020. Where possible, interviews were conducted in person, with interviewees given the option of choosing a location. Most chose their place of work or a public space nearby. In person interviews were not feasible for three interviewees due to their locations or schedules, and one interview in the summer of 2020 took place remotely due to concerns about the risks of Covid-19. Of these, two were conducted on online platforms selected and managed by interviewees, the remaining two were conducted over the phone. In all cases, interviews were recorded on a dictaphone with no visual recordings made. Interviews ranged from 25 – 90 minutes, with most around an hour in length.

6.5 Coding and analysis of data

Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed using ExpressScribePro. Notes were also taken after each interview to record initial impressions and relevant context. Transcripts and audio recordings were transferred to NVivo, where they were coded in three stages. The analysis process was based on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), with additional consideration given to the CR underpinnings of this research and the use of abductive and retroductive reasoning. Whilst the structure of this thesis identifies 'analysis' as a specific phase and framework within my research, both critical realist studies and thematic analysis highlight that analysis begins long before the formal process of coding or structuring data and can continue long after into writing and communicating research.

6.5.1 Data analysis in critical realism

Critical realism (CR), as a meta-theory, is concerned with 'with the nature of causation, agency, structure, and relations, and the implicit or explicit ontologies we are operating with' (Archer et al., 2016). As such, data analysis within a CR framework aims to go beyond description to understand 'the specific causal connections and dynamics associated with the phenomena under study' (Parr, 2015: 196). To do this, use of

abductive and *retroductive* reasoning, is considered essential to CR studies (Danermark et al., 2019). *Abduction,* though variously defined, has been described in CR terms as 'theoretical redescription' (Fletcher, 2017), inferring 'from facts in the domain of the actual, to facts in the domain of the real' (Danermark et al., 2019: 114). It moves from a deep view of individual phenomena to attempts to understand the causal mechanisms and the social structures they are embedded within, through reference to existing theory and 'creative reasoning' (Danermark et al., 2019). *Retroduction* is concerned with identifying 'the necessary contextual conditions for a particular causal mechanism to take effect and to result in the empirical trends observed' (Fletcher, 2017: 189). Both involve exploring different theoretical interpretations and identifying causal mechanisms through questioning and in, practice, the processes of employing abductive and retroductive reasoning are closely related and will likely overlap (Danermark et al., 2019).

6.5.2 Thematic analysis

Although abductive and retroductive reasoning can provide a framework for data analysis in CR, to apply these modes of inference it is first necessary to first describe the phenomenon studied and to identify its different components or aspects. This, in itself, involves a process of interpretation and use of reasoning, particularly as CR suggests a need for depth in research and a plurality of methods in data collection. However, there are relatively few detailed descriptions of the actual process of data analysis within CR studies (Fletcher, 2017) and CR does not propose a specific analytic method, though CR scholars do suggest that analysis should be 'focused', 'rigorous' and 'systematic' (e.g. Parr, 2015; Danermark et al. 2019). This study uses thematic analysis, described by Braun and Clarke as an 'analytic method' which 'organises and describes your dataset in (rich) detail' (2006: 6). Thematic analysis is consistent with a CR research practice that identifies the existence of 'demi-regularities' within data as indications of underlying generative mechanisms which are dependent on context. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke, is an organised process for managing and refining data through a series of stages (2006). These stages are

described in a linear fashion but, in practice, are recursive and are not only about the process of coding but also reading, writing and reasoning about data. These stages are: familiarisation with data; coding; searching for 'themes' and reviewing themes. In this way, textual data is collated, compared and refined according to the interest of the researcher and the questions they are seeking to address. This broad framework can then be adapted with respect to the research methodology. For example, coding can be latent and/or semantic, driven by existing theory in a deductive approach and/or 'rooted' in the data using an inductive approach. For this research, a deductive-inductive approach to coding is used, with some initial codes applied from provisional theory relevant to the study of third sector organisations and to policy formation and from my own reflections throughout the interview process, as captured in my research diary and field notes. The process of searching for and reviewing themes then brings in abductive and retroductive reasoning, though I have also designated these as specific stages within my analysis process to afford them sufficient attention.

6.5.3 Reflexivity and data analysis

This study specifically uses *reflexive* thematic analysis, in which the procedures of analysis 'reflect the values of a qualitative paradigm, centring researcher subjectivity, organic and recursive coding processes, and the importance of deep reflection on, and engagement with, data' (Braun & Clarke, 2019: 593). In this construction, researcher reflexivity is seen as a 'resource'. Whilst one element of this is reflection on data, its context of production and the 'position' of the researcher, as Braun and Clarke suggest, another is developing an ongoing awareness of the individual and broader contexts of knowledge and knowledge production. In actually practicing a reflexive analysis, this has involved an attempt to articulate explicitly some of the ontological and epistemological assumptions that have underpinned the structure of my analysis process. It has also involved the inclusion of questioning practices which might reveal and disrupt my assumptions, with the acknowledgement that there are still limits to reflexivity, even when actively practiced. In this, a structured approach to retroduction and the acknowledgement of the provisional nature of theories have felt helpful. I

have also attempted to explore further my own position and relations to the production and interpretation of this data in the following ways:

- through a research diary - this recorded my emotional responses and initial theorising from the start of the PhD
- field notes - more narrative commentaries on the context of interviews such as location and how I perceived power dynamics
- a self-interview - this followed the same structure as that for participants and was carried out after my first stage of data collection. The audio recording was included in my familiarisation process but not transcribed or coded.

6.5.4 Analysis process

Further detail on the analysis process, including my articulation of a staged approach which draws on Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) six stage model and combines this with Danermark et al.'s model of 'stages in an explanatory research based on critical realism' (2019) is in table 2 below. Note that stage 1 begins from the start of the research process and stage 8 continues into writing and communication of research. The interim phases are fluid and recursive but all are moved through before a theme or group of themes become concretized.

Table 2. Analysis process

Stage	Description
1. Familiarisation	Listening to audio recordings of interviews, reading and re-reading transcripts/field notes/research diary and making descriptive notes of the content of these. Specific theories or similar research studies that informed design of interviews or the research approach were also revisited. From this phase initial codes developed that are primarily descriptive and are about ordering the data. A secondary set of contextual codes also developed around the experience of

	the interviews (e.g. miscommunication, shared experience/empathy).
2. Coding	Systematically going through transcripts in NVivo and using both the identified codes and identifying new codes from reading the data. This continued through 2 phases, with separate coding folders for each stage. Phase 1 is coding all parts of transcripts, using both contextual and content codes. Phase 2 involves refining and combining these codes so similar concepts/labels are grouped and more tightly defined.
3. Identification and organisation of themes	Phase 2 codes are then revisited to be grouped and identified as 'themes'. Themes are 'patterns of shared meaning' and are usually 'broader' than codes. Often they are more explanatory, though this will depend on the data and use of theory. At this stage the codes are also compared across different 'types' of interviewee (e.g. CEO/expert/trustee/within org/outside org) to identify themes that capture patterns of meaning.
4. Reviewing themes	The coded text, then grouped into themes, is examined in more detail to 'test' whether the themes do accurately capture the meaning in the text and whether they take into account the context of production, which should be captured in context codes or through memos where this is not practical. This is a formalisation of the idea of moving between ideas and the data.
5. Theoretical redescription	At this stage, themes are examined for their explanatory potential and interpreted and redescribed in the context of provisional theories about structure and relations.
6. Retroduction	For each of the themes and for provisional theories considered above, questions about what would be necessary

	for these to exist are explored. What properties would need to exist for x to be x? What causal mechanisms are related to x?
7. Comparison between theories and abstractions	Assessing the relative explanatory power of provisional theories – are some better explanations than others? Are they complementary?
8. Concretization	Examining how different structures and mechanisms manifest themselves in concrete situations. Identifying the relationship between the context and these manifestations – what are causal properties, what is contingent or circumstantial? How does this explain or enable interpretation of meaning of different mechanisms?

6.6 Ethical considerations

In designing and conducting this research I have adhered to BERA's guidelines for ethical research (2018) and have been granted ethical approval through Sheffield Hallam University's ethics approval process (ref: ER11211778). Some of the ethical issues that I considered as part of the research design are connected to interviewing and to my own relationship to participants and this field of study, including ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, consequences and considering the researcher's role (Kvale & Brinkman, 2015). These are closely related and stretch throughout the research process, from design to publication.

6.6.1 Anonymity

Guidelines on ethical research often recommend disguising the identities of research participants as a default position, preferable for providing some measure of protection for participants to speak freely and without concern for adverse consequences. However, offering participants true anonymity in research is often challenging and may not always be preferred by participants themselves (Saunders et. al., 2015). In the case of this research, with such a small and distinctive group of organisations and

individuals working within this policy field, promising complete anonymity was unrealistic. For interviewees designated as 'policy experts' and therefore likely to be public figures or identifiable from the experiences or roles referenced in their interviews, consent for interviews was requested on the basis that they would be willing to be identifiable. None refused or queried this. For interviewees within organisations, they were invited to participate on the basis that they would only be referred to by their type of role (CEO/Trustee/Policy role/Delivery role) and the size and function of their organisation. In both cases, interviews began with a discussion about the limits of anonymity and an offer for interviewees to indicate during the interview if they did not want to be quoted. Although interviewees were unconcerned and many gave their consent to be named, I remained conscious throughout the interviews, analysis and writing-up findings, that their comments and my recontextualization of them within a critical academic framework, may have impacts on them beyond what they may have considered at the point of interview. I felt a responsibility to consider these impacts as part of exercising a duty of care, particularly where I felt that they might affect professional relationships for those already working within the field, and this has formed part of my considerations in how I have approached attribution of quotes within this thesis.

As there were fewer interviewees than originally intended and it became apparent that interviewees held multiple authoritative positions within the field, I reconsidered my original intention to separate named interviewees and interviewees identified by single roles and organisations. Describing the multiple affiliations of interviewees to which I had offered anonymity (albeit limited in scope), could make them more easily identifiable, and ascribing quotes to named interviewees did not easily and quickly indicate their affiliations to a reader. I have therefore chosen to take a consistent approach in attributing quotes across both sets of interviewees. In keeping with the focus of this research on the knowledge interviewees bring as authorised decision makers, attribution of quotes reflects the positions of authority held by interviewees relevant to the topic of discussion. This means that, given the variety of roles held by some participants, quotes from one individual may be attributed in more than one

way, dependant in what capacity their comments are made. i.e. The former Director of Fair Access is referred to by his role, 'Former Director of Fair Access' and by his current position as Chair of NEON, 'Trustee, WPO'. As some interviewees did explicitly give consent to be named within this research, I have also included a list of these interviewees in appendix v to acknowledge their contributions.

6.7 Summary

Within this chapter, my theoretical approach, which links critical realism with policy sociology and interpretive policy analysis, was outlined. This included discussion of my own positionality and particularly how this has been relevant in the ethical considerations within this research. Throughout this chapter I have also referred to the concepts detailed within the previous chapter, particularly that of enactment and my definition of policy, to provide the rationale for the research methodology applied. This chapter has also described the methodological basis and implementation of interviews as the primary method on which the following findings chapters are based. The following two chapters focus on presenting findings to the first two research questions detailed in this chapter, before chapter nine then provides a discussion of these findings in reference to the definition of policy as authority, order and expertise.

Chapter seven: How are TSWPOs shaping policy and practice?

7.1. Introduction

This thesis set out to answer the question of how and in what ways a particular form of organisation shapes policy and practice in relation to widening participation. It explores how some policy actors within the field of WP perceive their environment and their positions within it, setting these perceptions as an important determining factor in political activity (MacIndoe & Beaton, 2019). In the following chapters, I present findings drawn from interviews with experts within the field and contextualised by a range of policy documents. As set out in chapter six, interviewees were chosen for 'institutionalised authority to construct reality' within the field of WP (Hitzler, Honer & Maeder, 1994, quoted in Meuseur & Nagel, 2009: 19) and hence their perceptions are significant in shaping policy actions within this field. This chapter and the following chapter eight explore the first two research questions, which address how and in what ways TSWPOs are shaping policy and practice, and the relations between this and their status as charities. The question of 'how' policy or practice is shaped in this context is multifaceted, with the responses of interviewees often simultaneously referring to outcomes (i.e. how policies change), the inputs of TSWPOs at various stages of the policy process (i.e. how policy is made) and the methods of influence (i.e. how they take action). This chapter covers the first two aspects of this, with chapter eight looking in more detail at methods of influence and the positions of TSWPOs as charities. Chapter nine draws both chapters together to address the final question of implications for the future of widening participation.

As noted in chapters one and five, the research questions within this thesis have been worded to reflect a conception of policy and policy action that is about how policy is 'shaped', rather than seeking to make direct connections between an organisation or individual and change to or creation of a specific policy. However, influence is the far more commonly used word by interviewees and, broadly, captures many of the same

meanings so is used here as a way of indicating the effects created, intentionally or otherwise, by TSWPOs on policy and practice.

7.2 Limited influence, important contributions

Before looking at specific examples of where interviewees feel that TSWPOs have been part of shaping policy and/or practice, this section looks at the perception of the position of TSWPOs in policy and practice as a whole to contextualise some of these claims. All interviewees were asked about their perception of the influence of TSWPOs on policy and practice, with a variety of responses. Given that nearly all interviewees had some direct connections to TSWPOs, it is unsurprising that all saw these organisations as an important and established part of the widening participation field. However, this did not necessarily translate into believing them influential on policy, at least at a national level. Staff in three of the four TSWPOs selected for interviews believed that organisations like theirs have limited influence on national HE and WP policy, and that what influence they have had is 'at the margins' (CEO, TSWPO). Rarely did they point to specific examples of where their involvement resulted in a change in policy position or the introduction of new policy ideas. This was partly a technical point, in that they felt that the structures of HE and WP policymaking, with multiple actors, made it difficult to claim influence, even where they felt that they had a notable involvement. They commented that they were rarely the only organisation championing a particular view of policy or practice, making their specific influence difficult to articulate. Of the TSWPOs examined within this research, only the Sutton Trust and the Bridge Group make public claims about their impact on policy in their annual reports and websites and many of these claims are tentative.

Outside of this view of 'influence' as national policy change however, interviewees did suggest that they had a role in 'contributing' to policy either through their enactment of policy goals, supporting or promoting an existing policy agenda, or providing expertise on the design and implementation of WP activity. They suggested that they were 'listened to' (CEO, TSWPO) by policy makers and several of them were regular

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participants in formal policymaking processes, including providing evidence to enquiries and commissions, responding to requests for advice or information and occasionally responding to consultations, though there is little evidence of individual contributions in documentation. This view of their role as advisors in the policy process is supported by comments from a former civil servant who acted as advisor to Alan Milburn in producing the 2012 'University Challenge' report on the role of universities in social mobility. He referenced three TSWPO CEOs who he 'spent a lot of time with' to help build his understanding of the sector and stated that his role involved 'a lot of consultation and engagement with third sector organisations and they shaped a lot of what emerged in that report in different ways' (Former Government Worker). This influence was largely collective, with several voices, from TSOs and otherwise, involved in making representations to government or working on the design of policy initiatives and with participants feeling that the resulting policy sometimes 'reflected' or 'humoured' (CEOs, TSWPOs) their views.

Although the consensus from interviewees was that TSWPOs have been only on the fringes of policymaking, in an advisory rather than an influencing role, there is one exception in the form of the Sutton Trust. As one of the largest and longest standing TSWPOs, all interviewees indicated that the Sutton Trust were a 'big player' (CEO, TSWPO), who do 'very much affect policy makers' thinking and defining the issue' (CEO, TSWPO). As with other TSWPOs, the Sutton Trust are described as being 'listened to' but in comparison with examples from other organisations, their access to politicians, described as 'unparalleled' by a former Director, and the media, is seen as giving them far greater influence. The examples of policy influence cited by the Sutton Trust in publications and by their former Directors are, in some cases, detailed and specific, and backed up by documentation of their input into the policy process. Much of the influence of the Sutton Trust is credited to their ability to influence the 'narrative' around WP, rather than specific policy proposals. As described by one former civil servant:

> [The Sutton Trust is an example of] an organisation there who have just been phenomenally successful at helping to influence a media debate, for better or worse. And I think that can help shape the policy framework and dynamics. Third sector organisations can shape what's talked about and how it's talked about and the structure of policy. (Former Government Worker)

Although this statement suggests that TSOs beyond the Sutton Trust can also use this pathway to influence, several interviewees, including former CEOs of the Sutton Trust, highlighted the challenges of replicating this model for other TSWPOs. There were suggestions that the presence of the Trust and the extent of its reputation with media and policy makers created a monopoly on influence, with alternative agendas, such as a focus on HE in FE for example, unable to challenge the authority and position of the Trust's advisory position. The consensus appeared to be that, whilst it is, in theory, possible for TSWPOs to influence policy, in practice this role is reserved for the Trust and others able to align with their message. Beyond the Trust, TSWPOs are, by their own accounts, more 'contributors to', rather than 'directors of' policy.

Despite TSWPOs feeling that their influence is limited, this did not wholly dissuade them from the importance of engaging with and attempting to shape policy. Some organisations had a strong interest in policy work, feeling that this was an essential part of their missions.

> [our] new strategy, which we're about to publish, clearly states that one of our aims is to influence policy…the majority of our work is delivery, it's interventions. But the interventions are all about a sticking plaster for a system that is fundamentally broken. And we'd be missing the point a little bit if all we do is sit in a broken system with glue and shoestring to help people out. (CEO, TSWPO)

This was even true for organisations who felt that influencing policy was not easy and could not point to examples where they had been successful.

> I think it's part of what [organisation] should do, set to do. I mean the success of doing that. I'm not going to hold a claim on that one. I think it's a very hard thing, particularly in this environment but yeah, it is what [organisation] was set up to do and it is what [organisation] will continue to try and do (CEO, WPO)

Much of the rationale for seeing policy as aligned to their mission was articulated by interviewees in terms of otherwise 'wasting' their experience or knowledge, something that they feel policymakers are lacking due to high turnover of ministers and civil servants, particularly in recent years. However, the exact sort of influence that TSWPOs should have was not agreed across all interviewees, with some seeing involvement beyond specific interventions and issues that affect their work directly as disruptive to their mission and not adding value:

> I think organisations that are really great at delivery, I think it's absolutely right that they're brought in, it's really important their voice is heard on things that will affect that delivery…I think just more general pontificating on stuff, I can understand with why organisations want to do it. I just think there are only so many voices that are needed. I can see it's sort of attractive in terms of an individual's profile and feeling you're influencing the system. But I don't think it can be done lightly and if it's done badly it can backfire and can distract actually from what you're really good at. (CEO, TSWPO)

Similar concerns were expressed by Trustees, who felt that expending resource on 'general' policy work was not always justified. Some CEOs also felt that delivery was where they could have the most impact and that, although they themselves might have an interest in policy work, they couldn't justify the financial investment on behalf of their organisation.

7.3 What is 'shaping policy' to TSWPOs?

Although there was not consensus amongst interviewees about whether TSWPOs are or should be influential on policy and an acknowledgement that influence was limited, there were still some consistent examples of where interviewees felt that TSWPOs had and were making important contributions to policy. The following section will explore these, grouped under themes of: shaping the narrative; being 'useful' for policy change; shaping sector practices on evaluation; shaping sector practices on activities and shaping institutional behaviours. This section then concludes with some critical

assessments of this influence offered by interviewees themselves and some reflections on how TSWPOs approach shaping policy.

7.3.1 Shaping the narrative

Interviewees consistently described the influence of TSWPOs in terms of contributing to a political and public understanding of what WP is or should be. This influence was referred to by interviewees as 'defining the issue' (CEO, TSWPO), important in policy terms because it affected the 'thinking' of policy makers, the media or a wider public and thereby 'policy direction' (CEO, TSWPO). As already noted, the Sutton Trust were seen as leaders in this, but it was also described as an important and ongoing part of the role of other TSWPOs within the field. Collectively, TSWPOs saw a role for themselves in influencing conversations about WP, within and outside government policy, and saw this as part of how they had contributed to and changed the sector.

Several interviewees indicated that the involvement of TSWPOs had been an important factor in 'raising the agenda of social mobility and access to universities' (CEO, TSWPO), with some suggesting that this has led to policy development:

> I don't think Aimhigher would have happened if there hadn't been third sector organisations working directly with young people, doing that sort of outreach work, forcing the government to see that universities had to be partly responsible for this. (Former TSWPO CEO)

The role of TSWPOs as promoters or catalysts of social mobility policy was also echoed by the former Director of Fair Access, who indicated that he had supported the involvement of TSWPOs in WP partly because 'it therefore meant more favourable publicity for social mobility'. This 'favourable publicity' was seen as being a means to place pressure on government or provide opportunities to advance discussions about particular aspects of WP policy:

> When you think about the fact that there's now a social mobility commission, there is now a much harder OfS, there's more money in this space than ever before. All of those things have been created in

conditions of 'we need to do something about this'. The Sutton Trust
research and contextual admissions would probably be another
example actually, just sort of helping to pave the way and open up
this channel of debate. (CEO, TSWPO)

The value of TSWPOs attempting to raise the profile of WP was seen partly in how they
felt that they could shift attitudes or how widening participation work is framed in
policy and practice. However, although TSWPOs saw value in this work of shaping
narratives or changing the language of WP, there was recognition that this could be
challenging, particularly if it went against the narratives put forward by others in the
sector:

I think we've done a lot, for example, to challenge the use of the
term 'social mobility'. And try and situate those narratives a little bit
more…really work to try and challenge people and that actually
involves quite confrontational conversations with other charities that
are very focused on high-ability students and access to selective
institutions. (CEO, TSWPO)

Other interviewees from the same organisation as the interviewee quoted above
noted that attempts to challenge language used in social mobility work was part of
their goal but that this was not easy in a context where they had to work alongside
many of the TSWPOs they might want to challenge. One interviewee suggested that
they would not feel comfortable having a 'confrontational conversation' with some
TSWPOs, in part because of the professional and personal links between their
organisations that might be threatened by such challenges.

The success of the Sutton Trust in shaping narratives around WP was mentioned by
interviewees as an example of how 'shaping the narrative' could be done and also why
other organisations struggled to do this work. The Sutton Trust were described as 'just
way out ahead of anybody else' (Former Government Worker), with little space for
alternative conceptions of widening participation to be advanced in media or policy.
The Trust themselves indicate that they have 'set the terms of the fair access debate'
and put 'social mobility…at the heart of policymaking and education reform' (Sutton
Trust, n.d). The dominance of the Sutton Trust's position was reflected indirectly in the

way that interviewees talked about the framing of WP more broadly, with 'Sutton Trust' used as a shorthand for summing up a strand of WP that focused on fair access, using phrases like 'The Sutton Trust kind of language' (Trustee, TSWPO) and 'you've then got another set of organisations who were the, if you like, anti-Sutton Trust' (Former Government Worker). Several interviewees expressed frustration with the dominance of a fair access narrative in WP policy and in media coverage of HE. Although interviewees didn't credit the Sutton Trust with being the sole promoters of such a narrative and suggested there was more nuance to their work, there were several interviewees who spoke about the Sutton Trust focus on fair access as having limited the scope for debate on what WP policy and practice could focus on.

> …the Sutton Trust continued focus on that meant that the WP message never evolved beyond 'let's get poor children into the Russell Group'. And again, I think it should have become much more about what does a higher education sector that's fit for purpose look like? What does a school sector that is helping young people to make the right decisions for them look like? How do those two things match up or not? How does this then segue into recruitment practices? It's so narrowly remained access to the Russell Group and access to the top firms and it hasn't moved beyond that and I think that's the biggest disappointment in a way. (Former CEO, TSWPO)

This strand of influence then, although seemingly very successful for the Sutton Trust and for a fair access narrative, does not necessarily extend for other organisations or other messages. One WPO CEO suggested that organisations outside of the Sutton Trust who appeared to be exerting influence in this way were most likely 'going with the flow' (CEO, WPO) of existing policy frames and using them to their advantage. Even within the Sutton Trust, former CEOs talked about needing to be 'tactical' in their research and policy work through identifying and nudging current agendas, rather than setting them.

> Sometimes it happens, you get a really big piece of research that changed the whole thinking of things. It can happen. But mostly you need to be quite tactical I think. Particularly in terms of university access and education more broadly. So, we would be very clever with, ok where is the government going, where can we push it to

make it, in our view, go into a better place. Maybe more budget for this sort of thing for example. And could we do an interesting piece of research that will get people talking but also potentially influence government. (Former CEO, Sutton Trust)

As discussed in chapter two, the framing of widening participation and how it has been understood as a policy problem has been significant for the development of policy. The advancement of a fair access narrative in WP policy over the early 2000s and then a development of a focus on relative social mobility has been in line with the Sutton Trust's messaging and they themselves make claims about their role in shaping the debate and policy around widening participation and social mobility. There are several other TSWPOs, many of which were initially supported by the Trust, who advance similar fair access messages in their policy work and activities, as well as many universities. As with tracing policy ideas more generally, whether the influence of these organisations is collective, more specific to TSWPOs or driven by the Sutton Trust specifically is not wholly clear, as identified by the Trust themselves:

At the Trust, you'll see the documents, we have several 'here are the 10 things that we believe we had some influence on'. And some were stronger than others. But you never quite knew whether your conversation - was the minister talking to several other people? Was it something they already wanted to do, they wanted someone? (Former CEO, Sutton Trust)

It is not clear from their comments or from documentation that TSWPOs are leading a policy agenda. As with their general conception of influence, policy work is seen as more about contributions rather than change and 'going with the flow' for pragmatic purposes. Many of the most prominent TSWPOs deliver on a fair access variant of WP and, thus far, have tended to align themselves with this direction of policy. It isn't entirely clear whether this is pragmatic or simply a sign of consensus within a particular policy frame. There are few TSWPOs who appear to be publicly promoting, or gaining traction in doing so, conceptions of widening participation and social mobility that go against the position of the Sutton Trust. It is also not clear whether third sector organisations are either in a position to or have any desire to move WP policy in a different direction to where they currently see it going, which may explain

the lack of alternative positions. However, it is evident from the comments of interviewees that TSWPOs and those within WP policy do see 'shaping the narrative' as part of TSWPOs' roles and their contribution to WP policy and practice, even if that might mean validation of existing narratives. For the Sutton Trust specifically, their support of a fair access narrative is identified as a major contribution to WP policy, one that still shapes how other TSWPOs carry out similar narrative shaping work.

7.3.2 Being 'useful' for policy change

Although, as discussed above, TSWPOs largely felt that their influence on policy was peripheral to policy change, there were two areas of policy where some TSWPOs felt that they had been a factor in either changing policy or limiting the potential negative impacts of policy change for their organisations and WP more broadly. These areas were in relation to the creation of the Office for Students and its remit and in relation to the Augar review and possible changes to WP funding that may result from its recommendations. The interviewees who commented on this influence were primarily those who had formed the Fair Access Coalition (FAC) to collectively make policy statements, including on these two areas. Although interviewees were very cautious about the extent of the influence of the FAC and other TSWPOs, the Coalition were still active at the time of writing and had expanded their membership, suggesting that some TSWPOs see value in investing resource in their activities.

In November 2015, the government published the green paper 'Fulfilling our potential', which included proposals for the creation of a 'regulator and student champion' in the form of the Office for Students, taking on the responsibilities of and replacing OFFA and HEFCE. The proposal included the creation of a Director of Fair Access role but gave limited detail about the powers and position of this role. There was some concern from several parts of the sector that this would represent a weakening of the existing powers of OFFA and would also jeopardise the independence of such a role, bringing it into conflict with other structures of regulation. It was the opinion of the former Director of Fair Access that TSWPOs 'were

very helpful in drawing government's attention to the successes and to the support that they gave to us in OFFA…it was very helpful in terms of making sure that the legacy of OFFA was preserved to some extent in the OfS'. The action taken by TSWPOs is described by one CEO:

> So, when I started, they were just putting the legislation through Parliament to create the Office for Students and there was a bit of a worry that the position of the Director of Fair Access would be downgraded in that process and Les [Ebdon] was worried about that. So, a group of organisations, third sector organisations, came together and they collectively represented to government and collectively represented in the media that, you know, they wanted a strong Director of Fair Access and I think we have got one now. But we weren't the only players in that.

In addition to this media representation, several TSOs responded to the consultation on the green paper, including from those organisations in scope for this research: Brightside; FACE; IntoUniversity; the Bridge Group; the Sutton Trust; and Villiers Park Education Trust. Although it does not distinguish between the responses of charities and other organisations, a summary of consultation responses noted that 'There was support for the incorporation of the DFA (Director of Fair Access) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) within the OfS, but respondents stressed the need for the DFA role to maintain a level of autonomy' (DBIS, 2016: 40). The white paper, published in May 2016, contained greater detail on the independence of the role of Director for Fair Access, which addressed several of the concerns raised by TSWPOs and others. Although this may not have been their influence specifically, several did note that they felt that this was an area where they had been 'listened to'.

An expanded group of TSWPOs came together again as the Fair Access Coalition to publicly represent their views on the Augar review, releasing statements in November 2018 and in February 2019. These statements called for protection of WP funding, quality IAG for students, increased maintenance support for students and no introduction of caps on student numbers. They also indicated that any reduction to funding would threaten their work, saying that 'Now is not the time for government to

turn its back on the funding we need to do this.' (Causeway, 22 Nov 2018). Although a full response to the Augar review in terms of fees was significantly delayed until Feb 2022, organisations felt that this collective action resulted in a positive response from government and led to further engagement from ministers with their views in the interim.

> So, we had meetings with Sam Gyimah, with Chris Skidmore, then Chris Skidmore went and Jo Johnson, and Jo Johnson we know a bit as well and very supportive of us, and Skidmore has come back. So, we've been representing to them about our concerns on some of the aspects of the review, we weren't arguing for 9k fees but we were saying that the funding for WP should not go down. I know that we were listened to. I know that we were seen as helpful and I know that when ministers said things to the media about what they thought in relation to Augar they would talk about the access charities being very concerned about the fees. We were, you know, we were useful to them. We were also saying things that they agreed with. (CEO, TSWPO)

In both this example and with the creation of the OfS, the involvement of TSWPOs appears to bring attention to issues that the relevant parties are either sympathetic to or aware of already, rather than offer a particularly controversial view. Little attention appears to have been given to their comments around IAG and caps on student numbers, with the main focus on how WP funding, and therefore activity, might be protected in the detail of policy. This would suggest that, although they have been 'useful' in these areas, they have not played major roles in shifting policy. It is potentially also relevant that, of the comments that they have made around these policy changes, the issue of funding is the one that affects them most directly given how many of them are reliant on funding filtered through HEIs.

> It's really important their voice is heard on things that will affect that delivery so Augar was a good example of that. If there's no widening access money you're not going to have all these great organisations doing this work, isn't that a problem? (CEO, TSWPO)

Funding may therefore be an issue where their expertise is considered by policy makers to be relevant and where they can articulate most clearly the negative impacts

on their work. It may then be that both the content of the message that they are able to convey and the receptiveness of their audience are factors in their ability to shape these specific policy areas.

7.3.3 Shaping sector practice on evaluation

A regular criticism of WP policy and practice from politicians has been the limited evidence base and 'standards' of evaluation. The lack of convincing evidence about effectiveness was the reason given for the termination of the Aimhigher programme in 2011 and building on evaluation practice has been a focus for HEFCE, OFFA and OfS in the support and direction that they offer to the sector. In recent years, some of this criticism has started to wane, with acknowledgement that HEPs are showing improvement of their evaluation practice following OfS strategy (OfS, 2020). For many interviewees, TSWPOs were an important part of this shift. There were broadly three ways in which it was suggested that they have contributed: by acting as an example to the sector and thereby putting pressure on HEIs to improve; by developing and sharing practice that can then be applied in the context of HEIs and other organisations; and by representing to policy makers and government bodies the need for a greater focus on data and evaluation.

In general, it was not suggested by interviewees that shaping evaluation practice was a specific aim of TSWPOs, excepting possibly the Sutton Trust. Instead, it was their presence as competitors to universities and the ability to draw on experience as charities that fed into a change in practice and justification for policy change. The former Director of Fair Access described how charities offering a contrast to HEIs contributed to a shift in perspectives on evaluation:

> …one of the things that charities are very good at is their impact statements. They have to produce them and they're very important that they are good solid stuff because their donors will look at those and will base their decision to fund and to give to that charity based on them…A Vice Chancellor comes along, he sees a charity doing an evaluation of the sort that colleagues have told him is impossible to do, 'No you can't do that Vice Chancellor. It's too long a period, you

can't'. So, suddenly you begin, as a Vice Chancellor, to think 'if they can do it, why can't we?'. And that's been part of the beneficial...

Other interviewees were more direct in crediting this shift to TSOs and, as with the previous statement, linking this to the circumstances of TSWPOs in having to satisfy funders.

> One thing I noticed is, for me, that the third sector organisations have done, have really led on the evidence side of the debate. So, I think a really fair question for people, particularly when you're fundraising as much as government policy, is 'have you got evidence that what you're doing works?' And I think that's been a real Achilles heel for the sector generally…Then the third sector, because we have to raise money, I think have been far more proactive in developing evidence so that we can defend our spend because there's always another competing bid…there's always pressure within universities on budgets but it's not quite the same as having to fundraise externally. I think certainly the evidence agenda has been led by the third sector. (Former CEO, TSWPO)

Those delivering activity also suggested that the presence of TSWPOs and the examples of evaluation that they provided, whether intentionally or otherwise, had some impact on the approaches adopted within the sector.

> I do think that the third sector organisations have influenced impact evaluation for universities, particularly the outreach teams. Because we are just ahead of the game on it. We've got one mission, concentrating usually on one intervention rather than 60,000 students in an institution and trying to support them. But the theory of change has come from the third sector and that was a huge deal for every outreach team across the country. So, I do think that. I'm hoping they haven't picked up on it because they're all cross about it! [laughter] It definitely seems to have been an influence that's come from the third sector. (Delivery role, TSWPO)

In recent years, TSWPOs have been active participants in shaping the agenda around evaluation for the whole sector by participating in sector-wide evaluation networks, such as HEAT, NEON and TASO. They have participated in and led evaluations undertaken alongside HEPs or as part of the Uni Connect programme. They have also been asked to contribute to or carry out research on behalf of government

committees, both informally and through formal processes. Therefore, there is potential for sharing practices, which may lead to changes within institutions. The developed evaluation practices of TSWPOs have also informed recommendations made to the Office for Students around evaluation practices (Harrison et. al., 2018) and frameworks for the sector.

Part of the popularity and attention paid to TSWPOs in terms of their evaluation practices and influence on the wider sector may come from their alignment with the interests of politicians and broader trends in 'evidence-based' policy. Several interviewees noted that TSWPO research and its presentation was well-suited to the interests of policy makers and civil servants:

> The other type of research that you can do that third sector organisations are really good at is something sitting between pure academic research and research that NCOPs or other third sector organisations or government can understand because government does not have time to read academic papers. Even if they did they probably don't understand them...I think third sector organisations are really good at creating evidence-based research or evidence-based reports. (CEO, WPO)

There is also alignment between the evaluation work of many TSWPOs and the 'what works?' approaches which have dominated much of education policy in recent years (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2020). The reasons for this go far beyond the field of WP but the championing of this approach by the Sutton Trust may have had some influence on raising the status of and developing capacity for 'what works?' approaches in education and WP specifically. As the Sutton Trust themselves claim:

> The Trust's focus on evaluation and evidence, including through the creation of the EEF, prompted the Office for Students to establish the new What Works centre for higher education, the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO). (Sutton Trust, n.d.)

The creation of TASO, an affiliate 'what works?' centre focusing on the evaluation of access and participation work, has been part of OfS' approach to improving evaluation practice, alongside more detailed requirements around evaluation and monitoring

within APPs. The creation of an 'evidence and impact exchange' was suggested in 2016 as part of the UUK commission examining social mobility in Higher Education. This call was repeated as part of a joint publication between Brightside and HEPI in 2017 and proposed by the Office for Students in 2018. Although the idea certainly did not originate from TSWPOs alone, there was a suggestion that the promotion of the idea by Brightside may have helped in raising its prominence:

> You know, one of the things that was called for in the first HEPI/Brightside publication was Nottingham Trent University calling for a national evidence unit to be established and that has been established…I wouldn't overclaim about it, people have talked about that outside that publication, but it was good that it was set up and the person that called for it turned out to be one of the people who then set it up. So, you can point to things like that. (CEO, TSWPO)

7.3.4 Shaping sector practices on activities

Several interviewees pointed to the involvement of TSWPOs as being significant in bringing particular forms of outreach activity to prominence, with the effect of these becoming commonplace practice and, in some cases, part of policy initiatives. There were two main examples given by interviewees – summer schools and mentoring, and specifically e-mentoring. Both activities are now widespread in practice and, at an early stage of national WP activity, had one or more TSWPOs as major champions or deliverers of this activity. As with other examples of influence, it is difficult to say conclusively that TSWPOs were the main or only source of influence, and, in contrast to looking at policy activity more widely, there is very limited policy advocacy work or lobbying that points to TSWPO involvement in the spread of these activities. However, there appears to be a common understanding amongst interviewees, both in and outside TSWPOs, that a significant part of the momentum behind the spread of these activities came from two TSWPOs. It has also been common for ministers and HEIs to reference these TSWPOs as influences, best practice examples or experts in relation to WP practice. In the case of summer schools, this is the Sutton Trust, and in the case of mentoring, Brightside. In both cases, there has been national funding allocated to supporting projects either inspired by these organisations or delivered by them.

Interviewees suggest that the work of TSWPOs, including those outside the two specifically credited above, has raised the status of particular activities, making them mainstream practice. This is partly through working at an institutional level that then gains recognition, political support and resources to become embedded:

> I think they [TSWPOs] influence by means of a different route. So, if I'm going to have a conversation with a Head of WP in an institution and say 'Well, you know, this is what we do and this is why we do it. And this is how we know it works'. And then you get that bottom up influencing of policy… I mean if you look at mentoring, it wasn't a thing and mentoring has grown and it becomes a bit of an expectation. (CEO, TSWPO)

There was also discussion by interviewees of TSWPOs as potential testbeds for activity, providing 'proof of concept' for activities or programmes which could then be adopted by other organisations or attract national funding. It is this aspect of their work that was noted as helpful by the former Director of Fair Access, suggesting that they were useful for 'trying out different methodologies, at low risk. Could see what [activities] were working and what weren't.' This is particularly the case for the Sutton Trust, whose summer schools have provided the model for policy initiatives.

> …some just say 'look our summer school's been phenomenally successful, the government should run them'. So, now we've proved it. I guess the Sutton Trust model is we've used Peter Lampl's money to prove something works. (CEO, TSO)

This proof of concept model is explicitly how the Sutton Trust has approached some of its initiatives and funding, such as the provision of seed funding for initiatives and brokering funding for the expansion of these.

In addition to particular activities and organisations gaining recognition and thereby influencing policy and practice in the past, interviewees suggested that there may be further scope for this in future, with TSWPOs being viewed favourably by policy makers. The suggestion was that not only were these organisations now seen as more professional but that there is increasing parity between them and universities, even in contractual relationships, as a result of that professionalism.

> OfS have actively been approving of the way that third sector organisations kind of work and that feels like that is a little bit more joined up. It's not so much like a university says 'well we're paying for this service or this thing and we're going to plug it into something else and not really talk to you'. It's ok. It feels a little bit more joined up in 'what are you going to offer us that relates to our need?'. The expectation that we understand their need has changed. (Delivery Role, TSWPO)

This 'bottom up' model of influence was seen as more effective for creating change than national policy engagement for many TSWPOs, though there was still limited evidence of intentional change driven by TSWPOs. The close association of some TSWPOs with models of outreach activity means that advancing the status of activities in the sector also benefitted organisations in terms of funding and developing partnerships, making this potentially as much a business goal as a policy one. However, there are also indications that this is a form of influence being more actively sought by TSWPOs in recent years, particularly when they have felt that there is limited engagement from government through other channels. Frustrations with lack of capacity or engagement with government has led to some TSWPOs considering a bottom-up model of influence with more intentionality.

> I think at the moment there isn't a lot of persuadable room to sway people and I'm not generally in favour of banging my head against a brick wall…I think that there are different ways of doing it. And then where I see that is how the third sector's done it previously. Well, you influence practice in universities in terms of their outreach activities and then that has a knock-on effect. And some public profile raising. (CEO, TSWPO)

This shift in focus was credited to a number of factors including: lack of political appetite for development of widening participation policy; limited capacity in government due to Brexit and election campaigning; and an increased role for the OfS that TSWPOs needed to be aware of.

> I think it's just that you know, if third sector organisations want to engage the higher education sector we have to be absolutely aware of what the OfS is saying and make sure that what we are doing is supporting OfS principles. (Delivery Role, TSWPO)

Some also indicated that this shift in focus on policy influence was the result of a change in the regulatory environment, with the introduction of targets and what was perceived to be a tougher, more interventionist stance by the OfS now meaning that the work of policy was in implementation.

> The idea that there should be really ambitious targets has really been forced on universities by OfS. So, we have definitely noticed the difference under OfS and it has caused us to reflect on what our role is…if we can all align behind these targets that everyone is set our role might be to continue to put gentle pressure on the universities but also to help them think about how they deliver on those targets. (CEO, TSWPO)

This model of policy shaping was also built into delivery models for some TSWPOs, with the development of relationships with universities and employers where, either as consultants or partners, they were directly advising or steering institutional work. TSWPOs have often acted as delivery partners or contractors to these organisations but in these models they are more directly involved in shaping the policies and agenda for work that they may deliver on. Rather than a sector-wide approach, though sector-wide influence may be an eventual aim, several TSWPOs are focusing on institution-level change in policy and practices through their work.

7.3.5 Shaping institutional behaviours

As with shaping sector practices on activities discussed above, TSWPOs pointed to their influence on institutional practices as an example of how they were shaping policy and practice. For some organisations, this was seen as their main route to influence:

> The Bridge Group I think is very influential but not always in a very public way. So, it is taking that Justine Greening approach of working with businesses, looking at their recruitment practices, looking at their skills needs and the way that it makes money… and it has a front facing bunch of research and lobbying around social mobility and access to university and access to professions but behind the scenes it has a money making operation where it's doing consultancy for businesses to help them be more accessible to disadvantaged

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people, to make the most of that challenge. So, it kind of starts with
the business need if that makes sense. (Former Government Worker)

Organisations discussed actively trying to influence 'behaviours' (CEO, TSWPO) as part

of their missions and gave examples including improving monitoring and reporting,

changing procedures and refining processes (e.g. Bridge Group, 2019). This was

referenced most often in relation to changes within employers, though examples of

policy or practice changes within universities included shifts in approaches to

employability or student support within individual institutions. These changes to

behaviours or policies were often achieved through consultancy relationships or close

partnerships which, for some TSWPOs, had become integral to their ways of working

and conception of creating change:

> We found a much more direct route to achieving the impact we
> wanted to through commissioned work. You know because
> ultimately our business model is built on people paying us to create
> the change that we want to create, sort of *at them.* (CEO, TSWPO)

This was increasingly an approach being adopted by TSWPOs who felt that this could

be more impactful than working with government as the focus for 'actually effecting

change' (Trustee, TSWPO). TSWPOs have increased their focus on working with the

Office for Students and individual universities and employers, not just as deliverers but

as influencers:

> Towards the end of my tenure I think I was probably, in many ways,
> trying to influence the sector as much as the government itself
> (Former CEO, TSWPO)

In some cases, there were expectations that an influence on practice or policy at this

level might filter upwards, with an intentional strategy to work with prominent or

multiple organisations to achieve this:

> And they are a beacon, so other people look to them and go 'oooh,
> we need to look at that and we should be doing that' so I think that
> that has had an impact…I do believe you need sort of top-level
> tambourine rattling, and all that sort of thing, and sabre rattling. But
> I think in order to make things happen and in order to change policy

in employers and we're talking quite often about really big employers of graduates, the biggest employers of graduates in the country then that has a huge impact. (Delivery Role, TSWPO)

Interviewees pointed to a specific example in the form of the Bridge Group and their 2016 report on 'Socio-economic diversity in the Fast Stream', which led to changes in Civil Service recruitment practices and was sent to major employers by the office of the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General with an endorsement of its recommendations. This model of organisational level work leading to sector level change, acknowledged and supported by policy makers was also the goal for similar work.

Work at a sector-level has also been part of TSWPO activities, with a goal of promoting change within organisations.

> The policy lever, in a way, is the social mobility employer index where large amounts of data are being collected on over 100 organisations who enter around their approach. And the impact that approach is having on changing inside of organisations. And that is really a big thing. (Trustee, TSWPO)

In addition to the example given above of the Social Mobility Employer Index, the Social Mobility Awards and Social Mobility Toolkit are other examples of TSWPO-led activity aimed at creating organisational and sectoral change. This work is not necessarily about policy enactment in the sense of translating national-level policy to a local context but is frequently prompted by or responding to policy discussions, such as the potential development of regulations around socio-economic diversity in employers, with an expectation that work at organisational level in this area might inform policy development or, as in the first example of influence, might 'shape the narrative'.

7.3.6 Summary

There were some consistent examples given by interviewees of areas where they felt that TSWPOs have shaped policy and practice. These include influence on the language

and framing of policy, their 'usefulness' as supporters for policy makers and their influence on practices, both institutional and sector-wide. Some of these influences were expressed as the result of collective efforts, such as 'raising the profile of WP' or steering sector practices in terms of evaluation. Other influences were credited more to individual organisations, particularly the prominence of a fair access variant of WP being credited to the Sutton Trust, and changes in organisation or sector practices linked to the activities of specific organisations such as the Bridge Group or The Social Mobility Foundation. Some expressed frustration at the dominance of particular organisations in shaping policy, particularly in terms of the message of the Sutton Trust, but nonetheless continued to engage in policy, even if they felt their chances of success were limited. There were some indications that this policy work could come into conflict with other objectives, particularly in terms of managing relationships within the sector or in prioritising resources, but collectively TSWPOs appeared convinced of the potential value of engaging in policy shaping, at least in terms of the potential benefits for their organisations, if not for the wider sector.

7.4 What is policy work?

In describing the ways in which TSWPOs had shaped policy, there were often not clear distinctions between shaping policy, shaping practice and what was also essential 'business' for TSWPOs. Raising the profile of WP or advancing a particular policy frame functions both as a policy aim and a business one, with individual TSWPOs sometimes benefitting from policy work through a greater profile with funders or tacit and explicit endorsements that give their work status. Influence on sector practices in terms of evaluation or activities also benefits TSWPOs who offer those activities, with TSWPOs beginning to offer consultancy to universities and other charities on impact evaluation or programme design and delivery. The development of organisational-level influence has also often been as a result of consultancy or contractual work. Examples of where they have proved useful for supporting policy change are also closely connected to their own survival as organisations, with their lobbying activity focused around HE funding. In many cases these dual purposes are explicit, with activities having multiple

aims being part of managing limited resources. Although it may have more than one function, TSWPOs were still able to identify what they considered to be 'policy work' or work that they felt had shaped policy or was more likely to do so. This section examines the work that TSWPOs describe doing to influence policy, which, together with the examples given above, will then form the basis of analysis in the next chapter of the roles that TSWPOs have taken on within the sector.

7.4.1 Formal routes

As interested parties, designated experts and public bodies, TSWPOs have opportunities to contribute to policy through several formal means. These include responding to consultations and calls for evidence, participating in committees and evidence gathering exercises and taking on formal voluntary and contractual roles for committees and departments. There are several occasions where TSWPOs have chosen to participate in this way or have responded to formal invitations to do so. However, these structured and more formalised processes were mentioned infrequently in interviews and interviewees appeared to view these as ineffective as a means of influence on policy. This was particularly true within organisations focused on delivery and without designated policy roles. This perception is reflected in the patterns of engagement with formal consultations on HE policy, where large organisations like the Sutton Trust or membership organisations like FACE or NEON do appear to make written submissions but responses from other smaller, delivery-focused organisations are less consistent. Unfortunately, application of guidelines around data protection combined with lack of formal responses from government in some cases, means that there is not a comprehensive record of where TSWPOs have responded to HE consultations or what their positions were. For example, in a review of consultation responses to a 2018 OfS consultation on 'A new approach to regulating access and participation in English higher education', 13 TSOs responded but these are not named, nor are individual responses recorded (CFE, 2018). Aside from the Sutton Trust, TSWPOs rarely publish their consultation responses, if they make them, and there are indications that this type of activity is not always seen as a priority.

> In recent years I'm not quite so sure how many we've done. Certainly, initially we did that quite a lot because that was close to the lobbying and advocacy stuff that was our bread and butter. Since I have been here I've…I mean I responded to the OfS consultation. There was a consultation in, I don't know, April last year, May last year, what was it about? Can't remember. Anyway, actually the person who was in charge of responding to that one got the date wrong so we never responded [laughter] which was a wee bit annoying but there we are. So, I don't know how many we've been doing. I suspect not as many as we should. (Delivery Role, TSWPO)

Engagement by TSWPOs with formal consultation processes appeared to be dependent on the availability of senior staff members with an interest and expertise. Few organisations had roles dedicated to this, leaving much of this work with CEOs, dependent on their interest and expertise. As a consequence, this doesn't appear to be a consistent part of TSWPO engagement with policy. It may also be that TSWPOs or those who lead them see consultation responses as a less effective means of influence, particularly when it is not always clear whether an individual response may have prompted a reconsideration of policy.

Instead of attempting to influence policy through public formal processes, TSWPOs have instead tried to engage with formal processes or roles which have involved invitation, such as the enquiries led by Alan Milburn, or giving evidence to committees on social mobility and fair access. In these cases, the same organisations have been represented repeatedly, with the Sutton Trust, Brightside, Bridge Group and IntoUniversity appearing regularly and upReach, Villiers Park and the now inactive up2uni also referenced. There are also some formal roles that have been taken up by TSWPOs or their CEOs, including the role of the Sutton Trust as secretariat to the Social Mobility Commission or the involvement of the Sutton Trust's Directors and Chairman on the OFFA advisory group and HEFCE EQUALL committee respectively. Interviewees also referenced being asked to 'do some research' (CEO, TSWPO) for bodies like the Social Mobility Commission or being involved in 'working groups' (Former CEO, TSWPO) on HE regulations. Although there are records of some of these groups, there is no clear indication of the criteria for inclusion within them. From the comments of

interviewees, these less public opportunities to engage with policy are seen as desirable forms of policy influence. Appearing as experts, contributing specific knowledge or having their work showcased as 'best practice' offers a number of benefits to organisations and is often more closely aligned to their missions than responding to consultations, which may cover a range of areas less relevant to them. Participation in consultation and formal processes also does relatively little to make organisations 'stand out' as lobbyists or deliverers, meaning that there are potentially fewer additional benefits such as attracting funding or gaining future opportunities for influence. Without explicit policy influencing roles or objectives, organisations may struggle to justify the allocation of resource to activity which doesn't also benefit the continued activity of the organisation. This may explain why TSWPOs appear to have focused on influencing strategies and objectives which can lead to multiple benefits, such as those described within this chapter.

7.4.2 Relationship work

Rather than engaging in formal policy processes, TSWPOs describe much of their policy work as either relational or reputational and designed to build advantageous connections that could support both their policy work and their organisations. Several interviewees remarked on the 'very well-networked' (CEO, TSWPO) and close-knit nature of this field and the necessity of making connections to play a role within it. In relation to policy particularly, there were also several comments which described policy making and policy influence within and beyond this field as about making and 'leveraging' relationships. This comment, made by an education policy consultant with experience within HEIs and TSOs, is typical of how interviewees connected relationships and utilising networks with their policy influencing activity:

> Policy is a person-to-person kind of business, I think. Yes, it's about ideas and evidence but it is ultimately about persuasion. One person trying to persuade another person to come to their way of thinking…So, these organisations need to be credible, they need to present evidence, they need to present persuasive stories. (Policy Expert)

The relationships that they sought were varied but focused on 'influential figures' including: ministers with responsibility for HE and for Education; senior staff within governing or regulatory bodies (currently OfS but previously OFFA and HEFCE); and senior civil servants within departments responsible for HE and for Education. Additionally, engagement with the Social Mobility Commission and preceding enquiries, with the Cabinet Office (particularly under the Coalition Government) and with politicians whose roles or interests align with widening participation were also mentioned. One CEO outlined who they currently focus on within government and why:

> It tends to be focused on DfE and to a varying extent, depending which administration it is no.10 as well. So, it's easier said than done but we find getting the buy-in at those very senior levels just unlocks so many doors further down. There's downsides to it as well but when you can get that relationship it works really well. So, typically Secretary of State for Education, then universities ministers, schools ministers…they're the key relationships but then advisors, policy advisors at DfE, SPADS or the policy advisors and their counterparts and Number 10 as well, seem to be quite important in terms of what percolates down to the DfE and what's a priority for the DfE. (CEO, TSWPO)

These were mostly figures whose roles gave them some direct influence either over HE and schools policy or on the implementation of that policy into regulations and sector guidance and consequently it was the post-holder of particular roles that tended to be most important. However, there were some exceptions, such as Alan Milburn or Michael Gove, whose continued involvement with and interest in social mobility and education in different roles has given them a status that means that their influence in seen as potentially valuable even outside of a relevant formal role in which to enact it.

Talking directly to policy makers was seen partly as a way to 'persuade' (Former Director of Fair Access) or 'inform the debate' (CEO, TSWPO) but was also route to more formal engagement with policy processes. One CEO described how offering policymakers invitations to events and activities like conferences, board meetings or

delivery activities could lead to further engagement with the sort of policy work that they considered most desirable:

> And often from those encounters, from things like conferences, we then get involved in other things. So, for example, I get invited to meetings and discussions. I've served on a number of committees over the years all kinds of things. Including things like the SMAG group, the social mobility advisory group…select committees, worked for a whole day with Cameron and Sajid Javid… Jo Johnson, who was minister for higher education at the time. So yeah, we are given a platform for us then to access and influence policymakers. (CEO, TSWPO)

In some cases, as described above, future engagement included invitations to be involved in formal structures of policymaking. There were also often more informal invitations, with interviewees indicating that, through relationships developed with policymakers, they had been approached informally for advice around social mobility or widening participation programmes. A close relationship could also lead to exchanges like this one, reported by a former CEO of the Sutton Trust:

> I won't say what on, it might not be a university but on other areas the government will say 'look we've got money here we haven't spent. Can you come up with some ideas?'. Because we had a relationship with them.

There are no records of these sorts of engagement coming from government to TSWPOs and so no indications of how frequently this approach is used or details of what might be discussed, however, being 'called in' (CEO, WPO) or 'asked for advice' (Delivery Role, TSWPO), seemed to be a fairly common experience for those working within TSWPOs and an expected part of the outcomes from building relationships with those connected to policy.

Although relationship building with senior political figures was still a major part of their policy work, TSWPOs did indicate, as noted above, that the benefits of this had shifted in recent years, with the political climate creating additional challenges to relationship building. This has led to a greater focus on reaching MPs or civil servants, rather than ministers.

It's sort of a bit of a revolving door in terms of ministers and
Secretary of State, as you know. So, the idea that if we're going to
get some of this long-term change, we're going to keep this issue on
the radar, you need that next level down in terms of that awareness
of the issues and those people who are knowledgeable about us and
our work. In Parliament, more widely. (CEO, TSWPO)

Given the resource required and also the limited capacity for engagement amongst
senior ministers, some TSWPOs felt that there was more value in acting together with
other organisations, whether TSWPOs or other bodies.

…this is where collaboration is good. I've done a lot of this talking to
civil servants and politicians over the years and saying 'what are the
most effective ways of engaging?' and they always say, and this is
why over many years I decided that dinners and a relaxed forum are
a good way, but bringing together, from a civil servants point of view,
a Special Advisor point of view, there'll be a million demands on the
decision maker's diary and how do you get your case up their diary?
And I'll say 'oh look, it's a really efficient use of your time because
we're bringing together all of the key stakeholders'…And the other
thing that works is they'll say 'when we ask you what do you think
should be done, all you organisations, you'll come up with 20
different things.' (CEO, TSWPO)

The relationship work done by TSWPOs therefore extends beyond that engaging
specifically with policy makers, to other relationships within WP and allied fields.

The decision to work as a collective appears to be partly a result of shared interests as
noted above but also a strategic decision to gain the interest and attention of policy
makers by 'efficient' use of their time to access their collective 'knowledge and
expertise' (CEO, TSWPO). Some interviewees also noted that the idea of 'collaboration'
across the sector was actively encouraged by policymakers and funders and that,
particularly with the end of Aimhigher funding, there was sector interest in
maintaining or forging relationships based on shared interests. In recent years, there
have been two networks set up specifically by or with TSWPOs with the express
purpose of influencing policy. These networks, the Fair Education Alliance (FEA) and
the Fair Access Coalition (FAC), were mentioned by several interviewees as examples
of where there could be benefits to building alliances. However, there were also

several indications that developing such networks was a challenging task and that there were tensions in doing so. As one CEO noted, there often needed to be a 'specific good' or benefit for the individual organisations involved. Talking about the initial days of the Fair Education Alliance, one CEO reflected on the early challenges of finding consensus:

> Certainly, the intention was that it was about influence. And that there was power in numbers. And then it became quite difficult in terms of those initial groups sat around the table. We quite quickly worked out that either not everybody was aligned in terms of what their policy ask would be or some of us were saying well I can't put my name to anything that comes out like that because we have to be independent. That's not a thing that we can do. (CEO, WPO)

The need to create consensus between many organisations in the FEA also put some TSWPOs off participating:

> We were at one stage invited to, approached to join - what are they? Fair Education Alliance? …And anyway, we didn't just because there was this thing about having to agree basically. With a majority opinion. Not sure if we want to do that. (Delivery Role, TSWPO)

The networks of the FEA and FAC operated, at least initially, on the basis of invitation from existing members, meaning that they were not necessarily reflective of the policy views of the sector as a whole. In interviewee comments there was evidence of tension between several organisations due to historical disagreements, competition over resources or philosophical differences in their approach to WP. As one interviewee commented 'I wouldn't call it a model of coherence' (Trustee, TSWPO). Although largely not hostile, there was a wariness between some organisations, with a particular divide between those focused largely on fair access vs those with a broader definition of WP. These divides likely affected perceptions of which organisations were suitable collaborators.

Outside of connections within government or similar organisations, TSWPOs also identified and built relationships with key figures in the sector who they 'need to be friends with' (Delivery role, TSWPO). These included organisations, like the newly

created TASO, or The Russell Group, which seemingly provided a supporting role to developing other forms of influence. The FAC, in putting out a statement around Augar, decided to do so alongside the Russell Group as an 'ally'. Although members of the group suggested that the move was slightly contentious because it was an organisation that 'we wouldn't naturally team up with', the collaboration was made because they were deemed to 'carry weight' and had more 'resource' than the TSWPOs involved. In the case of TASO and its staff, they were described by interviewees as a necessary partner in advancing evaluation work, making this a less negotiable and contingent relationship than is described with the Russell Group. However, in this sort of relationship building it was mostly named individuals that interviewees referred to, rather than organisations. Many of these named individuals were those who had held multiple roles within the WP field and therefore represented an accumulation of contacts and relationships beyond specific roles or organisations. In other cases, it was the position of individuals within another field (notably academia and 'the City' or 'corporates') that made them valuable contacts.

Individual relationships built up by TSWPOs were sometimes formalised through contractual relationships, shared projects or charitable structures such as board membership. This was partly through strategic selection of trustees, often those 'who have experience or work within the financial or legal sector, connected very much to the City.' (Trustee, TSWPO). This preference for trustees connected to the corporate world was evident in organisations who are largely London-based and who rely on corporate or individual donations as part of their financial model. Trustees also noted that these corporate connections could also come from or lead to organisational support:

> …to help organisations to improve the way that they run. So, they'll put money into employing somebody to just something out or they'll invest in some software or something like that which is their way of helping. And they may put a trustee on the board. (Trustee, TSWPO)

Several of the organisations covered within this research had, in addition to a trustee board, advisory roles in the form of 'critical friends', 'fellows', an 'advisory board' or

'advisory group'. These tended to be comprised of academics and individuals considered to have expertise relevant to the organisation's mission e.g. 'academics, headteachers, vice chancellors, some people from the graduate recruitment world, some people from widening participation backgrounds as well' (CEO, TSWPO). Although these groups do not appear to be part of formal governance structures and are not subject to the same regulations or expectations of a trustee board, there does appear to be some sharing of advisory functions across both advisory and trustee boards, with trustee boards potentially being more strategic and advisory boards more operational. That said, there is also seemingly a distinction in the qualities sought and the potential benefits of relationships with members of either group. Cynically, this expansion of different boards can also be seen as furthering opportunities to formalise relationships with individuals and organisations who may benefit the aims of the organisation, including, in some cases, exerting influence over policy and practice.

7.4.3 Reputational work

The final strand of work described by TSWPOs to shape policy and practice was around building a favourable reputation. Closely allied to relationship building, in that relationships were either developed by or leveraged for positive reputations, this nonetheless was sometimes a distinct strand of activity. For larger organisations or those with relevant connections, this was often about media engagement and developing a media profile that could then enable access to policy makers and senior figures in policy enactment.

> …what we found was that with policymakers, if you had it right, it
> worked perfectly. In that you had media influence so that
> policymakers, whether or not they say it, like it, if you are in the
> news they will more likely answer your calls when you call up.
> (Former CEO, TSWPO)

Developing a public profile, particularly one that included positive media coverage, was seen by many TSWPOs as a means to draw attention to WP, thereby increasing pressure on political figures to act. It also had potential benefits in developing a profile for their own organisation that could lead to greater political access and even funding.

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Discussing a previous publication that they had co-produced, one CEO summed up some of this rationale:

> ...the key thing that I wanted to do there, as well as getting our brand out there, is to for that day or two days in coverage in press, get people thinking about WP, to get the focus on it. (CEO, TSWPO)

However, reputational work in terms of media engagement was not widespread, primarily due to lack of resource and also due to the dominance of the Sutton Trust as a primary source for journalists. Those working within the Trust noted that:

> ...it's very hard because the Sutton Trust is such a strong brand in that particular area and journalists - it would take a long time for journalists to sort of see another sort of organisation in that space. (Former CEO, Sutton Trust)

PR and media facing activities were relatively commonplace in all large TSWPOs but limited resource meant that their focus might be more limited than that of the Sutton Trust. Some of the Trust's media profile is closely linked to their research profile and this is imitated by other TSWPOs in how they engage with the media. When asked about whether their organisation tries to influence policy, one CEO's response was 'we don't have people in the team who are there writing research', indicating how synonymous the idea of research and policy influence is. As this response also indicates, this work is resource intensive, and so for many TSWPOs is sporadic and something that they have to consider carefully.

> We try and use our research to sort of inform the debate but we're not experts at doing that. We don't have a load of resource like the Sutton Trust that we throw behind that with contacts. And then in terms then of policy, what we try to do is split it into 3 areas - what are the things that we think that we most want to change? That would help us to do what we do? What are the things where we feel we can have an opinion, that we're happy to be quoted on that are related to what we do? And what are the things that actually, we just, they're interesting but they're not anything that are priority for us? ...So, we then have things that we're trying to get quoted for. (CEO, TSWPO)

For this CEO and several others, there was a close relationship with producing research and generating a public profile for issues relevant to their mission. The significance of research or evaluation work as a means of influence and reputation building, is explored in more depth in chapter eight as a core part of TSWPO's role within the sector.

7.5 Summary

This chapter has sought to address the research question of 'how and in what ways are TSWPOs shaping WP policy and practice'. It has focused particularly on 'how' in terms of both outcomes and means used. As identified by interviewees, the demonstrable outcomes from TSWPO policy work are very limited and largely credited to a single organisation in the Sutton Trust or to the collective presence of multiple TSWPOs. Nonetheless, TSWPOs do believe that they have had some impact on the sector, particularly in terms of practices around evaluation, outreach activities and organisational policies. They also appear to be invested in carrying out policy work, particularly where this has multiple benefits for their organisation beyond attempting to create a change in national policy. This policy work primarily involves accessing influential figures and building a positive reputation, rather than formal routes to influence policy such as participating in consultations or lobbying around specific issues. Although there are some examples of TSWPOs seeking to develop their policy influence in relation to particular policy agendas, particularly those linked to funding, the majority of their policy work appears to be more about profile raising for widening participation more generally. This is sometimes about advancing or supporting a particular interpretation of widening participation, particularly a fair access variant of widening participation that focuses on the most elite institutions, or about promoting a focus on a particular aspect of WP or social mobility, such as university admissions or graduate employment practices. It is not clear, however, from the comments of interviewees, that TSWPOs have a developed policy agenda. Even amongst policy organisations like the Sutton Trust, or large TSWPOs with connections to policy makers, their description of policy work is related to being 'useful' (CEO, TSWPO) or

able to 'nudge' (Former CEO, Sutton Trust) policy, rather than promoting significant change. This approach relates to how organisations and individual interpret their environment, their potential for influence and the roles that they can play within this. In this chapter, the comments of interviewees have pointed to lack of interest from government, the dominance of the Sutton Trust and the importance of media to politics as all factors that have shaped their work. The following chapter therefore explores in more detail the position of TSWPOs and how they interpret it, the roles that they take on and how this relates to their status as charitable organisations.

Chapter eight: Being a TSWPO policy actor

This chapter acts as a complement to the previous chapter, which focused on the changes that TSWPOs believe that they have had on WP policy and practice and on how they see policy work. This chapter focuses more specifically on the ways in which they have tried to achieve their policy aims and on how their engagement with policy is shaped by their position as registered charities. Together these chapters address research questions one and two, as set out in chapter six, and, in exploring the roles that they take on and how they interpret their positions, also provide the foundation for assessing under what conditions they are able to shape WP and how they may be able to do so further in the future. Building on the three forms of policy work identified in the previous chapter - formal routes, relationship work, and reputational work – this chapter first examines the strategies used by TSWPOs and how they have developed a position as 'networked experts'. In the second half of this chapter, the focus shifts to explore how this position of networked experts has been and is informed by their positions as registered charities, operating in a 'third sector'.

8.1 Becoming networked experts

As will be explored throughout this chapter and in the following chapter nine, I argue that TSWPOs have developed a position as 'networked experts' in areas of WP policy and practice. Drawing on their personal and professional connections and building new networks form a core part of the policy work described by TSWPOs and is, for many of them, the means by which they attempt to develop their policy influence. The following section explores the basis for this argument, outlining how interviewees described the strategies of TSWPOs in policy and the environment in which they work across three themes: gaining access; building alliances; and being an expert. Each of these are tactics span the three types of policy work identified in the previous chapter: relationship work; reputational work and formal routes.

8.1.1 Gaining access

In talking about policy influence, all interviewees referenced connections to either policy makers or to civil servants as being a core part of how they saw this being done. Although many acknowledged that resource to engage political figures, particularly WP policymakers (i.e. those directly involved in WP policy by virtue of their professional position) and ministers (i.e. who may or may not be directly engaged in WP policy but who have the scope to influence policy by virtue of their position), is a challenge, they also argued that, to achieve their charitable missions 'you have to change the systems and the systems, you've got to be talking to policy makers' (CEO, TSWPO). This went beyond being responsive to government, such as in responding to consultations or participating in committees, to actively developing relationships that could enable their involvement in more in-depth policy discussions on a range of issues. TSWPO interviewees indicated that they 'needed to talk to people higher up in government' (Trustee, TSWPO). The impression given by interviewees was also that this was and had been a viable option for TSWPOs for some time, with ministers and government more broadly open to approaches. The former Director of Fair Access spoke about this happening within his tenure (2012-2018):

> I mean Willetts [Minister of State for Universities] would. He would give time to people and they would come and lobby. Urban scholars for example got to Vince Cable because it was in his constituency, or nearby his constituency. So, yes, they were clearly, lobbying going on and I knew because they came back down to me and yes, 'we saw David Willetts and he suggested we saw you'.

From the description of interviewees, this opportunity to gain access to government figures was fairly commonplace, at least under new Labour and under the coalition government. However, this access in itself did not necessarily lead to an ongoing relationship or to opportunities to feed into policy processes. For political access to be meaningful in terms of shaping policy, interviewees suggested that this required a concerted effort and was often dominated by those with the resource to invest in this

sort of work. A former TSWPO CEO, speaking in 2019, reflected on the difficulties of this environment:

> There was a window in time where people would listen and would give money, rather than government doing it. It felt like a sensible approach in a way but then it was about who shouts loudest, and who has the biggest pockets? And who bullies the most? And who gets the civil servant on side? And there was lots of, you know, cooking up of civil servants and things. I think now the landscape has completely changed.

Several interviewees commented on the amount of resource required to maintain relationships, particularly in an environment of high turnover of civil servants and ministers. This was noted as particularly true of recent years, where between May 2015 and Dec 2021, there were four different incumbents of the role of Minister of State for Universities, over six different terms, some as brief as a few weeks. A former CEO of the Sutton Trust commented on how the Trust managed this extensive relationship building:

> Over years we had built up huge amounts of networks with civil servants, with advisors, ministers. What I found is ministers come and go so you have to keep on making those links. And it can be quite interesting as you go over the same stuff. I probably went over the same stuff with 10 education secretaries, right? So, you need to make sure you're also in touch with the permanent secretaries and I think part of the style with the Trust was accessing the people at the top. So, a lot of our studies are about people at the top and a lot of our policy influence was try and get to the senior people. You always have to back that up by the way, because otherwise you meet other people who are at lower position who can be, you know 'this charity's come in and now they're telling us', so you have to think carefully about how you manage that.

The Trust appears to have been in a prominent position and directly engaged with the work of government throughout the period covered by this thesis. A former Special Advisor to the Minister for Universities and Science noted that one of their first meetings in office was with the Sutton Trust and that the Trust currently have a formal role as the secretary for the Social Mobility Commission. Interviewees credited their position partly to the resources allocated by the Trust, as discussed in the quotes

above, but also to the position of their founder, Sir Peter Lampl. Lampl's access to politicians was, even to those within the Trust, a significant and unique aspect of their work:

> …at that point I think the biggest thing, and the biggest shock to my system…was Peter's access to politicians. Absolutely unprecedented. You know, he managed to sort of strike a chord, I think. He was in the right place at the right time. It was a government context where they were interested in talking to people. He was making a noise about a problem that hadn't really been made a noise about in that way before. And so, we just had unparalleled access to the Secretary of State for Education. He met every couple of months with Gordon Brown. You know it was *bizarre*, *absolutely bizarre.* The extent to which we were listened to. (Former CEO, Sutton Trust)

Lampl's approach in 'putting his money where his mouth was' (Former CEO, Sutton Trust) was described by interviewees in and outside the Trust as attractive to policy makers, as was his engagement with politicians and with journalists.

> And he wined and dined, you know. He'd take journalists out to Mossimans, give them very expensive lunches. You know, he was very wealthy and a bit of that stardust is always helpful I think. Politicians like hobnobbing with the rich. (Former CEO, Sutton Trust)

Although the level of status and wealth available to the Sutton Trust through Sir Peter Lampl, at least in their early phases, is distinctive, similar approaches appear to have been successful for other founders and CEOs. A further example given by one CEO was that of Steve Edwards, founder of the now inactive 'bestcourseforme', who was able to secure the support of David Willetts, then shadow Minister for Universities. His success in doing so was suggested to be partly a result of the level of his own investment but also the political value in the aims of bestcourseforme.

> Willetts was a big supporter of this and then when he became the minister, obviously that compromised his position on the steering committee but he remained very close. He genuinely believed that it was, to be cynical, the key to higher fees. To justify higher fees the key is information. If people are making an informed choice then you can justify higher fees. I mean less cynically he was thinking actually well, people should have access to this information and they should

have it explained to them. And so, he was very supportive of bestcourseforme's efforts.

This offers another example of where, in their efforts to be influential, TSWPOs are also part of being 'useful' to policy makers, making for potentially mutually beneficial alliances that can reinforce policies as well as potentially shape change. Like the Sutton Trust, bestcourseforme fit into a social mobility narrative that was aligned with the interests of the government at the time in its focus on encouraging potential students to make 'informed decisions' about HE. As noted by some interviewees, the fact that this message could come from an organisation deemed to be politically neutral, such as the Trust, was also advantageous for both politicians and for organisations.

A further dimension to the ability of some individuals and organisations to gain access to senior political figures was the perceived relevance of their message, partly in its political utility but also in its ability to appeal to the interests and values of those in positions of political influence. Those who had worked within government talked about the reoccurring preoccupation of politicians with a particular perspective on WP and social mobility:

> I'll say the politicians and the civil service were very drawn towards what they would see and call like 'elite' institutions and the 'best' institutions and that shaped a lot of what was in the media narrative and a lot of where the money went and a lot of where the policy went. (Former Government Worker)

The 'social mobility' model was deemed politically and ideologically attractive, preventing most government actors from straying too far from it

> There was no questioning of the thought that shall we have such a tiered and segregated society, there was an acceptance of that, that was the nature of society and they didn't question the broadening gaps. What they questioned was the ability of anybody to move up those gaps because, of course, they realised that if there was no possibility of movement then you were setting up a pre-revolutionary situation. And so, they wanted the ability of working-class kids to identify hard work and accepting the values of the middle classes to move into the middle classes. (Former Director of

Fair Access, commenting on the limited conception of WP he was working within)

This social mobility model and preoccupation with elite higher education extended beyond government to other means by which TSWPOs might prompt engagement with government through the media. Gaining media attention was described by interviewees as enabling access as 'once you've opened the door with that you get yourself in the room with the minister or whoever it might be' (CEO, WPO). However, this sort of attention was equally restricted to organisations with a message that might chime with editors.

> I once had an education editor of a national newspaper say to me 'only ring me to talk to me about a story if the story's about Oxbridge'. And I once had another education editor of another national newspaper say to me 'we don't write about FE because my evidence says that my reader's children don't go to FE colleges' so..these are sort of problems. (CEO, TSO)

As a consequence, gaining access was not simply about resources but also about the messages that organisations were seeking to gain access with and how well understood they might be by the political or media figures TSWPOs sought to engage.

With few organisations having access to the financial resources or founder-driven initial structure of the Sutton Trust, even if their messages were in tune with government, there was a strong reliance on CEOs to carry out policy work and to leverage personal resources to gain access for their organisations.

> I also through various networks managed to secure quite a few meetings with people in the Department for Education and in the Social Mobility Commission but particularly DfE and also in Treasury and no 10 advisors. (CEO, TSWPO)

Despite noting that relationship building was challenging and ongoing, many interviewees were able to easily point to examples of where their personal and/or professional networks had enabled access to relevant political figures. This significance of the role of CEOs in this strand of policy work is discussed later in this chapter as an

important feature of both how policy shaping is done in WP and also of the socio-cultural make-up of TSWPOs as organisations.

In general, TSWPOs appeared to be less focused on engaging with senior policy makers in recent years, referencing both a combination of the dominance of the Sutton Trust and the limited 'bandwidth' (Delivery Role, TSWPO) from a government preoccupied (at the time of interviews) with Brexit and other political crises. The most frequently referenced figures to engage with at the time of the interviews (2019/2020) were not ministers but senior staff within the newly formed Office for Students and sometimes the DfE, suggesting that organisations saw these as both accessible and a helpful level at which to focus their relationship building efforts.

> You know so we had meetings with Sam Gyimah, with Chris Skidmore, then Chris Skidmore went and Jo Johnson, and Jo Johnson we know a bit as well and very supportive of us, and Skidmore has come back. So, we've been representing to them about our concerns on some of the aspects of the [Augar] review (CEO, TSWPO)

This targeting of particular political figures was noted also as a risk-management strategy for TSWPOs, who needed to keep WP policy on the agenda to ensure the survival of their organisations.

> Chris Skidmore, who I've met a few times, he seems like a great guy and it is about maintaining those professional relationships with those people and that somebody like him…one person like him or Jo Johnson or Sam Gyimah who is in the role for a few months in the case of Sam, can fundamentally crush your entire organisation and all the good that you are trying to do. (CEO, WPO)

As noted in chapter seven, access to senior figures was not simply a goal in itself but was about being in a position to be called upon for advice or to input more informally into policy discussions.:

> Sometimes they would ask us to come and talk with them. So, you know, meet with this small group of MPs or there were a few meetings at the cabinet office. (Delivery Role, TSWPO)

Some TSWPOs discussed being the 'go-to' organisation for a particular policy issue (Trustee, TSWPO), leading to involvement in committees focused on specific policy areas. However, this was, at least in recent years, not always a fruitful exercise, with only some committees seen as relevant to influencing policy.

> There were very few committees that were actually there to do something. (Former CEO, TSWPO)

However, in some cases, this position of being a 'go-to' organisation would put TSWPOs in good positions for receiving funding themselves or being able to directly feed into policy initiatives, such as in the case of the Sutton Trust, Bestcourseforme or the Bridge Group. In a context in which TSWPOs framed policy influence in terms of 'shaping the narrative', then simply being 'in the room' (Trustee, TSWPO) could lead to the sort of relationships and outcomes that TSWPOs saw as beneficial, regardless of whether they could point to specific changes arising from their involvement.

8.1.2 Building alliances

As noted in chapter seven, the 'relationship work' of TSWPOs extends beyond accessing political figures to also forming and leveraging alliances between organisations and to building connections to individuals considered influential in a range of fields. The development of connections by TSWPOs has included the creation of formal networks like the Fair Access Coalition and the Fair Education Alliance and the creation of formal roles like advisory boards, alongside a more informal set of connections and ways of working that support their policy and practice activities. It is the practices of network building that are explored further in this section, as a core part of how TSWPOs operate.

The field of TSWPOs and of WP more broadly was described as 'very well networked' (CEO, TSWPO) by interviewees, with the same names, organisations and networks being referenced repeatedly throughout interviews. The relations between organisations and individuals are multiple and overlapping. Many connections are historic, as actors take on multiple roles within the field or in areas connected to it. The

majority of interviewees within this research occupied more than one role in the field, meaning that the relations they engage with may change depending on their role at the time but also are informed by historic relations which can change or remain the same. Figure 2 offers one example of these multiple, historic and overlapping relations between three actors within this field, mentioned frequently by interviewees as significant in relation to policy activity - King's College London (KCL), Brightside (BTS) and The Brilliant Club (TBC).

Figure 2: diagram of relations between three actors in the WP policy field
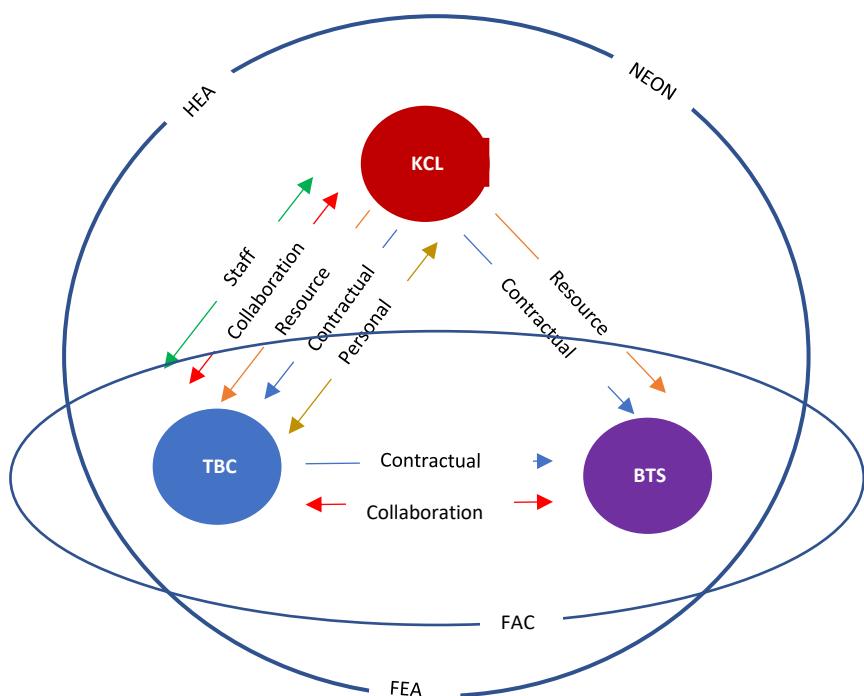
All three organisations are connected through a series of contractual and partnership delivery relationships – BTS and TBC are providers of activity on behalf of and alongside KCL. In some cases, KCL sets the terms of this relationship by contracting BTS and TBC to deliver a service, in other cases KCL provides resources, such as physical spaces or access to student volunteers, to enable TBC or BTS to deliver their own programmes. TBC and BTS are also connected in a contractual relationship, as BTS provide the technological platform for TBC to deliver activities for KCL. All are also connected as members of the Fair Education Alliance (FEA), a coalition of organisations

concerned with education policy and are current or former members of NEON and of HEAT, which both offer practitioner training and development activities as part of their portfolios. TBC and BTS are also members of the Fair Access Coalition (FAC), a group which formally excludes KCL in its public statements but has previously involved conversations between senior staff of all organisations as part of their meetings. TBC and KCL have a longstanding relationship as co-deliverers of TBC's annual conference and all have worked together in different configurations as part of national projects such as Realising Opportunities, a collaborative outreach project, or the Doncaster Opportunity Area, where TBC are deliverers of activity and the former Director of Social Mobility and Student Success at KCL the Chair. TBC also has connections to KCL as a recruiter of PhD students as volunteers for its outreach programmes and as trainees for its 'researchers in schools' teacher training programme. On a personal level, there are connections between current and previous staff members, including the current CEO of TBC being the former Director of Social Mobility and Student Success at KCL and the former CEO of TBC being the son-in-law of a senior KCL academic. Staff from each organisation attend the same conferences and will exchange knowledge and experience in formal and informal settings. These multiple and shifting relations provide many opportunities for the 'on-going effort' that animates policy networks and for the development of relations of trust and dependency that sustains them (Ball, 2016). The complexity of these relations and their dependencies also blurs the distinctions of whose interests are being served and for what purpose (Ball and Junemann, 2012).

Developing and extending relations through collaborations and alliances forms a core aspect of how policy is 'done' within this field. This ranges from institutionally structured alliances, with funding and organisational structures being based on collaborations or partnership arrangements, such as Aimhigher or the Uni Connect programme, to loose and temporary alliances based on specific issues, such as the Fair Access Coalition. Acceptance of the need for collaboration and connections was discussed by several interviewees when describing delivery of TSWPO work:

> So, there are more forums where people come together. Obviously, I had set up this Access Alliance and that led to creating one part of the Fair Education Alliance…there's also a lot of pressure from funders to have a story to tell around collaboration so what are you doing? So, it's become more part of the story…I think there's more pressure on universities to work with third sector organisations and…I think that's improved, or there's more of that. (Trustee, TSWPO)

The emphasis on partnership, initially between universities and schools under Aimhigher, then between universities as deliverers of WP activity and then increasingly between universities and outside providers, is reflected in policy and guidance to universities around access and participation. From 2014, OFFA guidance on collaboration suggested that TSOs were ideal collaborators (OFFA, 2014) and they have continued to be included as likely partners for initiatives funded by the Office for Students (e.g. TASO, 2020). In some cases, this collaboration was partly a practical endeavour to enable delivery. However, it was also clear that interviewees also saw being well-connected as a crucial asset to being able to develop their position within the field. Several interviewees, particularly those new to the field, described the importance of meeting with prominent figures as part of the process of establishing a position within the field.

> There's quite a few of them, they scroll down, found out who I am...want to meet with me and then, you know they want something, they want us to do something for them or something like that. And I do meetings with some of them. Sometimes I don't. It depends what they are looking to do and what can come from that. (CEO, WPO)

These connections made by individuals and organisations bring with them access to material resources, including funding or in-kind support, to knowledge, and to opportunities to identify and advance a shared agenda (Ball, 2016). Connections could also be essential for accessing the financial support and connections which have helped to grow some of the largest and most prominent organisations within the field. Several of the largest TSWPOs received their initial seed funding from the Sutton Trust,

whose founder has previously indicated that their preference is to fund organisations who can find a credible champion for their work:

> "I don't like being approached cold," he says."If charities can find an intermediary who is known to me or someone at the Trust, then that's more effective" (Third Sector, 7 Feb 2012)

This initial connection has then led to further funding and support opportunities, with the Sutton Trust making 'introductions' (Impetus PEF IU Case study) for organisations it supports to other foundations like Impetus, who now support formerly Sutton Trust funded organisations IntoUniversity and The Access Project. The importance of 'knowing the right people' also extends to individuals within universities and within government.

> It's always, you know, you have key people within that you know you have to have relationships with the OfS and OFFA – a key one - DfE, but also like the Anne-Marie Cannings of the world. We're friends with Anne-Marie Canning because you have to be friends with Anne-Marie Canning because she's everywhere! (Delivery Role, TSWPO)

In this case, the named person, Anne-Marie Canning, was an established figure within the field, having been Director of Social Mobility at King's College London and CEO of the Brilliant Club, as well as a participant in many consultations and advisory groups on WP policy, but the point was not restricted to one individual. Other names were mentioned by this interviewee and others and the importance of developing relationships with multiple individuals within the field who might wield some influence was highlighted by several interviewees. Some interviewees also discussed being frequently approached themselves, suggesting that making connections is deemed essential practice and that there is consensus around which individuals and organisations are meaningful connections to develop.

Many of the relationships described by TSWPOs are ones relevant across the field of widening participation, not specific to being TSWPOs. However, the emergence of the Fair Access Coalition, whose members are exclusively 'third sector', also indicates a practice of network building between TSWPOs that is specifically related to policy. For

some interviewees, TSWPOs working together was described almost as a natural consequence of being similar organisations operating in the same spaces:

> And we probably talk to each other more than the university sectors are able to because, again, we're nimble, we're small. We see each other at the same events and we're all kind of got the same challenges and speak the same language and as a collective, going to the OfS and talking to them seems to have had an effect which I think is a positive thing. (Delivery Role, TSWPO)

These collaborations between TSWPOs were also described in a more intentional way, offering potential routes to policy influence, with TSWPOs sometimes sharing their connections:

> When the Office for Students came in, and I got an audience with Chris Millward, I said you should talk to us because we've got lots of knowledge and expertise in this area. And then obviously everybody wanted to meet him and Nicola Dandridge so we got everybody together and we did it as a private dinner. (CEO, TSWPO)

As noted by one interviewee, this alliance of TSWPOs did not include the Sutton Trust, who 'don't need' (CEO, TSWPO) to make alliances to secure or maintain their position. This form of alliance is potentially then also a strategy for TSWPOs to match the resources of the Sutton Trust through collaborative activity.

In addition to networks built within the widening participation field, TSWPOs appear to also make a conscious effort to build relations in other allied fields as part of developing their capacity to shape policy. This includes connections with researchers in education, such as through invitations to participate in advisory groups or programmes like the Bridge Group 'fellows' network. These networks play a mostly informal role in shaping the direction of TSWPOs, described by the Bridge Group as 'challenging our thinking to ensure that our work is current, relevant, and has maximum impact' (Bridge Group, n.d). As with other policy work, this often has a dual purpose, with these networks also being about reach potential funders or partners for TSWPOs.

> We consulted with, well essentially an advisory group, and that had representatives from all around most of our partner universities and

employers. With a view to engaging them in our work and getting their advice and counsel and discussing issues and it also embeds them to understand what we do and hopefully secures them as long-term partners (CEO, TSWPO)

Network building by TSWPOs appears to be sometimes intentional, as in the case of policy networks like FAC or advisory boards, but also seems embedded in ways of working. Networks and relationships are seen as a means to getting things done, with some relationships deemed essential to participating fully in the sector and to advancing an organisation's position. 'Being friends with' was an important concept for developing influence in both policy and practice and hence building favourable relations with important figures was part of several aspects of TSWPO's work. The purpose and nature of these relationships was often unclear, either due to complexity of multiple overlapping relationships or due to a lack of clarity about exactly how the relationship should be leveraged for advantage within the field. Even within networks established specifically around policy, there were examples of disagreement between members and engagement with policy has been inconsistent. Beyond taking action, these networks appear to be valued more for their ability to develop status, to enable further connections and to share ideas.

8.1.3 Being an expert

Linked to the strategies discussed above, there was a need for TSWPOs to be able to establish their credibility as part of building relationships and playing a role in policy. Many of the comments made by interviewees were quick to equate policy and practice influence with some demonstration of expertise on their part that would establish this credibility. As indicated in comments in the previous chapter, expertise was generally equated with research, building on the perceived success of the Sutton Trust's model of influence. However, the expertise established by TSWPOs in their activity is not necessarily the sort of large-scale research with academic partners that is funded by the Sutton Trust, although they do sometimes appear to aspire to this. Instead, there is a focus on more easily resourced means including: building up a reputation for

strong local evaluation; making other forms of links with academia such as trusteeships or the appointment of advisory roles; the production of think pieces; and demonstrations of 'practical knowledge' through workshops, blogging and consultancy activities. In the case of some organisations, the capacity for this work was internal, but for most it involves collaboration with researchers, academics or prominent 'expert' figures/organisations such as TASO or the Behavioural Insights Team.

Carrying out research or, more often, producing 'evidence' was seen as an important way the TSWPOs could exert influence though gaining the attention of the media or policymakers, which could then lead to further opportunities to shape policy. Influence could also be more direct, through placing specific research or evidence in the hands of policymakers. It was suggested by some interviewees that TSWPOs were particularly well placed to offer the sort of evidence and research that could be easily digested by those creating and implementing policy:

> The other type of research that you can do and that third sector organisations are really good at is something sitting between pure academic research and research that NCOPs or other third sector organisations or government can understand. Because government does not have time to read academic papers. Even if they did they probably don't understand them…I think third sector organisations are really good at creating evidence-based research or evidence-based reports. Impetus have been brilliant at saying 'just focus on the evidence, focus on the evidence'. (CEO, WPO)

It was partly in producing 'evidence' for the sector that TSWPOs saw the opportunity to carve out a role for themselves in the field and in relation to shaping policy.

> So, there's that knowledge that they [TSWPOs] sit on - that practitioner knowledge - and there's also a huge amount of data and research that they sit on that's often squirrelled away. So, how you can surface that data in a way that can help people make good decisions? I think it is a really interesting area and an area where organisations like mine, you know, could do a lot in. (CEO, TSWPO)

This then formed part of their strategies for approaching government:

> We think we've got a lot of data and we've got something to say about it so what we've tried to do is to publish research…and we tried to then use that to sort of go to the DfE or Social Mobility Commission to say look this is what we've found. (CEO, TSWPO)

On occasion, this was also about using data to direct the behaviour or policy decisions of other organisations, such as universities, employers or governing bodies:

> I mean at the time that I've been involved, policy has gone from…about trying to influence government…to looking at more employers and HE. Around supporting policy development and using expertise, quantitative and indeed now qualitative measures to support. (Trustee, TSWPO)

There were some parallels drawn by interviewees between the sort of research and evidence work carried out by some TSWPOs and the practices of think tanks, with both producing expertise in a digestible format that could be used to influence policy. The Sutton Trust particularly was described as acting in a think tank role. However, much of the 'evidence' that TSWPOs produced was seen as part of being a charity, in that they were obligated to meet the demands and interests of funders who wanted indications of the effectiveness of their activities, and not an additional activity intending to mimic the functions of a think tank. For the majority of organisations, the policy influence aspect of producing research was secondary to its value in securing funding or refining their models of activity. Nonetheless they did see it as offering some potential for building their reputation and appealing to policy makers. They also saw it as part of their responsibility to share and use their data and research with the aim of shaping policy:

> All this work that we're doing we want it to somehow get out there and influence wider policy and practice so that's the impact side of it. (Policy Role, TSWPO)

Several interviewees who were formerly involved in making WP policy did reference the 'impact' work or 'evidence' of TSWPOs as being one of their strengths, particularly

in comparison to universities who were seen as being weak in assessing the impact of their work.

Despite evidence seemingly being an important part of how they might influence policy or a supporting strategy to other approaches, there was some scepticism, largely from those working within TSWPOs, that the quality of this research warranted its positive image. One TSO CEO suggested that, thanks to their efforts at promotion 'the perception of the amount of work they [TSWPOs] are doing - actual quantity – looks much more than in reality'. One issue was the purpose for which much evaluation was produced, to inform and encourage funders:

> Your evaluation becomes very defensive of the funding that you've received so everything is summative and everything has to tell a good news story (CEO, TSWPO)

There were suggestions in this comment and from others within and outside TSWPOs that part of the impact of evidence work was about producing work that was 'media friendly' and met the expectations of funders and potential funders. The production of evidence was frequently tied to discussion of strategies about engaging the media and politicians, with recognition that this aspect of the work therefore could require compromise:

> When we commission a piece of research we always have a policy direction or a policy idea in our minds, that we want this to elucidate. But we also spend a lot of time around the comms around that research and policy piece as well. So, getting it into relatively simple, straightforward terms. And that sometimes involves some compromises. (CEO, TSWPO)

This consideration of impact and 'comms' was particularly true of work described as 'research', which was usually discrete from delivery activity. In the case of evaluation or data linked to programme delivery, there was less emphasis on how this might be presented publicly, with the primary purpose often being to satisfy funders or make programme changes.

Those working within TSOs did comment on the limitations of their evaluation work, particularly in terms of gaining access to similar resources to academics or in securing funding to support research and evaluation activity. Alongside acknowledging some of the shortcomings of their evaluation, all TSOs covered within this research were pursuing a variety of approaches to strengthening both their evaluation and the external connections which might help validate it. Some CEOs were using contacts within universities or within government who provided support for capacity building within the organisation by acting as advisors, facilitating access to academic publications and forums, providing training to staff or carrying out discrete projects. One CEO described using a personal connection to make links with the Behavioural Insights Team or 'nudge unit', who have become relatively prominent in WP evaluation work:

> …he introduced us to [Behavioural Insights Team] and we did a lot of stuff…We looked at defaults in our processes to try and make the default be the thing we wanted students to do, rather than…So, we've had massive involvement with them. They also helped us think through the idea of RCTs which is quite difficult to do with the kind of numbers you need.

In the type of evaluation activity that they favoured, TSWPOs appear to show a preference for quantitative and experimental methods, often those also favoured by government and bodies like the EEF. In recent years, some have sought closer involvement with OfS-led or sponsored evaluation activity, including evaluation of initiatives as part of the Uni Connect programme and involvement with bids to lead the OfS sponsored evidence and impact exchange. This alignment with particular approaches to evaluation was acknowledged by some as problematic but also necessary in order to satisfy the expectations of funders:

> we do struggle hugely with trying to develop evidence-based models to prove that what we do works and we do end up having to come up with these really soft measures of success. (CEO, WPO)

The adoption of approaches to knowledge production more readily accepted by government and by funders appeared, in some cases, to be a pragmatic decision to

encourage positive perceptions of their organisation, rather than any strong belief in these being the most effective or appropriate methods for assessing their activity. However, other interviewees seemed wholly convinced by what works approaches, seeing these and extensive production and monitoring of performance data as the 'gold standard' that they were working towards.

8.1.4 Summary

The three themes identified above, of gaining access, building alliances and being experts, are closely interlinked and based in TSWPO's seeking to develop their proximity to sources of authority, whether those be individuals, networks, organisations or even ideas and forms of knowledge. As set out at the start of this chapter and explored further in chapters nine and ten, I suggest that their activities are collectively placing TSWPOs in the role of 'networked experts' in policy and practice. This role is one that has enabled, for some organisations, the ability to contribute to policy through participation in networks, through access to policy makers and through generation or promotion of ideas and 'evidence'. However, in many cases, even where TSWPOs cannot point to the specific influence of their organisation, they still perform the functions of this role, choosing to participate in networks and to generate 'evidence', seeing these as essential to their position and to their organisations. This role appears to be both an intentional one and one adopted almost by default, even where individuals within organisations may have a discomfort about the compromises this role requires of them. The following section explores in more detail some of the pressures identified by TSWPOs that are specific to their organisations, offering a further insight into why TSWPOs have adopted particular practices and approaches to policy.

8.2 Being 'third sector'

The previous section explored the actions and reasonings of TSWPOs as actors in WP policy and practice and particularly their role as 'networked experts'. Many of these actions will be similar in structure and reasoning to the actions of other actors within

this field. However, this thesis is concerned with also exploring TSWPOs as a particular *type* of policy actor in these circumstances - one that fits within the legal structure of a charity within England and is part of a notional 'third sector'. This section therefore explores how participants specifically viewed their policy actions and influence in relation to the type of organisation that they are. This relates to my second research question - How is TSWPOs relationship to policy/policy influence shaping and being shaped by their status as charitable organisations? This section first explores how those within TSWPOs see their position as part of a 'third sector' and how much they identify with being charitable organisations. It then examines four themes in how TSWPOs described their circumstances *as TSOs* and how they related their policy work to this. These themes are: funding; the role of founders and CEOs; moral authority; and bridging/boundary spanning.

8.2.1 A shared field?

Before considering in greater depth how the position and organisational form of TSWPOs relates to their policy actions and influence, it is first important to note that the extent to which they identify as either part of a field of WP policy or of TSOs does vary. As Emirbayer and Johnson (2008) indicate, the extent to which they identify belonging to a field, including identifying shared relations, actors and 'rules' within it, is pertinent to whether they then feel it will guide or structure their actions.

Broadly, those interviewed readily identified with a widening participation field, seeing this as a major policy space in which they worked.

> We talk about widening participation because that's essential the policy frame that universities work with and most of our work since the beginning has been in the university space, that's where most of the funding is. So that's why I use that language (CEO, TSWPO)

In describing the field that they worked within interviewees consistently referenced the same actors and appeared to have similar understandings of their relative positions within the field. Although many of them also considered themselves as working across multiple policy fields or a part of broader fields of education and social

mobility, the day-to-day experience of their field appeared to overlap around widening participation policy, actors (including funders) and structures.

In contrast however, there was some disagreement about whether they would consider themselves part of a 'third sector' and whether this was particularly significant to them.

> I don't see myself as part of something called the third sector...on a day-to-day basis, I don't really have very much to do with someone who's running a domestic violence charity or a charity to support community development in Africa. (CEO, TSWPO)

For many, they identified as many similarities between their organisations and universities or their organisations and private sector organisations as they did between themselves and other charities. The charity structure, for most, was seen as a functional choice rather than an ideological one.

> I mean there aren't many disadvantages to us being a charity other than personal, you know personal income [laughing]...there aren't many things that we would want to do that we can't do as a charity, do you know what I mean? So, we don't want to trade, we don't want to own big assets, we don't want to issue bonuses to staff. (CEO, TSWPO)

Interviewees in organisations not registered as charities but operating as 'not-for-profit' organisations also indicated that they didn't see the charity structure as particularly important to being able to carry out work as a WP organisation.

> I mean some organisations I think the focus is set the organisation up, make it a charity, get a board and all that. Then deliver stuff. Whereas it's the other way around for us. Deliver something, do something to make a difference then worry about whether you are a charity or not a charity. (CEO, WPO)

Even where organisations were charities, interviewees made a point to distinguish themselves from other TSOs and other charity 'types', variously aligning as 'third sector', 'social enterprises', 'social purpose organisations' or 'foundations'. There was little discussion of the 'traditional' characteristics of charities, including use of

volunteers or being non-profit making, in how they described their organisations. Interviewees within TSWPOs tended to emphasise the 'dynamic' (CEO, TSWPO), 'professional' (Delivery Role, TSWPO) or 'business-like' (Trustee, TSWPO) aspects of their own organisation and other TSWPOs. There were some exceptions, who compared themselves more to 'public sector' organisations, or emphasised their involvement of members, but these were in the minority. Instead, there appeared to be a stronger identification with more recent ideas of social enterprise in the UK and in being a hybrid organisational type.

As 'business-like' organisations, it was not uncommon for TSWPOs to note that they had competitors for funding and delivery of services, amongst other TSOs but also in universities and private businesses. Descriptions of their own organisations in relation to others indicated that, while their competitors for funding or profile may be different, nearly all TSWPOs see themselves as acting within a marketplace for ideas and services and follow similar rules around attracting funding, building relationships and acting as competitors. Who organisations saw and defined themselves in relation to varied but tended to include the same forms of organisations, even if they saw themselves in different positions in relation to these. For example, almost all organisations discussed how they were similar or different to universities, but not all saw universities as competitors or similar to them. It was also common for organisations to note how they were similar or different to the major TSWPO in their field, the Sutton Trust, suggesting some agreement about the Trust's position and influence on the field as a defining organisation.

In field terms, it might be appropriate to consider the Sutton Trust an 'incumbent' organisation, given its prominence amongst other TSWPOs. In their discussion of strategic action fields, Fligstein and McAdam describe incumbents as 'those actors who wield disproportionate influence within a field…the purposes of the field are shaped to their interests, the positions in the field are defined by their claims on the lion's share of resources in the field, the rules tend to favour them, and shared meanings tend to legitimate and support their privileged position within the field' (2011: 5). Incumbents

are placed in opposition to 'challengers', who can articulate an alternative vision of the field, though they may conform to its existing 'rules'. However, this framing of relations between the Trust and other organisations might suggest that there is one major field in which the Trust and others see themselves operating and/or that there is some stability to the Trust's position across the fields that they consider relevant. The comments of interviewees suggest that they see themselves operating in multiple fields and that the Trust particularly operates (at a minimum) in fields of social mobility policy, widening participation policy and education policy. In all these fields it has a high status, but it would not be true necessarily to think of it as an incumbent as it has relatively limited resources and capacities in relation to other organisations in the same field.

Taking as an example the field of widening participation, which most TSWPOs appear to consider a primary field for their activities, the position of the Sutton Trust is not as central as the impressions of other TSWPOs may indicate and, as noted in the previous chapter, their influence is limited. The field is instead dominated by organisations concerned with the delivery of higher education, such as universities and government bodies. Although the Sutton Trust may rank foremost amongst TSWPOs in this field, to the point of even limiting the capacity for other organisations to advance alternative views, their position amongst *all* organisations, including universities, employers, HE representative bodies etc. is less advantageous. In comparison with the position of universities and their representative bodies in particular, the resources that place it ahead of other TSWPOs are only a small proportion of the resources within the field. The Trust and other organisations describe having to carefully manage relationships with universities and particularly the Russell Group in order to maintain their positions. As discussed later in this chapter, as funders of TSWPOs, universities exercise the ability to shape how and what activities TSWPOs deliver. Interviewees from the Sutton Trust and other TSWPOs also described themselves as attempting to challenge the position of universities in this field, for example in terms of consideration of admissions and institutional autonomy or in relation to funding of widening participation, framing themselves more as challengers than incumbents.

In addition to the consideration of the Trust's position as a potential incumbent organisation, it is also relevant to note that the position of other TSWPOs, at least within this research, is not necessarily one of challengers. Although, as noted in the previous chapter, some TSWPOs express frustration with the dominant narrative of fair access that is perceived as supported by the Trust's activities, few are able to clearly articulate an alternative, at least not in terms of ways of working. Functionally, the majority of TSWPOs in this research align with large and selective universities as a necessity of funding. No TSWPOs within this research discussed widening participation in terms of provision within colleges of FE and HE or adult learners. In terms of the discourses of widening participation discussed in chapter three, few expressed alignment with a model of widening participation that is transformative or that might require institutional change. Within the field of widening participation, TSWPOs are therefore positioned closer to dominant narratives and maintenance of the current order than are many other organisations, such as FE colleges, independent HE providers and institutions like the Open University.

This consideration of the position of the Trust in relation to the wider field or fields that it operates within demonstrates some of the fluidity and temporality of a field of TSWPOs. While the TSWPOs within this research could identify themselves as being part of a policy and practice field of widening participation, they also simultaneously located themselves in other fields, of social mobility, of education and, in some cases, of third sector organisations. Their field positions are therefore changeable, depending in which field they feel they are operating and for what purpose. The seeming lack of an association amongst interviewees with a 'TSWPO field', as distinct from other fields they identify, would suggest that this is, at best, an emergent field. Instead, it is the broader, though still unstable, field of widening participation that appears to be the shared domain for interviewees, with the overlapping influence of other fields applying to varying extents for different organisations.

Although not ideologically significant for many interviewees and of limited significance in terms of separating them from other organisation types within the widening

participation field, interviewees did identify areas where they felt that being a TSO was relevant to how they engaged with policy and/or practice. These were: funding; the role of CEOs and founders; moral authority; and bridging/boundary spanning. These did not necessarily produce the same effects across all organisations but were nonetheless considerations for many of them in how they chose to engage with policy and policy activity. The remainder of this chapter examines these four areas in detail.

8.2.2 Funding

Insecurity

There were different funding models across organisations. Even within the same organisation, the balance of funding sources appeared to change significantly over relatively short time periods. Broadly, TSWPOs are reliant on a combination of funding sources including: income from sold services (both strictly mission aligned and less so); restricted and unrestricted donations from both individuals and foundations; grants; funding from government agencies (either for specific work or small capacity building grants); funding from national widening participation projects, distributed by universities; university support (as donations or support in addition to sold services); and fundraising or sponsorship. Interviewees highlighted the importance of 'a diversity of income streams' (CEO, TSWPO) to manage the 'risk' of funding streams disappearing.

> So, funding I think inherently you're reliant on un-reliable sources of income. So, if you're reliant on government funding we know that can just go. It may be 3 or 4 years but then it could just go. And in fact, if anything, there is an incessant need in government to re-announce and re-design things so the chance are it will go, be called something else and you'll have to reapply and all of those things. All you're getting from universities, and sometimes those partnerships can work really well, but again I have observed that universities want to do more in-house, for good reasons. I think because they probably to control it more? So again, that is not a reliant fundraising stream. Then you're reliant on philanthropy but that's time consuming and again short lived. Or you're reliant on school spending and of course that's been really tough over the last few years with all the budget

cuts and you need to really prove to your school that it is where they should be spending their marginal pound. And for most schools they're most worried about attainment so unless you're affecting attainment it's quite hard to access the budgets. (CEO, TSWPO)

The inconsistency of funding streams was something highlighted by several interviewees, particularly in relation to widening participation and reliance on the favour of government, HEPs and employers to provide funding. Interviewees raised concerns about TSWPOs currently being too reliant on one source of funding, particularly when that funding was linked to government initiatives or mediated by universities because these were deemed to be too unstable and susceptible to political changes. Programmes like Aimhigher and Uni Connect were credited with promoting organisational growth but also, where funding ceased or changed, with leading to organisations shrinking or disappearing altogether. There appeared to be a heavy reliance or alignment with government funded programmes – even where organisations could be financially secure without funding it was felt that 'you have to go for it' (Former Director of Fair Access), meaning that alignment with government policies was linked to funding security for many organisations and created tensions in their work.

Matching funders' interests

Given concerns about the security of government funding and, between 2011 and 2017, limited amounts of funding available, particularly for TSWPOs, many developed funding models that relied more on philanthropic donations or on sold services. Philanthrophic donations were an important source of income for several TSWPOs, now and previously, and several were themselves founded by philanthropists including the Sutton Trust, Brightside and bestcourseforme. Some interviewees noted concerns that this meant that many WP initiatives were geared to the interests of those with the personal wealth to support them. These were sometimes described as individuals with 'their own social mobility story' (CEO, TSWPO). There were suggestions that the prominence of individual founders or donors within funding models had

led to issues of duplication as they sought out 'their own thing to play with' (Former CEO, TSWPO) or 'their own personal CSR' (CEO, TSO). The position of founders and their relation to how TSWPOs engage with policy and practice will be examined in further detail in the following section.

Regardless of exactly the source of funding, interviewees did note that they had found themselves adapting their work to the funding available.

> ...gradually people and specifically blue-chip corporates started to give us money to do bits of work for them so and so perhaps more by accident than design we started just focusing more and more on employment - on widening participation and social mobility as they relate to progression into the workforce and then also progression within the workforce. So, that seemed to be an additional area of interest from our clients as I can call them. (CEO, TSWPO)

For most interviewees, this was an accepted part of the environment in which they worked – 'they will want something in return for their money. Very reasonable' (CEO, TSWPO) – but did cause some frustrations, particularly around aligning to targeting criteria or the desire of funders to regularly 'see something different' (CEO, TSWPO). It was also acknowledged as an ongoing challenge to be managed when considering how their work aligned to their mission:

> So, one of the challenges for us as a charity, and we've not quite got this right, but we're definitely getting close to getting it right, is that we can't just go where the funding is. And that's an odd thing to say but we've become more disciplined to saying no to pieces of work that people in the sector want us to do where we think 'actually that's not going to make much of a difference is it?' (CEO, TSWPO)

There were also some concerns expressed that being too closely tied to one or other source of funding did or could require them to modify their positions with regards to policy or practice.

> We haven't taken any government funding deliberately. We took some small bit...but it was a small part of our budget, we decided not to continue with that. And the reason is for us really is partly because

> government chops and changes so much but also because we want to be able to speak without fear or favour. We deliberately don't go on the attack of government for no reason but sometimes we are going to criticise something that government's doing or suggest further changes and we don't want that to be frustrated by sort of funding concerns or compromised by funding concerns. So, we try to avoid government funding. (CEO, TSWPO)

This was not just related to government but also to relationships with other funders, including universities.

> As you can imagine, working with universities as funding partner but also shouting from the sidelines that they need to do more about widening access is not always a comfortable relationship and we've come a cropper a few times on that in the past (CEO, TSWPO)

It also applied to modifying messages to attract and satisfy funders:

> We rely even more heavily on the moral crusade…I think it depends a bit on what your funding model is. We are so tied to a funding model and where we can generate our income from. If we can't generate our income and we can't maintain our income we cease to exist and so we tailor our messages according to what our funders want to hear. (CEO, TSWPO)

Those who spoke about this issue tended to be in larger, more established organisations with multiple sources of funding who felt able to resist the pressure to comply with the position of funders or who could afford to turn down funding but even these organisations acknowledged that the interests or perceived interests of particular funders did shape their activity as organisations, including how they might engage with policy and the activities that they delivered.

Competition

Linked to funding is the fact that TSWPOs are effectively in competition for funding – with each other, with universities (who might also be their funders) and with private sector organisations. For many of them, although they may have a strong reputation in relation to their activities, the actual format of their delivery is not necessarily unique

or protected, meaning that they are also at risk of being undercut in cost or to losing income from sold services as their 'clients' move to deliver activities themselves or to cheaper providers. There was a sense from interviewees that, with regards to funding 'everybody's fishing in the same pond' (Trustee, TSWPO). In some cases, this does not appear to be a significant hinderance and, with close connections between organisations, can even be an advantage. Foundations and trusts like the Esme Fairbairn Foundation, the Garfield-Weston Foundation and Impetus have funded multiple TSWPOs, some concurrently, and it was also indicated that the Sutton Trust had occasionally facilitated introductions to these funders for organisations that they had provided seed funding for. However, obtaining funding from these larger grant makers can require significant investment of resource that isn't possible for all TSWPOs and the awarded grants are dominated by a small number of organisations who often have grants from multiple funders.

Some interviewees did suggest that this environment of competition could be problematic, preventing organisations from working together for a variety of reasons. In some cases it was suggested that it was necessary for organisations to preserve their uniqueness in order to compete. In others, it was suggested that some TSOs might act competitively over funding, preventing more collaborative relationships.

> Well, some charities are very dominant and want to be everything to everybody and I guess are less open to collaboration. It's not just big, can be small as well. And there are some charities who are maybe are in the pre-18 niche who think 'ooh, there's a funding opportunity' or an opportunity to grow and arguably it might be a bit of mission creep (CEO, TSWPO)

There were tensions between organisations with similar offers in terms of their activities, though little open criticism. However, these tensions may be a factor in determining the formation of networks which can then serve to validate or circulate ideas and may shape policy actions.

Despite the competitive environment, there were also indications that funding issues could create common ground between organisations as an area of shared concern and

interest. Funding concerns were cited as one of the major reasons that TSWPOs formed coalitions to respond to possible policy changes, including the creation of the OfS and the Augar review. There were also coalitions formed around the ending of Aimhigher that campaigned to raise the profile of WP activity or to develop and present the forms of evaluation that the government cited as lacking and the reason for cutting funding. In these cases, the commonality of their experience in pursuing funding actually supported collaboration, albeit sometimes only for short periods and only between organisations who had the resource and security to collaborate on policy activity.

8.2.3 Founders and CEOs

Several of the TSWPOs included within the scope of this research originate from the ideas and sometimes financial backing of one or two individuals. Almost all are less than 20 years old, meaning that the influence, character and sometimes presence of a founder or initial funder still appears to play an active role in the activities of the organisation or, at the very least, in the external perception of the organisation. Although interviewees rarely explicitly mentioned this as a feature of their organisations as charities, the importance of the role of the CEO or founder came up repeatedly as something that guided their work. It was also common for interviewees to refer to the importance of this feature in other TSWPOs, even if not in their own.

Amongst the TSWPOs in this research, it was common for the CEO or founder to take a lead on policy activity, with their role often the only one deemed to have the necessary capacity, authority and interest within an organisation. As a consequence, their interest in policy, their personal networks and their background appeared to be very relevant to both the policy they chose to engage with and how they did so. CEOs referenced using personal networks to gain access to journalists or politicians, to form policy coalitions or to develop areas of their organisation's work, particularly around evaluation. In talking about other CEOs, some interviewees referenced their well-connectedness or political 'nouse' (CEO, WPO) as an advantage in the policy work of

their organisation. The CEO and their public persona was also seemingly a factor in which alliances could be made by organisations, with some funders, like the Sutton Trust, preferring personal recommendations, and other TSWPOs feeling that this was an important part of the relationship.

> I found it very easy to align with them. It's often about who the Chief Executive is (CEO, WPO)

Amongst some of the TSWPOs in this research there do appear to have been somewhat different stances on engagement with policy and the type of policy engagement taken by organisations under different CEOs. This was reflected on by current and previous CEOs and trustees, who noted that a CEO's personal interest in policy could lead to an increase or decrease in policy engagement over their tenure. Prior political experience and personal networks that linked to government were common amongst CEOs who did choose to engage with policy.

In the case of founders, whether acting as CEOs or not, there was an emphasis placed on their personal connection to or interest in the TSWPO's mission and their own professional and personal backgrounds shaping the organisation. Even where founders were not nominally 'in charge' of an organisation or even the major funder, they were still sometimes in positions of influence as Trustees or Chairs, with CEOs acknowledging that their opinions could still carry significant influence within the organisation. The professional background of founders as 'commercial' (Trustee, TSWPO) or 'entrepreneurial' (CEO, TSWPO) was described by CEOs and Trustees as shaping the structure of the TSO, albeit sometimes resisted by others within the organisation.

The social backgrounds and positions of founders and CEOs was mentioned consistently by interviewees as significant to the missions and policy activities of organisations. As with other areas, the Sutton Trust's founder, Sir Peter Lampl, was held up as the major example, with interviewees saying that the Trust's 'specific view' was 'driven' by Lampl and his experiences. However, there were also several other

examples given and an acceptance that many of the currently active organisations were founded by those with very similar experiences of HE and inequality.

> I think it's also based a lot on people's personal experience as well, in that a lot of the people who've set [TSWPOs] up have been to a Russell Group university and seen the inequalities there and so its rooted in that experience and their networks and those sorts of things. (CEO, TSWPO)

Although interviewees were reluctant to be critical of this structure to setting up charities in this space, several suggested that the relatively privileged position of many founders in terms of their university background and current financial status (described as 'incredibly posh' by one interviewee), played a role in the continued focus of WP work within TSWPOs being centred around a fair access understanding of WP. A small number of interviewees also noted that the majority of prominent 'voices' in widening participation tended to be men, with this highlighted as true of TSWPOs and the wider sector. Of the TSWPOs within this research, just under half were headed solely or jointly by women, but few of these were named in the course of this research. The majority of interviewees (13 of 19) were men and it tended to be men who were named by participants as potentially useful interviewees for this research topic.

In addition to the background of CEOs and founders being important for how organisations engaged with policy, there were also suggestions that the policy position of TSWPOs was further personalised to their leadership by the conditions around the foundation of TSWPOs. Some interviewees suggested that there was at least some element of 'ego' or 'personal CSR' for some founders or significant funders who, although well meaning, may be inclined to set up their own organisation or to be 'hands-on' with organisations they support, rather than supporting WP in other ways. This meant that it was therefore possible for their personal visions to be more prominent within their organisations. This element of a prominent leadership figure was sometimes taken to be an advantage, as it could allow access for an organisation, through the networks and image of their founder/CEO, access to powerful figures and a positive image associate with philanthropic work.

The importance of figureheads or prominent figures acting as leaders was described a feature of the wider WP field, rather than something specific to being a charitable organisation. However, what does appear to be relevant is the similarity of background and experience amongst charity CEOs and founders and the level of influence that they have over the charity's mission and in policy work. Whereas a figurehead within a university, government or a large corporate organisation may be guided in their policy actions by the interests of a wider institution, with institutional norms or restrictions, this does not appear to be the case for leaders in TSWPOs.

> There is a huge advantage to being in the position of head of a charity or third sector organisation and so on, in terms of the policy. Because you don't have a box in the same way that a Vice-Chancellor might. A Vice-Chancellor might desperately want to go in and say some of the same things that we do but they know there's all sorts of different things they've got to weigh and balance. An employer might also have half an eye on one interest, half an eye on another. If you're a charity that is there to support students from poorer backgrounds, you don't have to kowtow to anyone else. (CEO, TSO)

Interviewees with experiences of working both in TSOs and universities or government noted that, in institutional roles, they had sometimes been unable to put their names to or associate with WP policy activities that they might wish to because of a perceived conflict of interest with other aspects of their institutional priorities. The structure of charities, and particularly these relatively new and still founder-driven organisations in the WP field, appears to allow more freedom for the personal positions and experiences of founders and CEOs to play a role in policy engagement.

8.2.4 Moral authority

Interviewees often highlighted that the features of their organisations, such as being small or led by a dominant personality, were not unique to being charities and, in general, there was a relatively weak association with the idea of the charity model significantly shaping their work. However, they did indicate that their funding models and the expectations of funders did require them to 'rely on the moral crusade' (CEO, TSWPO) in the public presentation of their work. They also suggested that there could

be aspects of the public perception of them *as charities* that was helpful for their policy activity. This included a sense that amongst political figures and sometimes potential clients 'the perception of us is probably more generous' (CEO, TSWPO), leading to some opportunities for conversations or even contracted work with potential supporters and clients. In the case of gaining access to policymakers, one former CEO suggested that having a philanthropic founder 'putting their money where their mouth was' could be an attractive proposition and was helpful for building relationships. This, combined with their position as 'non-partisan' organisations (CEO, WPO), could enable access to important figures across the political spectrum.

In many cases, it was not necessarily in the image of what it meant to be 'a charity' in and of itself that was valuable, but the contrast between a perception of charities and other organisations working in this space:

> for third sector organisations if you've got time with a Minister it's a win in and of itself so it's like, unlike these slow bureaucratic people who are telling me 'no', here are idealistic caring people who are, you know with a can-do attitude which I…so you've got that sector. (Former Government Worker)

There were several points where interviewees, both in and outside TSWPOs, contrasted their position with that of universities. The image of TSWPOs was of dynamic, value-driven organisations with 'on the ground' expertise, often offering a contrast to a more negative view of universities.

> Third sector organisations are seen as having not so much of an axe to grind. They are people who are doing it because they believe in it and, particularly now we've got a Tory Government, they're seen a bit how they see new providers in higher education. They're gingering up the system, they're gritting the wheel. All that kind of stuff. And so, I think that they probably have more of an impact than you might think because they come in saying 'we're doing this stuff because the universities aren't doing anything' you know? 'we can do something different' 'we can do something in a new way' and 'we're small and agile'. (Former Government Worker)

When talking about the strengths of being a 'third sector' organisation, it was common for interviewees to talk about universities as self-interested, bureaucratic and reluctant to change, sometimes seeing this as the reason for their lack of progress on widening participation. By contrast, TSWPOs were seen as being responsive and as having a strong track record on evaluation by virtue of having to prove impact to funders.

> They evaluate their work and not all WP work is sufficiently well evaluated. And they do evaluate their work and put it through rigorous evaluation and have shown that their model seems to work. (Former Government Worker)

This reputation for carrying out robust and compelling evaluations was largely unquestioned by policy makers, whereas those working within them or close to them we more critical, whilst also acknowledging that maintaining a reputation for good evaluation was important.

> Necessity of survival encourages you [TSWPOs] to be more focused on establishing your output. I carefully say that because what I don't think that means is that they evaluate it better. I'm not saying that. Because I think there's good evaluation going on within institutions but it doesn't go out publicly. It stays within the institution or it circulates in different ways. But what happens in smaller charities, because they have to, they are very focused about that. I think what's happened is that the perception of the amount of work they are doing - actual quantity – looks much more than in reality. (Trustee, TSWPO)

The value of the image of them as charitable organisations and all the possible positive connotations of this, particularly as 'new' charities, associated with entrepreneurialism, philanthropy and a challenge to the ineffective 'old order' of universities, appears to have been part of their appeal to policymakers. In presenting an alternative to universities, they provide a useful example of the sort of behaviours that regulation appears to be steering universities towards in terms of WP – the embracing of targets linked to funding, responsiveness to change, externally defined target groups and an acceptance of 'what works' approaches to understanding the experience of HE. However, it is important to note that, despite some TSWPOs

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explicitly making a case for direct funding of TSWPOs, there are few examples of government actually financially backing TSOs to deliver on WP objectives. At most, there have been reputational incentives to working with TSWPOs, and a few isolated examples of funding provided to TSWPOs to deliver in collaboration with universities.

8.2.5 Bridging/boundary spanning

Although there was not necessarily a strong identification with being a charity for many organisations, there were indications that not being other organisational types, like universities or government agencies, or corporations, were all seen as advantages to some extent. Being a form of organisation distinct from, but with similarities to the other major players in this field, was part of what shaped their approach to policy and how they presented themselves to policy makers. Some interviewees noted that part of the appeal of TSWPOs to ministers was that they presented themselves as 'business friendly', with people working within them who would be equally comfortable working in a charity, business or within government (Former Government Worker). This ability to seemingly straddle different 'sectors' or to translate between different fields was part of how they developed their profiles in policy and with policy makers.

As noted elsewhere in this chapter, interviewees suggested that TSWPOs had created a platform for engaging politicians that was unique to their position was around the types of research they produced or how they presented their expertise. Some interviewees likened this role to that of think tanks, though they also highlighted the focus of TSWPOs on delivery and more practice-based expertise. The Sutton Trust were again the main example of this bridging, both between an academic and political sphere but also between think tanks and delivery organisations. Being 'this interface between the business and the more academic, charity type sector' was something remarked upon as important to their success by one former CEO. This sense of belonging and crossing between multiple sectors was reflected in how TSWPOs identified themselves as organisations and their value in a policymaking space:

> I guess on a good day I feel like we're part of 3 different sectors, maybe 4. Which are the higher education practitioner sector, you know we work a lot with pro-Vice Chancellors and then also WP professionals…The other is the employer sector, gosh you could cut that up many ways! The third is sort of academic - we have a network of academic fellows who contribute to our work in all sorts of wonderful ways. And then the fourth is the sort of policy making, so I guess mainly happens in Whitehall but not only that. I would say part of where we deliver in perhaps the best way is because we intersect across those different areas and I think…if you want to solve those really entrenched problems you need those sort of sectors to come together and they rarely do, as far as I can gather. (CEO, TSWPO)

In several cases, being a 'bridging' type organisation was part of what guided their work – 'we wanted to bridge that gap between policy and practice and research' (Former CEO, TSWPO). That bridging work includes bringing different groups together – 'creating a space where practitioners, policy makers, academics, you know etc., would come together in one space' (CEO, TSWPO) – or identifying where there are gaps between organisations or sectors that could be reasonably filled by an entity unconnected to either.

> …we would say that we are, or there is a gap for an intermediary between universities and employers that understand both (CEO, TSWPO)

One CEO suggested that TSWPOs could play a role in building relationships that could make the 'closed community' of academic and university-based WP research more open. It was often links with academic research that TSWPOs felt that they were well placed to facilitate or even 'translation' (Trustee, TSWPO) to other audiences. Their structures as independent organisations, in a position to sometimes commission academic research or to engage individual academics in voluntary capacities, formally as trustees or less informally as advisors, seems to be part of what enables this bridging capacity. Several TSWPOs included here have, in recent years, developed advisory boards or reviewed their governing bodies to actively include academics and researchers in an effort to develop closer links and bring this particular form of expertise to their work.

8.2.6 Summary

In exploring how TSWPOs explained their policy activities *as TSWPOs,* it is possible to identify factors that contribute to why the position of 'networked experts' has become an expectation for TSWPOs. The pressures of competition and limited funding, often from multiple funders, has made maintaining networks a means of survival for TSWPOs, as well as a means to develop policy or practice influence. The connections of CEOs or founders, as well as their professional and personal experiences, have meant that attempting to influence policy through personal networks is an established and possible route for some organisations and can spread to others. The perception of TSWPOs as nimble, dynamic organisations that blend practices from different sectors, has placed many in the position of acting as bridging organisations, making networking a core part of getting things done. All of these aspects of TSWPOs as organisations, identified by interviewees, form part of creating taken for granted assumptions about ways of working, and are also the structural enabling and restricting factors which shape their work. Even where individual organisations might wish to challenge established and understood routes to shaping policy, to do so can put their organisation at risk by challenging the expectations of funders or the status of other organisations within the field.

As noted in chapter seven, many of the policy or practice outcomes desired by TSWPOs are vague or closely interlinked with their own interests and survival. There are few examples of campaigns or campaigning activity and hence the ways that TSWPOs describe developing their influence are ways of working, rather than specific activities. Some of their activities in this area are intentional, based on tactical decisions around which relationships or activities might be most beneficial to advancing their interests. Others seem taken for granted, with participation in networks or adoption of particular evaluation practices seen as essential aspects of being an organisation in this field. In some cases, interviewees are critical of activities or of their uncontested value, even as they carry these activities out themselves,

seeing them as a necessary compromise to secure or advance their position in this field.

The role of 'networked expert', whether intentionally developed or taken for granted, has scope to influence policy but also many restrictions, and, despite organisations sometimes performing similar functions, is not a position of equal standing for every TSWPO within the field. It has supported the sort of policy influence and policy work described in chapter seven and has shaped and been shaped by the conditions for TSWPOs described within this chapter. Some TSWPOs have sought to change how they shape policy and practice by moving away from engagement with government and towards engagement with organisations, yet this is still largely done within the frame of being networked experts. The following chapter explores policy in its component aspects of authority, order and expertise, to explain why it is that this particular role has become such an established one for these organisations and why, despite many organisations performing this role, it isn't equally successful for all in terms of policy shaping.

Chapter nine: Discussion

9.1 Introduction

Based on interviews, policy documents and other public facing TSWPO materials, the previous chapters have built up a picture of how TSWPOs have shaped policy and practice in widening participation since 1997. They provide an account of policymaking in widening participation from the perspective of organisations not usually considered part of this field and offer an insight into the considerations of TSWPOs as policy actors. Building on the data presented previously, this chapter explores how we can understand the actions of TSWPOs attempting to influence policy by considering how they relate to and engage with different aspects of policy. It draws on Colebatch's (2002) description of policy as *authority, order* and *expertise* as a means to explore the role of TSWPOs. Situating TSWPOs within a heterarchical assemblage of policy actors within WP, part of the 'new' networks of education policy, this chapter examines how this networked context validates particular forms of expertise, order and authority to make up WP policy.

In this chapter I argue that, although the most successful organisations are those who contribute to all three of Colebatch's aspects of policy, TSWPOs are seen as 'experts' and make strategic decisions to support and develop this perception. In addition, they have charismatic authority, derived from their charitable status and a perception of them and their leaders as 'entrepreneurial'. I suggest that, through networks, TSWPOs are actively developing their capacities to contribute to all three aspects of policy, with an emphasis on expertise. I also argue that, to do so, TSWPOs participate in a politics of esteem which works to limit the diversity of opinion and experience within the WP policy field. Whilst recognising that many of those who work in this field feel a personal discomfort around the limited conceptions of widening participation that dominate the policy spaces they work within, particularly in relation to fair access and to notions of 'evidence', I also argue that by participating in and actively constructing approaches to policy influence that rely on elite networks, and by 'working with'

dominant narratives around fair access and 'evidence', TSWPOs are part of validating and upholding both these narratives and elite and exclusive networks of policy influence. In this and the following chapter, I explore what this has meant for the extent of their policy influence and the potential for future WP policy change.

9.2 TSWPOs as policy actors

The findings of previous chapters indicate that the majority of TSWPOs are seemingly peripheral to policy and practice changes. They largely sit outside the formal structures of WP policy making and enactment, with responsibility and accountability for WP policy expressly situated with government and with universities as dual authorities over the financial and educational structures of HE. Despite being named as part of a wider collaborative network of organisations necessary for the successful delivery of WP policy, there is little evidence that TSWPOs have directly influenced policy. They offer few examples of policy change and several admit to feeling frustrated in their limited capacity to change policy. However, an inability to identify policy change because of TSWPO involvement is not only the result of limited structural or symbolic capacities to affect policy but also reflects the context of WP policymaking and the inclinations of TSWPOs.

As noted in previous chapters, the context in which WP policy is made, like much of education policy, is one of 'network governance', with varying configurations of organisations and individuals creating 'sites of influence, decision making and policy action' (Ball, 2008: 761). A major function of these sites is to generate and 'validate' policy ideas, which may then may either change policy or, in many cases, uphold the status quo. Due to the structure of these networks, which are overlapping, sometimes exclusive and lacking in public records of activity, it is difficult to establish 'what may have been said to whom, where, with what effect and in exchange for what' (Ball, 2008: 761). As a consequence, establishing the origin of policy ideas or how they have come to be favoured is fraught with difficulties. The approaches to policy influence described by TSWPOs appear very much aligned with this network governance model,

with a conception of policy influence as 'shaping the narrative' and TSWPOs investing in attempting to be part of or influence 'conversation' or 'ideas'. What is unclear in the descriptions of TSWPOs and made further unclear by the context of networked governance is the extent to which TSWPOs are actually generating new policy ideas or challenging existing ones.

Despite limited evidence of their influence on policy change, TSWPOs appear to be valued in policy circles, suggesting that there is a role, at least for some of them. TSWPOs themselves see value in investing resources in attempting to access policymakers or in becoming more directly involved in policy enactment and can point to examples of increasing influence through involvement in policy networks, committees or consultations. Several TSOs active within this field of policy are active and deemed influential in other education policy fields, such as Teach First, the Sutton Trust and Impetus. These points would suggest that, although not discernible through examining policy change, there is at least a potential role for TSWPOs within WP policy. Rather than considering TSWPOs in terms of a linear model of policy influence, focused on policy change, a more granular examination of policy as three elements, as presented in this thesis, provides a framework for understanding the current and potential policy influence of TSWPOs and for their strategic action in context.

9.2.1 Authority, Order and Expertise

Colebatch (2002) identifies three elements to 'policy' - *order*, *authority* and *expertise*. These attributes are not equally present or necessary at different points in the policy process, nor do they take exactly the same form throughout (e.g. different authority may be required to implement a policy locally than nationally), but policy will ordinarily comprise of all three elements. These elements are not equally balanced, may be in tension with one another and are also contextual – for example an uncontroversial policy may contain fewer elements of 'expertise' than a controversial one. Similar to the analysis presented here, in Colebatch's applications these concepts are applied to explore how 'diverse activities by different bodies are drawn together into stable and

predictable patterns of action which (as often as not) come to be labelled 'policy' (Colebatch, 2000: vii). Taken together these attributes cover the purposes and conditions of policy and help to understand how policy is shaped and the different roles that those shaping policy may take. Colebatch (2000) provides some parameters for understanding these three concepts, as well as some examples of their application, but is not prescriptive in definitions. This thesis therefore draws on Colebatch's examples but also brings in other research and theoretical work which has explored these same concepts. These are explained in more detail within each section but a brief overview of these and the relevant actors within WP policy are considered here.

Authority is a legitimating force, often (though not always) operating through the principle of hierarchy. In WP policy, the main authorized decision makers are central government and ministers; relevant government departments such as DfE; bodies designated by government to carry out policy functions such as OfS, OFFA, HEFCE; and higher education institutions. Each of these possess political and legal authority within WP policy. Other organisations and individuals are able to draw on these and other forms of authority, either through appeal to or endorsement by these authorities or on their own merits. Order refers to the concern of policy with consistency, stability and predictability. All individuals involved in making the organised activity of widening participation predictable are therefore contributing to creating order, from government setting legal and funding structures to practitioners developing programmes designed to meet OfS targets. Order can also be capacity to disrupt consistency and stability and therefore organisations and individuals who can threaten order may contribute to this element of policy. Expertise is relevant and specialised knowledge that is context dependent. What qualifies as 'relevant expertise' is different within different policy areas and different parts of the policy process. In WP, as in many areas of education and social policy, there is a strong preference for 'evidence-based policy' and use of experimental methods and quantitative measurement of 'performance', though some credibility is also given to practitioner expertise and expertise by experience. This chapter examines each of these elements, starting with expertise, which is the major element on which TSWPOs appear to focus their efforts.

9.3 Expertise in WP policy

Expertise or expert knowledge is one basis for participation in the policy process, where policy is seen as a process of skilled problem solving (Colebatch, 2002). Expertise is used to legitimise or structure policy (Boswell, 2008), though there may be multiple forms of expertise involved depending on how a policy problem is conceived. Within WP, expertise has had a prominent role in policy making. In public, there have been formal consultations that focus both on problem definition and solutions (e.g. Panel on Fair Access to the Professions); establishment of independent bodies intended to provide recommendations (e.g. Social Mobility Commission); debates in both houses; the creation of advisory bodies for OFFA and HEFCE; the publication of specialist reviews outlining the 'problem' or 'progress' on WP (e.g. Cabinet Office briefings); and multiple calls for evidence and contributions as part of policy reviews or legislative processes. The reports of interviewees also indicate that, more privately, ministers and civil servants have consulted with selected experts as part of forming and implementing WP policy.

The notion of 'expertise', despite being sometimes presented as neutral and value free, is socially and politically embedded (Christensen, 2021), influenced by values and cultural and political context (Grek & Ozga, 2010). The context of expertise in WP is closely linked to its recent political iteration as a project of the New Labour Government. The establishment of WP as a policy concern was framed by the 1997 Dearing Report, which highlighted the roles of both government and universities and the necessity of having measures of progress. As such, the foundation of modern WP work lies in a political process that has been about 'evidence gathering' or defining an issue for policy action and then assessing its success through specific quantitative measures. As part of a broader field of education policy, this approach was part of new Labour's supposed turn towards 'evidence-based policymaking' that was intended to take the ideology out of decision making and move towards a more technocratic era of policymaking (Nutley et al., 2019). A concern with 'evidence', or the lack of it, has formed part of an ongoing narrative around WP work, expressed by interviewees and

policymakers. Insufficient evidence was given as the reason behind the ending of the national Aimhigher programme and the same concern prompted HEFCE and, in turn, OfS to fund evaluation specialist organisations to support the sector to develop its 'evidence base' . This focus on 'evidence' in policy is part of a longer-term trend, not confined to WP, education or to the UK (Christensen, 2021), but which in UK education policy has played out through a strong focus on 'what works' approaches to policy (Grek & Ozga, 2010). In WP, this focus can be seen in the creation of an affiliate 'What Works?' centre, now a registered charity established to 'inform evidence-informed practice in higher education' (TASO, 2021) and by the prominence given to quantitative and experimental methods.

9.3.1 TSWPOs as experts

For TSWPOs, presenting expertise appears to be a core part of their policy work and attempts to influence policy. In interviews, those with roles in TSWPOs repeatedly stressed the value of 'evidence', 'stats' and 'stories' to enhancing their organisation's reputation and to influencing policymakers and/or the media. Interviewees discussed networks, relationships and values that helped to establish the position of TSWPOs in the field as experts, and particularly with expertise that is 'useful' (CEO, TSWPOs) to policy makers. Some also discussed the potential for a greater role for TSWPOs within WP policy in terms of being experts and in terms of translating academic research for use within government. Interviewees spoke about the accessibility of TSWPO research and their capacities to act as bridging organisations that could bring people together. TSWPOs, like think tanks, foundations and edu-businesses described by researchers like Medvetz (2012) and Thompson et al. (2016), form part of policy assemblages, often operating as 'intermediaries' in 'orchestrating' rather than producing research knowledge. This appears to be the role played by organisations like the Bridge Group, Causeway or The Brilliant Club, whose events aim to bring together organisations from a range of sectors, often with a focus on sharing expertise.

TSWPOs appear to be in a strong position as experts within the field of WP policy in terms of the type of expertise that they offer. As TSOs, mostly founded in a period of enthusiasm for a 'third way' or 'big society' solutions to social problems, the organisations within this study fit within an imagined sector partly constructed as a 'laboratory for new ideas' (Mulgan, 2007). As such, they are seen as offering policy relevant knowledge, easily understood by policymakers. Lingard (2016) points to the creation of a 'void' within contemporary policy networks that has been created by a suspicion of academic expertise and the outsourcing of research by government departments. This void is easily occupied by organisations offering timely and politically expedient solutions (Thompson et al., 2016). Within WP, some interviewees pointed to a void created by turnover of expert staff within the civil service and the demise of government funded WP activity as presenting an opportunity to 'think tanky' organisations (CEO, TSWPO), bypassing traditional structures. Within WP, TSOs appear to have secured an expert position, with several of them now offering their expertise, particularly in evaluation, as a product. Organisations like the Bridge Group and the Brilliant Club offer their services in evaluation and research on a consultancy basis to universities, employers and other TSOs. This 'economy of expertise' has been noted in the wider education services sector as one form of marketable resource and a mechanism by which some ideas come to prominence (Ball, 2007).

As Strassheim and Kettunen outline, 'the epistemological status of facts and their political relevance might vary heavily depending on the foundations of expertise that dominate a certain social context' (2014:260). Within WP, and particularly for TSOs, the Sutton Trust appear to be the reference point for discussions about TSWPOs and about expertise. Over the course of the past 20 years, the Sutton Trust's research has become the 'go-to' in parliamentary debates on widening participation and social mobility and they have become embedded in social mobility work as the secretariat for the social mobility commission. This position gives them a critical role in vetting expertise presented to the commission, enabling them to determine some of the parameters for what qualifies as expertise. Even for HEIs, the expert position of the Sutton Trust and their founder has had influence, including the presence of Sutton

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Trust staff on advisory boards at HEFCE and OFFA and at sector events including the meetings of the Russell Group. The strength of their position and the advantage that it offered them in terms of promoting a specific vision of WP was noted by other TSWPOs.

> So, the big player in our world is Sutton Trust and not only are they a big player but they also have a very specific view which is driven by their Chair and founder and they've got fantastic links within government. So, they don't really need to partner with any of the others to get their messages out there. (CEO, TSWPO)

The 'really strong brand' (Former CEO, Sutton Trust) of the Trust with politicians and the media puts them in a position to create a monopoly over the supply of evidence and to even set standards around what counts as evidence. The former Director of Fair Access pointed to this monopoly, suggesting that the increase in TSWPOs in the 2010s was a positive development partly because of the 'challenge' that they offered to the Trust. However, there are limited indications that the Trust's position has truly been challenged, with other TSWPOs appearing to replicate the 'model' that the Trust has set for policy influence or concentrating their efforts on influencing individual organisations.

The Sutton Trust has built up a particularly strong association with the forms of expertise deemed politically useful and valid. Their focus on 'what works' approaches and quantitative research has both reflected and seemingly influenced what counts as evidence within widening participation and education. From the outset, the Sutton Trust's research has tended to focus on quantitative measures to assess both the 'problem' of widening participation and to evaluate solutions. They have been major proponents of a 'what works' approach, co-founding the Education Endowment Foundation, the government designated 'what works centre' for Education in 2011. Through the Trust and through their other major funder, Impetus, the EEF is closely connected to several TSWPOs, sharing staff, trustees and funders. Whilst the focus on

particular forms of knowledge, largely quantitative research and experimental methods, being considered valid 'evidence' pre-dates the EEF and is a feature of the wider policy landscape in WP and beyond, the Trust have played an important role in sustaining and spreading its influence. Having one provider of evidence, favouring particular methodologies or research approaches can lead to cognitive selectivity, with ignorance of knowledge pluralism and a tendency to protect against contrary evidence (Strassheim & Kettunen, 2014). Several interviewees credit TSWPOs with being 'ahead of the game' (Delivery Role, TSWPO) on evaluation and influencing sector practice, including in this focus on particular methods, making it difficult for other forms of evidence to shape policy.

The expertise presented by the Trust is multiple, including the expertise by experience of its founder, Sir Peter Lampl; the academic expertise from its commissioned reports; its expertise from delivering activity; and its expertise in translating research for use in policy. This variety of expertise appears to be an attractive prospect for policy and for funders:

> I think what gave us gravitas was the fact that we were also could say look, we were helping 5000 young people a year and I think that combination of the do side and the think side was a really amazing mix actually and not many charities have that. (Former CEO, Sutton Trust)

The uniqueness and variety of the Trust's combination of expertise make it particularly difficult for other organisations to challenge its position. Even the ability to present similar forms of expertise does not necessarily offer the same advantages to other organisations as it does to the Trust due to its established status.

Some organisations who felt shut out of national policy discussions, partly due to lack of government interest but also due to limited space for expertise outside of that promoted by the Sutton Trust, suggested that their expertise could be better employed elsewhere, particularly within organisations.

>...government sort of settled on a position and there wasn't really much else to do...[we're] looking at employers and HE around supporting policy development and using expertise, quantitative and indeed now qualitative measure to support. (Trustee, TSWPO)

With the Sutton Trust considered the main providers of almost all forms of expertise, it is perhaps not surprising that other TSWPOs might choose to concentrate their efforts elsewhere or, where they do seek to involve themselves, have chosen to act as a collective or as representative of practitioners, emphasising the variety of their knowledge rather than competing directly on the basis of prestige.

9.3.2 TSWPOs and 'the politics of expertise'

Who is accepted as an 'expert' within policy is significantly shaped by networks, relationships and values (Stevens, 2021) and it is common for individuals and organisations to engage in 'credibility work' (Geiger, 2021) to advance their positions. The position of the Sutton Trust as the 'model' for expertise within WP policy, at least amongst TSOs, was credited by interviewees to a combination of status of their founder, their media and political connections and their dual focus on research and delivery. For the Trust, establishing and maintaining this position has been a conscious effort, sustained by taking a 'tactical' approach to their research activities and by creating and maintaining relationships that can support their position. This approach also extends to other organisations and individuals within the field, who make strategic decisions to try to advance their positions as 'experts' and their knowledge as 'expertise'. Much of this work appears to take place through networks and relationship building. The networks in WP appear tightly linked, with multiple connections between organisations and individuals, reinforced through formal and informal relationships and networks. These networks and relationships act as a means to develop credibility, through connecting with the 'right' people, and as a way to reinforce and validate policy ideas.

The networks formed within the WP policy field can be seen as an example of the type of policy networks 'through which particular discourses and knowledge flow and gain legitimacy and credibility' (Ball, 2012: 9). Such networks can be exclusive, limiting participation in the policy process (Rhodes, 1997). Many interviewees spoke about the need to build and maintain relations with the 'right' people and needing 'to be friends with' (Delivery Role, TSWPO) particular individuals and organisations. It also appeared common for new entrants to the field to approach influential figures and gain their backing to enable participation in the policy process. Gaining access to and acceptance within these networks appears to be facilitated by personal relationships and some affinity with existing members, following the observation that 'recognised experts for policy panels tend to be members of existing networks of people with similar social backgrounds' (Stevens, 2021). Interviewees noted that it was easy for TSWPOs to form relationships and, on occasion, networks because they 'speak the same language' (CEO, TSWPO), have common values and similar operational concerns. They also noted elements of homogeneity of background and experience amongst those who are most prominent in policy within the field. Both Tessa Stone and Rae Tooth, themselves relatively prominent women within the WP field, reflected particularly on the prevalence of male voices in constructing the public debate around WP. Prominent male figures identified by these and other interviewees tended to also have their own (and relatively similar) 'social mobility story', having come from a background they identify as 'working class' and, through participation in some form of selective or elite education, having advanced their social and economic position. These social mobility stories fit neatly into and have helped shape the existing policy frame for WP, making the position of these figures more tenable as policy entrepreneurs. These prominent voices of men from working-class backgrounds within WP contrasts with a view that the majority of those working in the field are women from middle-class backgrounds.

> ...one thing that always strikes me when I speak to WP audiences and
> particularly to people from WP teams inside universities, is the
> gender mix. It's always very very very female...And probably above
> average socio-economically as well, I don't know. And it's intriguing

> because it's different, different even to other university staff. I don't
> know if that is a good thing or a bad thing. I don't know what that
> signifies but there is a particular sort of person I think who does this.
> (CEO, TSO)

There is a similarity of 'type' that interviewees associate with those who 'do' widening participation and about the roles that they might take on within the field. In this and other descriptions of the networks within WP, particularly those deemed influential in policy terms, there are indications of a power elite, which rests on 'the similarity of its personnel, and their personal and official relations with one another, upon their social and psychological affinities' (Wright-Mills, 1959: 278).

> The people I've met from an incredibly posh background interested
> in all this tend to be more of the access end of the debate than the
> WP access end. (CEO, TSO)

Gaining access and membership of this WP policy elite appears to rest, at least partly, on personal connections, with some interviewees citing relationships from earlier professional roles or from their personal lives as benefitting their ability to carry out policy work in WP. For example, one TSWPO CEO indicated that their personal networks had led to 'quite a few meetings with people in the Department for Education and in the Social Mobility Commission'. For some individuals with significant personal wealth, such as Sir Peter Lampl (Sutton Trust) or Steve Edwards (bestcourseforme), it appears that this also facilitated access to politicians and networks. For actors in the WP policy field, there appeared to be significant benefits to being already part of a social and political class that enabled ease of access and 'fit'.

That many key actors within the field have similar social backgrounds is not necessarily an indication that they will share the same interests or affinities. There were indications of differences of opinion and ideological conflicts within the field, particularly in relation to whether WP should be focused on ensuring access for all or on fair access and the most selective institutions. There were also comments from many interviewees about discomfort with dominant narratives within WP policy, the

strength of focus on fair access and the use of RCTs and behavioural insights to guide evaluation and standards of evidence. However, the existence of a power elite does not suggest a unity of opinion, nor are indications of dominant interests reducible to a shared social background of actors. It is not characteristic similarities alone that suggests a power elite but the existence of a group of individuals and organisation who 'define one another among those who count, and who, accordingly, must be taken into account' (Wright-Mills, 1959:283). Amongst those in the WP field there was such a familiarity, with interviewees referring to others in their networks positively, mostly on a first name basis. There were elements of esteem and deference in how interviewees talked about others in the field and criticisms were cautious and mostly de-personalised. This environment appears conducive to creating a 'policy constellation', which can enable the most powerful social actors to have policy 'reflect their material interests and normative preferences, although not in a way that any individual actor might have intended' (Stevens & Zampini, 2018: 68).

Throughout interviews, several interviewees in a range of different positions referenced their discomfort with aspects of WP policy. Most often, these discomforts related to the focus on fair access as the major issue in WP and to narrow restrictions on what they perceived 'counts' as evidence. For those within TSWPOs, they felt pressure from funders, from government and from the wider sector to conform with certain expectations about what the outcomes of WP work should be and how they should be measured. Several interviewees within this study expressed misgivings about the dominance of a 'what works?' or 'evidence-based' approach to expertise within WP but also suggested that it is necessary for them to 'play to the premise' (Former Government Worker) to gain access to policymakers and informal parts of the policy process. The expectations of funders around 'measureable' and often short-term outcomes was also noted by CEOs, particularly in terms of securing funding or steering them away from activity they felt was impactful but were unable to 'prove' short-term outcomes for. In accounts of evidence use in policy, some researchers have noted a tendency to 'self-censor' amongst experts (Stevens, 2021), working with an understanding that policymaking 'tends to favour the politically feasible over the

technically possible' (Monaghan et. al. 2018: 436). TSWPOs noted the difficulty of challenging or diverging from dominant narratives with one TSWPO employee indicating that although their organisation was attempting to challenge the use of deficit language they still felt 'not in a place to have that conversation about their theory of change' (Policy Role, TSWPO) with some partners.

There were some interviewees who were very comfortable with a focus on fair access or on a 'what works?' approach to evaluation, feeling that these were, at least in terms of policy, sensible areas to focus resources. Even those who raised questions were often quick to point out that they didn't dispute the value of those approaches or the positive intentions of those who focused their efforts on fair access. Almost all indicated that, in order to advance the interests or mission of their organisations, they felt it necessary to 'work with' the expectations of funders, media and politicians. The Sutton Trust again appear to provide the model for this 'playing to the premise', with former CEOs noting that it was common for the Trust to select its research topics on the basis of whether they felt these would be well received by the media or were open to debate. They described commissioning a range of research that could perform different functions in terms of influencing policy, whether that might be raising the profile of WP without prompting specific change or targeting a specific policy change or initiative. Similarly, staff in other organisations described the necessity of tailoring messages to gain sufficient media attention (CEO, TSO) or to appeal to specific audiences (CEO, TSO). As a consequence, although there were several interviewees and organisation who were not, at least in their comments in interview, completely comfortable with a focus on fair access or what works approaches, there were almost no organisations who indicated that they were openly challenging these.

9.3.3 Credible expertise

In addition to being within the 'right' social and policy circles and conforming with the expectations of those, TSWPOs appear to be reinforcing their connections by borrowing credibility in expertise from other fields, namely academic and professional

fields. They do this through building relationships with organisations and individuals, including the creation of formal roles to embed these individuals within their organisations. This includes the selective recruitment of trustees that they feel will enhance their credibility and the creation of advisory board or 'fellowship' roles, mostly for academics but occasionally for other professionals with relevant experience such as teachers, university and charity leaders. Associations with organisations and individuals transferred to the image of the organisation itself. For example, the Bridge Group launched at the new London headquarters of Google in 2010. The event was hosted by Alan Milburn, then 'social mobility tsar', and gained public attention for the organisation as well as funding from Google. The location of the event and its host were deemed enough part of the image of the organisation to be part of its biography, placed on its website and research reports for several years afterwards (Bridge Group, 2016). Similarly, from the comments of interviewees, some credited the influence of the Sutton Trust to their association with 'reputable' academics:

> They got involved a lot with commissioning research with the
> academics from LSE, wherever. Become specialised in this field. So, I
> think that's why they became influential because they were able to
> produce these publications which had weight. Had intellectual
> weight. (Former Government Worker)

In Medvetz's account of think tanks in America, he notes that the notion of credibility as understood by those within think tanks is not necessarily a subscription to a universalistic notion of credibility but 'a practical achievement rooted in the ability to coordinate specific social ties and relations' (2012: 139). Within WP, there are some indications of a 'patronage' model, whereby organisations and individuals cultivate connections to enhance the credibility of their ideas. This was noted as relevant for interactions with the Director of Fair Access but also with other prominent individuals within the field.

In interviews, Trustees and CEOs noted the importance of building relationships with prominent organisations to enhance the reputation of their own organisation. Many of the TSWPOs appear to be building these relations partly through acting as 'intermediaries'. This includes organisations like the Bridge Group, the Brilliant Club or Causeway, whose conferences and seminars aim to bring together organisations and individuals from across the sector, and formal networks like the Fair Education Alliance. To be considered credible experts, CEOs and trustees of TSWPOs describe engaging with academics or other recognised experts, both within and outside WP. Many of the notable actors within this field are also well connected and influential within other policy networks (e.g. Ball, 2008; Williamson, 2013) and, as described by Ball and Junemann, are heterarchical actors 'defined by mobility and hybridity' (2012: 139), able to deploy 'reputation and contacts' (Mintrom and Vergari, 1996: 424) in new fields. Their activities involve drawing on links between fields, brokering relations between networks 'in order to create new syntheses that can be branded as new, rather than used, and marketed simultaneously to political parties, media networks, and the public' (Williamson, 2013:42). This can be seen in the activities of Sir Peter Lampl, who has been able to draw on personal and professional connections in the UK and the US to build the reputation and standing of both the Sutton Trust and its sister charity, the EEF.

Credibility, as described by Medvetz (2012), is also presented as a balancing act, with a plurality of forms dependent on the audience and the type of organisation. This is the sort of work described by one CEO:

> I guess there is something about like finding your credibility as a charity - something that is a little bit distinct, that's not quite the same in business ...you're constantly trying to get this balance of building relationships with credible people of one sort or another and then seeing how those can be leveraged.

My research suggests that for TSWPOs, credibility is a balancing act of association with academic, media and practical expertise. This can be as much about image as practices, hence a media presence and/or management of public image can be more important than practices which go unnoticed. Interviewees spoke frequently about the 'perception', 'image' or 'brand' of TSWPOs and the significance of this within their work. For example, when discussing how much resource to put into influencing policy, one TSWPOs trustee reflected:

> We had a strategy day a couple of weeks ago where we talked about this and the extent to which [TSWPO] should try and do this or focus on delivery. So, I guess it's difficult and it's a challenge for [TSWPO] to decide if there should be resources to that sort of work or should you put resources to delivery kind of work? And I think they would want to be involved with part of the [policy] work I would think. And the more [TSWPO] raises its profile.

This balancing act is also about offering something unique to compete with other TSWPOs; specialist expertise is seen as an advantage, with interviewees from TSWPOs often pointing out their specialism or uniqueness in describing their organisation. One CEO indicated that, rather than considering themselves as 'third sector', 'specialist widening participation organisations' was a preferable term.

9.4 Authority in WP policy

Within policy authority functions to legitimate a policy idea. It gives standing and a 'right' to participate to actors within policy, framing policy action to 'make it easier for some people, and more difficult for others' (Colebatch, 2002: 27). As in wider policy, government ministers possess executive authority to 'make' policy – the final decision on a particular policy rests with them and others will seek their approval – but there are different forms and sources of authority in operation that determine standing and right to participate in any given policy field. Within WP policy, both universities and government possess rational legal authority, accepted as being able to determine the

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rules governing the funding and academic structures of HE. Some of this authority is delegated to bodies like the Office for Students or, in the case of universities, to representative bodies such as the Russell Group. Third sector organisations, unless given delegated authority, as in the case of the Sutton Trust being appointed secretariat to the Social Mobility Commission, do not have access to this form of authority. Their consensus or participation is not required to make policy legitimate. However, they are able to draw on different forms of moral or charismatic authority to establish both a right to participate and to legitimate their ideas.

Dean posits that 'society has a tendency to think of charities as organisations with charismatic authority, based on the idea that they have good intentions, volunteers who give their time unselfishly, work to tackle injustice and deprivation' (Dean, 2020: 104). The notion of charismatic authority, resting on the exceptionalism of an individual or organisation, their 'exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character' (Weber, 1978: 215) can be applied to how TSWPOs are described within the sector. The character and commitment of those working within TSWPOs was referenced by many interviewees including noting that they have 'a real belief in their efforts' (CEO, WPO), 'genuine social commitment' (Former Government Worker) and are 'really well-meaning people' (CEO, TSWPO). These comments were often made to counterbalance more critical comments or questions about the focus of WP activity, indicating that such criticism was not meant as a challenge to their authority or right to carry out their work.

Krause (2014), in examining the work of NGOs, identifies that the very act of helping others in a less fortunate position carries, in itself, an authority. This form of authority comes with a right to speak and be heard on issues related to the act of helping and, in some cases, to be listened to in relation to policy ideas and implementation. This view of the 'rightness' of the involvement of some individuals and organisations within policy is reflected by comments made by interviewees, particularly in relation to Sir Peter Lampl and other philanthropists, whose personal financial investments in access work appear to give them a sort of charismatic authority.

> I remember one of my early meetings after I started working on
> higher education policy in opposition was with the Sutton Trust and
> everybody likes Peter Lampl. And everybody thinks, you know, he's
> an exceptionally rich man who has put his money where his mouth is
> and that's a good thing. (Former Government Worker)

Similarly, other philanthropists like Steve Edwards (funder of IntoUniversity and co-founder of Bestcourseforme) who participated in policy discussions about use of data to inform the decision making of potential students, were seen as having some right to participate in and contribute to discussions by virtue of their personal exceptional commitment.

Weber (1978) refers to the 'routinisation' of charisma to describe the transfer of charismatic authority to traditional or rational-legal authority. This creates a more stable form of authority and can be seen in the position of the Sutton Trust. Initial references to the Sutton Trust in policy documents often to refer to Sir Peter Lampl and his commitment or relevant knowledge, rather than to the authority of the Trust itself, which is not necessarily exceptional. Over time, it is the Trust that acquires a position of exceptionalism through its close association with its founder's interests and its 'unique' combination of delivering WP programmes and research. The Trust's consistent involvement with social mobility policy, their involvement in policy debates and providing briefings for ministers and civil servants has given them traditional authority, meaning that they have been involved in some way in nearly all public discussions about social mobility policy. More recently, they have also acquired rational-legal authority through being appointed as Secretary to the Social Mobility Commission. No other TSWPOs have seemingly achieved this transfer of charismatic authority to other forms.

In addition to being able to draw on charismatic authority, TSWPOs also appear to draw authority from their position as independent organisations, outside of the structures of WP. They have been able to draw on a public image as 'non-political or

pre-political' (Rose, 1999:188) and in some ways 'better' than alternatives in the public or private sectors, whether ethically or in terms of structures that make it more effective at tackling social issues (Macmillan, 2015). This status, particularly in comparison to universities, was described by one former civil servant:

> I think that the difference is that these third sector organisations are seen as having not so much of an axe to grind. They are people who are doing it because they believe in it and from the point of view, particularly now we've got a Tory government, they're seen a bit how they see new providers in higher education. They're gingering up the system, they're gritting the wheel. All of that kind of stuff. (Former Government Worker).

In this case, it appears that TSWPO involvement in policy offers some advantages to government, indicating that the authority for their involvement may not come from the organisation themselves but from government seeking to enhance their credibility by identifying moral authority which can support their agenda. It may be that their moral authority is not sufficient alone to support their right to contribute to policy (at least not in competition with many other organisations and individuals with similar 'rights') but can provide the basis for recognition of other authorities, which can support their position.

9.5 Order in WP policy

Order is the aspect of policy least relevant to TSWPOs because of their position outside the structures of the state and education systems. Order is the capacity to 'make' policy happen. It is what structures actions as part of policy. Government is able to contribute to order because of its capacity to fund and direct structures and processes. Similarly, HEPs possess this same capacity through their autonomy over the structures and processes within them as organisations. The interactions between government and universities play a crucial role in determining the exact form of policy and how it enacted. TSOs sit outside this and can only offer limited capacities to contribute to or

disrupt order because of their size and scale. However, this does not mean that TSWPOs make no contribution to order. In some cases, they have been able to be part of order at the invitation of universities or government.

The majority of TSWPOs are primarily 'delivery' organisations, in that they deliver widening participation interventions. As such, when delivering activity that is part of a policy aim, such as the Uni Connect programme or Aimhigher, the design and delivery of that programme can affect the success of a policy and what forms of delivery are deemed appropriate. However, most TSWPOs are not able to deliver at a scale for this influence to be felt, nor are they often fully in control of programme design due to having to meet the demands of funders. There have been some cases, in the form of mentoring and Brightside or summer schools and the Sutton Trust, where tacit endorsements from government or bodies like OFFA and HEFCE have led to these interventions and the particular models of intervention supported by these TSWPOs to become the standard across the sector. Endorsement of summer schools and mentoring, as well as suggestions that government fund national programmes of these activities, have formed part of the recommendations of the Child Poverty and Social Mobility Commission and other national inquiries into social mobility and widening participation. As the then originators or major 'suppliers' of a form of activity deemed part of policy, these specific TSWPOs have some capacity to contribute to order and for their activities to shape how policy is done. Both Brightside and the Sutton Trust are regularly called upon to contribute to policy discussions on widening participation and have informally received funding from government or HEFCE to deliver activity.

OFFA, in its Access Agreement guidance, and OfS, in its guidance on the foundation of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme, both encouraged the involvement of TSWPOs in delivering policy objectives. However, there have been very few formal endorsements or partnerships which make TSWPOs directly responsible for delivering on policy objectives and, by the accounts of TSWPOs, attempts by TSWPOs to secure these positions have not been successful. Where there have been formal arrangements for TSWPOs to deliver on policy objectives, these have not been

specifically in relation to widening participation. The establishment of the Education Endowment Foundation as a co-funded initiative between government, the Sutton Trust and Impetus was part of delivering policy but not directly related to WP. Similarly, the Brilliant Club received a teacher training contract for their Researchers in Schools programme, which does have widening participation aims but whose main policy purpose is to deliver qualified STEM teachers. These examples indicate that it may be possible for TSOs in the WP field to contribute to order but that this has not been a feature of WP policy.

9.6 Becoming established parts of policymaking

By examining policy, not as a linear process of change but as component parts in the form of order, expertise and authority, it is possible to see how the actions of TSWPOs have sought to develop their policy influence through contributing to these elements. In examining these component parts it is also possible to see how the Sutton Trust has come to be the foremost TSO in this area and the extent of their involvement in policy. What is also touched upon in this analysis but is perhaps less explicit, is that the ability to contribute to expertise, authority and order are, in part, influenced by access to material and social resources and to participation in elite networks. TSWPOs have sought to acquire some of their expertise by association with figures already considered experts, facilitated by their (often personal) connections to academia and elite institutions. Although their charismatic authority is partly based in a general perception of them as charities, there is also a more specific perception of their exceptionalism that is linked to the personal commitment of their founders and staff in helping those 'less fortunate', often with an element of personal sacrifice. Such sacrifices often require them to have some social or economic standing initially to be considered exceptional. They are also able to draw on a specific perception of the 'third sector' as entrepreneurial and dynamic, a contrast to the perception of other sectors, which sometimes relies on their ability to appeal to politicians. Again, personal connections have helped some TSOs to facilitate engagement with political figures to enhance their own authority. Finally, although few organisations have found

themselves able to contribute to order, the foremost of these, the Sutton Trust, has partly done so through being able to fund or co-fund activity alongside government. In this way they were able to establish summer schools as part of the expected delivery of widening participation and, through the EEF and their secretariat role, have become part of the structures guiding evidence use in social mobility and education policy.

What is also not explicit here but is made evident through the comments of interviewees in previous chapters and the actions of TSWPOs is an element of competition. The capacity for multiple organisations to be involved in policy is limited, both in terms of the number of organisations but also what they represent. There is little advantage in policy to several organisations with the same form of expertise or offering opposing structures of order. As a consequence, several TSWPOs have sought to collaborate, forming coalitions to influence policy. This enables them to pool social (and sometimes economic) resources to compete or to offer an alternative to the position of the Sutton Trust. However, there have been no direct challengers to the Trust's position, not least because many of the most prominent organisations who might be in a position to do so are or were formerly reliant on the Trust in some way through funding or social connections. This interdependency is a common feature of policy networks (Klijn, 1997) but can restrict not only the involvement of organisations outside these networks but also restricts action within them.

In interviews, some expressed frustration at what they felt were limited opportunities to influence policy, partly because of the domination of the same organisations within WP. One former CEO, describing their experience of being involved in policy discussions in the late 2000s and early 2010s, also suggested that the space was increasingly dominated by particular voices and that limited progress was being made as a result.

> It felt like a sensible approach in a way but then it was about who shouts loudest, and who has the biggest pockets, and who bullies the most and who gets the civil servant on side? And there was lots of

> cooking up of civil servants and things…I think increasingly I felt that
> we were just rehashing the same stuff. When you went with the
> politicians, the [meetings] with politicians, it was all the same people.
> It was UUK in the room making their point, it was UCAS, it was us, it
> was HEFCE, you know. (Former CEO, TSWPO)

In more recent years, some of the frustration of interviewees around lack of debate was directed at a 'distracted' government but there were still similar complaints that a lack of transparent processes and the dominance of some voices has limited WP debate. Some organisations have sought alternative routes to influencing policy, bypassing traditional forms of contributions like responding to national consultations or submitting evidence in favour of influencing high profile organisations to adopt different practices. However, these organisations still expressed interest in being part of networks that engaged with government and national policy, even if many of their resources were concentrated elsewhere.

The ability to be part of and influence policy on a national scale appears to favour organisations to be able to contribute to multiple components of policy. By being able to contribute to a combination of authority, order and expertise, the Sutton Trust have been able to establish themselves as part of WP policy making. They are able to offer expertise relating to a policy problem and the capacity to help implement its solution and this mix of capacities makes them a valuable player in multiple parts of the policy process, strengthening their connections with policy makers and the structures of enactment. Add in detail about incumbency here?

9.7 Summary

In this chapter I have examined the role(s) that TSWPOs have taken on in WP policy. Through examining policy as expertise, order and authority, this thesis has demonstrated how TSWPOs have come to be involved in policy primarily as 'networked experts' and how they have cultivated this role through their personal and professional connections. In this chapter, I have explored some of the limitations of

this role, particularly the need to participate in a 'politics of expertise' which has seen organisations and individuals involved in maintaining narratives about the nature of evidence and the problem of WP despite personal reservations about their value. I argue that the ability to participate in any of the three aspects of policy outlined here requires access to material and symbolic resources that are largely held by an elite group. As a consequence, many of the major organisations and individuals closely involved in WP policy share similar interests and affinities. Even where they may hold different viewpoints, the interdependency in WP networks and the presence of a dominant model organisation creates conditions where organisations and individuals are 'self-censoring' to maintain their position. This model then fails to provide the equality of access and opportunity in relation to participation in policy that many TSWPOs argue for in relation to participation in education. It requires compromises and leaves decisions about those compromises largely with funders, trustees and leaders whose value to organisations partly lies in their abilities to access the elite networks where policy ideas are validated. Few of the structures of this policy model are transparent, hence making claims about influence are vague and it is not clear in whose interests individuals and organisations may be acting. The precarious structures of funding and favour in WP policy also serve to weaken the connections between TSWPOs and those they often intend to benefit, as they struggle to maintain long term relationships with beneficiaries where the funding shifts parameters of deservedness and success. These structures of WP policy making do not sit easily with a democratic equality model of WP.

The concluding chapter to this research draws together the themes from this chapter and those preceding it to explore what the presence of TSWPOs as established experts, operating in interdependent networks, might mean for the future of WP policy and practice. It also includes recommendations for policy makers, for TSWPOs and for further research that can build on the themes identified here.

Chapter ten: Conclusions and policy recommendations

10.1 Introduction

This thesis set out to explore the role of third sector widening participation organisations in policy and practice. It specifically examined how and in what ways they have engaged with policy and how and why, if at all, they have sought to shape it. As demonstrated over the course of this thesis, the role of TSWPOs as a whole has been largely peripheral to national policy change; in most cases over their history TSWPOs have tended to be reactive to policy, though this has changed for some organisations in recent years. However, TSWPOs have been active in their attempts to shape policy, and, for a select few organisations, have played roles in supporting and shaping the direction of policy. Chapters seven and eight explored how, through engaging in networks and building reputations as 'experts', several TSWPOs have sought to develop their policy influence. These chapters outline how TSWPOs have contributed to supporting the direction of policy, particularly with regards to fair access and to evaluation, and the means by which they have sought to be influential. These chapters also demonstrate how one organisation, the Sutton Trust, has established itself as an expert authority in widening participation and as the foremost TSWPO, with its activities and research becoming part of how WP is understood by policy makers, the public and other organisations in this space. Chapter eight specifically outlines how the Sutton Trust and other prominent TSWPOs have developed their influence through access to elite networks and have employed a range of strategies to cultivate and maintain connections that will reinforce their status, thereby gaining access to political figures and funders to support their work. Chapter nine then examines these findings through looking at policy as component parts of authority, order and expertise, with specific reference to how the status of these organisations as 'third sector' has an influence on their policy activity and role. In examining policy as these component parts, chapter nine illustrates how policy influence can be explored as not only policy change but also as more subtle actions and positioning that may challenge or support existing policy. This model also

highlights the importance of considering politics, as the ability of policy actors to contribute to component parts of policy is often conditional on participation in a politics of esteem.

This concluding chapter brings together discussions from previous chapters around the three research questions posed at the introduction of this thesis, whilst also further addressing the question of what these findings may mean for the future of TSWPOs, their policy influence and for widening participation policy more broadly. In this chapter I draw together some of the already identified limitations of the models of policy influence used by TSWPOs, including the exclusive nature of policy networks, a tendency towards reinforcing similar values and the limited scope for (or possibly interest in) changing these models. I explore the limitations of these elite models of policy influence for a social justice conception of widening participation, one that has a concern with equality and with access and success beyond potential students deemed 'able'. I also point out some of the contradictions in 'going with the flow' of policy for the long-term goals and values of WP organisations. This concluding chapter makes recommendations for policymakers, for TSWPOs and for further research that are about addressing these limitations and contradictions. These recommendations are not necessarily those sought by TSWPOs or by policymakers, who may be more concerned with increasing policy influence or improving evidence use but, as I later explain in this chapter, do take into account the context in which these concerns arise.

10.2 Research questions

This thesis addressed three research questions across two 'findings' and one 'discussion' chapter. There were several overlapping themes in the findings chapters that have been drawn together in the discussion chapter, putting this in a framework of examining policy as authority, order and expertise. This concluding chapter returns specifically to these three research questions to provide an overview of how each has been addressed, reiterating some of the limitations identified in chapter six.

I. **How and in what ways are TSWPOs shaping policy and practice in relation to higher education access and success?**

This thesis has identified that a small number of TSWPOs have, over their history, taken an active role in engaging with national and organisational level policy (chapters four and seven). Influencing policy is not seen as an explicit aim for all TSWPOs, with decisions to engage in policy influenced by funding, organisational leaders and perceived opportunities and benefits (chapters eight and nine). Those who are engaging with policy have done so through formal and informal networks, with the aim of building relationships with individuals deemed to be influential in policy making and enactment (chapter eight). Gaining access to these networks is based on personal and professional connections and through the development of an image as 'experts' (chapters eight and nine). Although there are several TSWPOs who are active in these networks and express an interest in policy, very few are deemed to be influential by their own assessments or those of policy makers. Few can or do point to specific policy changes and they rarely call for specific policy changes in lobbying or public statements on policy (chapter seven). One organisation, the Sutton Trust, is generally believed to be influential in shaping policy and practice, largely as a result of its research and media activities and 'do tank' approach (chapter seven). Across the board, the influence of TSWPOs, including the Sutton Trust, is discussed as 'shaping the narrative', rather than direct influence on specific policies, with 'being part of the conversation' a desirable outcome of policy activity and participation in policy networks for TSWPOs. The influence of the Sutton Trust, and of TSWPOs in general, in shaping policy was identified by interviewees in two areas: supporting the prevalence of a fair access narrative in policy; and promoting evaluation practice. The Trust's combination of media work and direct engagement with policy makers is felt by other TSWPOs to create an unassailable position, whereby there are limited opportunities to work against the narratives that the Sutton Trust promotes and little opportunity to compete with their methods. This has meant that, even where TSWPOs disagree with the position of the Trust, they have not felt able to challenge it. Although many of those working in or with TSWPOs interviewed in this research were critical of the

dominance of a fair access narrative and of the limited conception of 'evidence' within WP, many felt that TSWPOs and the Sutton Trust particularly had contributed to these or, at least, had not sought to challenge them for political reasons (chapter seven).

Chapter nine examined the activities and influence of TSWPOs by using a framework of authority, order and expertise, building on Colebatch's (2002) identification of these as three components of policy. Using this framework identifies that TSWPO's have focused on cultivating positions as experts in order to shape policy, and on establishing their authority through network connections and their status as charitable organisations. Some have also sought to be part of the order of policy, through taking on delivery roles or official positions in WP policy enactment. Using this framework is helpful in also identifying the limitations of the roles that TSWPOs have within policy, as by only focusing on contributing to one aspect of policy, their influence is partial and not reinforced. The most successful organisation, the Sutton Trust, is able to contribute to all three areas within WP policy and, in doing so, has come to dominate amongst TSWPOs as a policy organisation.

II.   How is their relationship to policy shaping and being shaped by their status as charitable organisations in a 'third sector'?

Although many TSWPOs primarily identify as aligned with WP more than with being charitable organisations, there are aspects of their structures and how they are perceived that affect their engagement with and capacities to shape policy. Decisions to shape policy can be based on funding, including campaigning against threat to funding sources or by the encouragement (or not) of funders for TSWPOs to engage with policy.

Examining the policy activity of TSWPOs in relation to authority, order and expertise identifies that their charitable status can be a factor in how they are able to contribute to policy. The position taken by many TSWPOs of policy 'expert' is an established one for third sector organisations, and their participation is sometimes encouraged as 'useful' by policy makers (chapter seven) because of their charitable status. As

TSWPOs, they can draw on a perceived moral authority and an image of being both politically neutral and informed by practice (chapter nine), which has facilitated their participation in policy networks. As social enterprises, closely connected to networks that promote a 'what works' approach to generating and using 'evidence' in education, some are also able to draw upon an image as dynamic and 'effective' evaluators, which is attractive in the policy and practice contexts in which they work (chapters seven and nine). There are also limitations TSWPOs in engaging with policy linked to their charitable status, as they are not part of the established order for enacting WP policy, nor is their authority comparable to HEPs, who have autonomy within the law, or government, who have a financial and legal authority over widening participation.

III.   What are the implications of this for the project of widening participation?

Due to the structures of HE policymaking, in which government and HEPs have authority, there are limited opportunities for other organisations or individuals to determine WP policy, but there are opportunities for organisations with access to elite networks, presenting themselves as 'experts' with a politically neutral moral authority, to participate in policy discussions and thus shape WP. This study has demonstrated that, although marginal, there has increasingly been space made for TSWPOs in WP policy and practice. It has also demonstrated the interest and active participation of several TSWPOs in attempting to influence policy and the employment of a range of strategies including building networks and coalitions; using the media; and seeking to change organisational level policy through their charitable activities. In terms of the framework applied in this thesis, several organisations have moved from acting primarily as experts to also becoming part of order through engagement with government and HEP WP programmes, and to establishing their authority as moral organisations. Many TSWPOs are still expanding their activities and new organisations continue to be founded. This, combined with tacit and sometimes explicit support from government, would suggest that TSWPOs will continue to be part of the picture of WP policy and practice. Their expansion of policy activities and across different aspects of policy also suggests scope for expansion of their influence.

What is less clear is what this continued presence may mean for policy change. Most interviewees frame TSWPO policy influence as 'shaping the narrative', rather than advocating for a particular policy change. Several also suggest that TSWPOs are 'going with the flow', something those within them acknowledge as politically expedient. This study has identified few indications that TSWPOs can or will push for significant changes and several incentives and conditions that discourage them from doing so. Their funding structures and the presence of a single dominant policy organisation restricts opportunities to promote radical change, nor do their missions suggest that they would find such change desirable. As it stands, they, as organisations, are reliant on funding structures which rely on cooperation with universities and with government. Some of their more high-profile policy actions have been about maintaining or even increasing the stability of this source of funding for them. Some, in being funded by philanthropic donors, are also part of the participation of private interests in WP work. This is not confined to organisations designated as TSWPOs, with universities and sometimes schools also receiving large donations to deliver specific WP activity. Philanthropic funding appears to favour a fair access variant of WP and a specific stage of a student lifecycle, geared to identifying talented individuals to support into selective institutions and professions, rather than seeking systemic change. This has aligned with the interests of government, creating an environment where there are limited resources to promote alternative views.

Importantly, there are few indications from this research that TSWPOs would seek to change the direction of policy. As a network of organisations and individuals, although ostensibly working towards a change in circumstances for groups identified as 'disadvantaged', most are working for incremental change that preserves much of the existing system. Several, in focusing on a fair access variant of WP, have a specific interest in preserving the hierarchy of the HE system, though they do not support all practices to do so. The ways in which they engage with policy make use of elite networks and the established practices and values of those networks, in which similar modes of thinking and values are reinforced. That many TSWPO founders themselves already have access to socially elite networks through their family, education or

professional backgrounds does little to challenge the prevailing views within these networks, nor is it easy to access them without these personal connections. The two areas in which TSWPO influence appears to have had a role in shaping WP – the predominance of a fair access narrative in which there are a 'deserving' poor and a move towards a 'what works' model of evidence – are not themes unique to WP. They are wider trends in education and in other areas of social policy. Whether TSWPOs are a symptom of the increasing progression of neoliberal ideas in education or part of progressing them is not clear but it is apparent that the practices of policy making in WP are doing little to challenge these ideas. For those who feel discomfort in the dominant narratives or practices within WP, the adoption of a pragmatic approach appears to be a trade-off in values – accepting that a programme will be targeted at a narrow group of students in the hope that doing so will establish a 'proof of concept' for other groups or will establish relationships that, over time, might lead to a change in direction. It is unclear whether this has been a successful model for change. The circumstances in which TSWPOs have taken more active roles in advocating for policy change have been as a result of external shocks or threats to their funding, as in the case of concerns about changes to HE regulation or funding and in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This research indicates that some TSWPOs and others within WP are questioning whether continued participation in the current networks of policy making is advantageous. For some organisations, moving away from national policy and becoming more involved in organisational level policy and policy enactment represents a solution and more effective route to change. Organisations like the Bridge Group, upReach, the Social Mobility Foundation and the Brilliant Club have taken on roles advising or steering institutions, whether HEPs or employers, in their enactment of social mobility policies. Some have moved away from WP as their main area of activity and funding altogether, others have sought out alternative sources of funding (though mostly philanthropic or corporate funding, which comes with similar expectations of performance measures and articulation of the policy problems) and others are attempting to build slightly different relationships by involving current and former WP

students in their governance structures. However, these last two are options pursued by established and larger organisations within the field, not those who might be hoping to enter it and gain influence. As a consequence, it is unsurprising that new organisations in this space tend to have similar origins to those already working within it or replicate the behaviours of existing organisations to establish themselves. These changes in how TSWPOs might be engaging with policy (i.e. by moving away from government), although a shift away from supporting dominant narratives, also do not seem to present a challenge to the existing order.

10.3 Conceptual and theoretical considerations

This thesis made use of a 'toolbox' of concepts and theories to explore, in depth, the role of third sector organisations in widening participation. Although this thesis has only made limited explicit references to some of these concepts in explaining the findings presented, these have, as outlined in chapters five and six, informed research design and analysis and are integral to the findings of this research. This section therefore outlines some implications for these concepts, both in terms of interpretation and their application in research.

10.3.1 Authority, order and expertise

This thesis has explored the role of a specific 'type' of actor within a specific policy domain. In contrast with many other studies of policy and policymaking, these actors, TSWPOs, do not have a formal role in policy. Their involvement is not, in theory, a necessary part of the policy process and hence their roles are undefined in many models of policymaking. Yet there are many studies indicating that the involvement of multiple actors, many without formal roles, has become a common feature of education policymaking in the UK and elsewhere. The model applied in this thesis of authority, expertise and order has supported an analysis of the functions and position of these informal policy actors alongside more formal actors, such as the state or regulated organisations. The conceptualisation of policy as comprising these three elements enables an exploration of factors common to all actors but is also flexible

enough to be adjusted to the contexts of specific actors. In this thesis it provided a framework for exploring the relative authorities of the state, of universities and of third sector organisations. These organisations do not possess the same forms of authority, but authority is relevant to their capacity to shape policy in each case. Comparing these different forms of authority is also revealing in terms of identifying the values and politics that privilege one form of authority over another in a specific policy context. This model therefore has potential to be valuable in other similar contexts as a tool for examining the relative capacities of organisations to contribute to policy and for analysing whose values are represented (or not) within policy.

10.3.2 Fields and networks

As noted in chapter five, this thesis made use of both fields and networks in a relational approach to studying TSWPOs. This approach was taken, in part, due to challenges in identifying a single and stable field relevant to all organisations covered, and to provide a means of examining connections between fields that may be specific to one individual or organisation. This also enabled a more flexible use of the term 'network', as both an active construction and practice of TSWPOs to enhance their positions within a field, and as fields in their own right, with shared understandings and practices. The consideration of networks in addition to fields provided a more complete understanding of the behaviours of TSWPOs, as their positions were often the combination of shared understandings within the field but also influenced by connections and resources external to the field, mediated through networks. Although not fully explored within this thesis, the combination of fields and networks as separate but related concepts may offer valuable insights in other contexts, particularly those where fields are emergent or nested or where organisations may not have a clear 'primary' field.

One aspect of the study of fields and networks, particularly in relation to policy, has been consideration of the role of the state, something that has been partially explored here in relation to widening participation policymaking. This research appears to

confirm Fligstein and McAdam's assertions of the primacy of the role of the state in relation to strategic action fields (2011). The development of TSWPOs and any associated field appears to have been heavily influenced by actions of the state, including generalised support for social enterprise, tacit support for TSWPOs as deliverers of widening participation activity, and provision of funding streams that have supported the growth of TSWPOs. In relation to the role of the state within fields, the comments of interviewees indicate that they have been responsive to the state or its agents in the form of the OfS, OFFA and HEFCE, with the state possessing the authority to intervene and direct the work of widening participation. Similarly expressed in some policy network theories, the presence of multiple actors in networked configurations within widening participation policymaking is not a challenge to the position of the state but, as in Ball and Junemann's articulation (2011) of heterarchy, is a new modality of state power.

10.3.3 Enactment

As described in chapter five, this thesis made use of the concept of policy 'enactment', which explores how policy becomes contextualised practice, mediated through interpretations, values and the structural contexts of those enacting it. Enactment has generally been applied to those organisations and individuals that are subjects of policy – schools, teachers, civil servants. This thesis has extended that application to organisations who have chosen to be enactors but are not themselves named or given specific authority within the text or state enactment of policy. This thesis has shown that these organisations and individuals who are not 'official' enactors do still play a role in how policy becomes embedded practice, making their interpretations and contexts relevant to understanding how policy is done. However, in contrast to the study of 'official' enactors, the interpretation of policy in TSWPOs appears to involve different layers or mediators of that policy, as TSWPOs are simultaneously engaged with attempting to deliver and influence national articulations of policy alongside responding to the more local interpretations of HEPs, whose WP policies take into account their market positions (McCaig, Rainford & Squire, 2022). Conceptually,

enactment does not make a distinction in application to research between different positions of enactors as it already outlines the relevance of context, which has been a valuable structure for this thesis. However, there may be value in further identifying some of the varying contexts and structural constraints of policy that apply to 'unofficial' enactors, including access to policymakers and balancing contradictory interpretations of the same policies.

10.4 Looking forward

Although the indications from this research point to most TSWPOs playing and continuing to play a marginal role in WP policy change, there are notable features of their policy activity and their roles in shaping policy thus far that point to broader threats to the social justice conception of widening participation and raise questions about what is possible in future. In thinking about shaping policy as only bringing about a change in policy, then, aside from the Sutton Trust, TSWPOs have done little to shape WP policy or practice. However, considering shaping policy as not only creating change but also about maintaining a status quo, then TSWPOs have, albeit not necessarily intentionally, been part of maintaining the narrow focus of debate that so frustrates some of them. For government, TSWPOs have provided a source of expertise and authority that has been used in making policy proposals and for justifying policy decisions. TSWPOs have shown themselves adaptable to government priorities, with the Sutton Trust now advocating for apprenticeship routes and others moving to focus on the activities of employers, rather than universities. Recent debates over moving to a post qualification admissions system have drawn on the research of the Sutton Trust, though without reference to the caveats it notes in implementing such a system. As government policy appears increasingly hostile to universities and has moved to a conception of social mobility which is less exclusively concerned with expanding access to elite education and careers, many TSWPOs are in the position of being able to move with funding opportunities and to adapt how they present their activities. In doing so, they can act as examples of pragmatic organisations and of the sort of privately funded civil society organisations government policy has sought to encourage. Whilst this

ensures their continued survival, it can also act as justification for those who argue against the need for structural change.

Whether TSWPOs will continue to move with the direction of policy and funding, as they seemingly have done previously, remains to be seen, with major external financial and social shocks creating a different funding and political environment. Recent activities of TSWPOs, taking place after the interviews for this research, would suggest that although they may be pushing for change in more areas of policy, they are still employing the same tactics as in previous years. Importantly, they are also largely concerned with the advancing the fortunes of those they identify as 'disadvantaged' and focus heavily on access to 'elite' education and professions. At the point that this research was conducted in 2019 - early 2020, TSWPOs were concerned with the upheaval of a new university regulator and new national outreach programme, which presented opportunities for funding but was also seen by many as risky and short-term. Many were feeling the same pressure as universities to respond to increased emphasis from the Office for Students to demonstrate the impact of their activity. Policy activity was a small part of their work and, for many, was increasingly seen as a poor investment, given limited engagement from government and the dominance of the Sutton Trust. However the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020 and a reconceptualization of social mobility as 'levelling up' seem to have been factors in prompting new and more explicit policy activity by TSWPOs. These have included new coalitions between TSWPO networks, including the Sutton Trust partnering with other organisations, and have involved explicit calls for changes to policy and practice by government or by universities. The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on education, including the cancellation of GCSE and A-level exams in 2020 and 2021 and subsequent debates over the fairness of alternative forms of assessment, has presented an opportunity for TSWPOs to gain a greater public profile and to form coalitions with organisations they might otherwise be competing with.

The Fair Access Coalition (FAC), a small group of TSWPOs who had previously made public statements about the Augar review and the appointment of a Director for

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Access and Participation, provide an example of how the means of policy influence appear to have remained largely the same, with seemingly minimal impact on policy changes. In summer 2020, January 2021 and again in March 2021, the FAC came together to make public statements about support for young people and potential HE applicants in the wake of the pandemic. They collaborated with other visible organisations in the field, firstly the Fair Education Alliance, a charity and network founded by Teach First (Fair Education Alliance, 14 August 2020) and then using HEPI as a platform (HEPI, 22 March 2021). The approaches that they have used appear similar to those described by interviewees in this research, including responding to consultations, making public statements through mainstream media (e.g. newspapers) and engaging with politicians to showcase their activities and gain political support. The statements made by the coalition call for support from government and for clarity for young people around exams and HE admissions, as well as cautioning against the adoption of a post-qualification admissions system. Although the government response to the Augar review does indicate that they will not to pursue a post qualifications admissions system, the majority of other proposals are not in line with the proposals of the FAC, who have stated that the proposals 'damage the life chances of those who already have the fewest opportunities' (Johnny Rich, 24 Feb 2022). There are therefore few indications that their general statements and engagements with political figures have had any impact on the direction or content of policy.

Alongside organisations pursuing many of the traditional approaches to influencing policy, there has also been a continuation of the trend for TSWPOs to turn away from Whitehall in seeking to change policy. The 'Department for Opportunities' (DO), an 'advocacy arm' of the Social Mobility Foundation, was founded in January 2020 with its 'focus on civil society rather than Whitehall – working with employers, communities, charities, councils, schools, colleges and universities to take action within their spheres of influence' (Department for Opportunities, 11 Jan 2020). The activities of DO have included awareness raising campaigns with employers, creating an 'employer coalition' who have made commitments around work experience placements and developing a redistribution campaign to encourage organisations to donate old laptops to be used

by schools or identified young people. Thus far, none of their campaigns have focused explicitly on widening participation, though they have promoted alternative routes to degrees such as PwCs school leaver programme and resources to support students appealing their exam results. Their latest campaign, at the time of writing, uses research with young people they categorise as 'disadvantaged' as the apparent basis for a series of policy recommendations, suggesting that the organisation still has some focus on influencing government as well as promoting non-government activity.

Events taking place after the majority of interviews undertaken for this PhD, including significant disruption to education as a result of Covid-19, may have played a role in creating opportunities for TSWPOs to continue to engage with policy, as well as incentives to collaborate around issues that affect them all. However, the findings of this PhD, which indicate that TSWPOs largely remain peripheral to policy, able to contribute as experts but unable or unwilling to alter the trajectory of policies, appear to hold in this changing climate for widening participation. The policy activity of TSWPOs has included more specific interest in addressing structural inequalities, such as the potentially unequal limiting effect of student number controls on access to HE and access to resources such as laptops and internet access. However, the solutions proposed are often about mitigating the impact of these structures on those identified as having 'potential' to succeed in the current system and not addressing the causes of these inequalities. In many cases these root causes may lie outside of the expertise or perceived realm of influence of TSWPOs, or addressing them in policy activity may be deemed unfeasible given legal restrictions around campaigning as charities and the restrictions or expectations around their own funding. Whatever the reasons, the ability and interest of TSWPOs to take up adversarial positions to government social mobility policy (or lack of) appears to still be marginal.

Nonetheless, there may be some changes in their positions which may require them to reconsider. Unlike in previous years, TSWPOs appear, at the time of writing this thesis, to be losing favour with government. The recent awarding of the contract to manage the National Tutoring Scheme, initially founded by a coalition of the Sutton Trust,

Impetus, NESTA, the EEF and Teach First, to a private organisation rather than any of its founding charities would suggest that charitable status and connections to government do not override financial considerations or other connections. Opportunities for TSWPOs to be 'useful' to government agendas, as they have been previously, appear increasingly restricted. As the 'levelling up' agenda appears to have become the government's new programme for social mobility, it has shifted focus away from access to universities and to elite professions, with fewer opportunities for TSWPOs to align with what is currently a relatively vague area of policy. The Social Mobility Commission, whilst still running, was recently without a Chair for the second time in four years, with a gap of over a year between appointments, suggesting that the version of social mobility formerly championed by the commission and with the support of the Sutton Trust, is, as its former Chairs have indicated, not a priority for government. The new vision for social mobility does not appear to follow the ladder model favoured by the Sutton Trust and others. Influencing government policy in future may therefore require a new approach from TSWPOs. However, in contrast with the increasing distance between TSWPOs and central government, there are opportunities developing in the appointment and vision of the new Director for Fair Access and Participation, John Blake, who mentioned the work of the third sector in his first 'official' address in post, urging HEPs to 'seek out strategic, enduring, mutually-beneficial partnerships with schools and with the third sector, all working together to contribute to this work' (Blake, 8 Feb 2022). Blake also emphasised the need for independent evaluation of widening participation work, something offered as a service by a number of TSWPOs, and appeared early on in his role to speak at an event organised by Impetus, a major funder of TSWPOs. This continued support from OfS for the evaluation work and role of TSWPOs in delivery may then offer opportunities, both commercial and as a route to influence the OfS.

10.4 Outstanding issues

This thesis has focused on understanding how and in what ways TSWPOs have sought to influence policy. In doing so, it has highlighted the significance of the values of those

working in TWSPOs and those funding them to the type of policy activity they undertake and to what end. This is not unique to TSWPOs – enactment of any policy depends on the interpretations of individuals and the structural constraints of the contexts in which the policy is enacted. Recent research on widening participation practitioners has also indicated the significance of individual values and interpretations for WP practice (Rainford, 2019) making it timely to examine these values and the contexts in which they are enacted. Previous research has highlighted the challenges of multiple definitions of widening participation, as the flexibility of widening participation makes it possible for several competing agendas to co-exist and work against one another and against meaningful change. Advancing an emancipatory version of widening participation, which promotes education for all and not specifically for national economic gain, is restricted where widening participation is also deemed to be about enabling opportunities for a deserving minority. If we are to understand how different narratives come to dominate and shape WP work, it is necessary to examine critically the structures and practices that support the advancement of some agendas and not others.

Establishing whose values are represented in WP policy and practice is complex, made harder by a lack of transparency in some of the processes of WP policymaking highlighted in this thesis. This ambiguity of interests is something also noted in the study of policy networks (Ball, 2012), leading to a 'democratic deficit' in policymaking. Many of the practices and contexts of TSWPOs attempting to 'shape the narrative' of WP, often working through networks, represent potential threats to their independence and transparency as social purpose organisations and obscure the interests involved in their work. Although the expectations placed on TSWPOs in terms of their transparency and independence may be different from those placed on WP departments or practitioners within HEPs, I argue that these threats to transparency of interests, as outlined below, are equally relevant to all those working in WP and their practices and require consideration across the field.

10.4.1 Independence

As charities, TSWPOs are judged to be independent organisations, able to determine how to act in accordance with their missions and values. In practice, like any organisation, access to resources can be a factor in the limits of this independence, with the interests of funders and supporters being important factors. TSWPO CEOs and Trustees within this research remarked on the importance of maintaining their independence through careful management of these factors, such as taking decisions to not pursue funding that they feel would complicate their ability to carry out their missions. However, it was evident that many still felt constrained by the relationships they held with funders. This was particularly true in terms of university relationships which, although not necessarily significant financially, were often essential to maintain for a TSWPOs delivery model. CEOs remarked on the discomfort of criticising the practice of universities that they might also work with and on taking up an adversarial position on issues like WP funding or regulation. One TSWPO CEO talked about the reluctance of some TSWPO CEOs to suggest that funding for WP could come directly from government to TSWPOs, knowing that this would result in a direct challenge to the funding of their partner organisations. Others also talked about their hesitancy to publicly and loudly criticise the Sutton Trust, seeing this as potentially damaging to their relationships across the sector.

Part of a charity's independence lies in determining its own mission and purpose as an organisation. It is therefore relevant to note that many TSWPOs have had their origins in funding from government, Teach First and the Sutton Trust and have chosen to align themselves closely with the missions of these organisations. This is not necessarily an indication of lack of independence or of direct influence from these organisations but does raise questions around whose values are represented in the missions of TSWPOs. TASO is perhaps the most prominent example of alignment, in directly adopting the aims of their funder, the OfS, as their charitable mission. However, many others have adopted elements of the missions of Teach First and the Sutton Trust, with alignment with a single mission – that no child's educational success is limited by their socio-

economic background – being part of Teach First's 10th anniversary campaign for those graduating from its teaching programme. Beyond this alignment with direct funders, there has also been a tendency for TSWPOs to align with a government defined problem of widening participation. This means a focus on both national economic and social justice goals, with focus being on the broader social benefits than on individual rights. Many TSWPOs have been founded by individuals from backgrounds where their participation in higher education was taken for granted or strongly encouraged, either through family support or selective schooling. Although strongly personally motivated, in some cases their first introduction to the concept of widening participation was through interaction with policy, or was formed in relation to their own exceptional personal experiences of progression. Many of their first opportunities to secure funding would have also been aligned to the policy problem, further reinforcing the framing of widening participation as a national challenge to reduce a deficit or as a question of supporting individual success. It may be that there are third sector organisations working with alternative conceptions of widening participation, however, if they are not aligned with the policy problem of WP, concerned with the responsibility of universities in supporting the progression of young people to HE, these may not be active in the field of widening participation policy, given the difficulty of advancing alternative positions without funding.

10.4.2 Leadership and governance

The role and leadership of charity CEOs and founders was reflected on by several interviewees as relevant to decision making and policy. In the case of founders, many of whom remained involved even if they were not part of formal leadership of the charity, their personal interests could steer the priorities of the organisation beyond those specified in their mission. In some cases, this could create conflict and uncertainty, with several interviewees questioning the credibility of the Sutton Trust given apparent disagreements between the findings of its own research and the position taken by its founder. Less public challenges were also noted by CEOs and Trustees who sometimes felt bound to follow the interests of a founder over other

options. The position of the Sutton Trust's founder has been largely public, having a formal role within the organisation with decision making authority. Not all TSWPOs had this clarity, with founders now acting as Trustees and some moving between roles as Trustees or employees. Some organisations had further complications of founders having moved on to other roles but remaining interested in the day-to-day work of the charity or even advising, seemingly creating an obligation but without clear accountability or authority. Limiting the personal influence of CEOs or founders, even after leaving a formal role, appeared to be a challenge and adds a level of uncertainty to understanding whose interests and interpretations are involved in TSWPO work.

The composition and recruitment of TSWPO trustees, whilst more transparent in terms of roles and decision-making authority, also raises questions about whose interests are represented in decision making around widening participation. Trustees were frequently sought to advance the status of TSWPOs, thereby expanding their network of influence. As a consequence, trustees were recruited from similar elite sections of society and were sometimes appointed on the basis of financial relationships, with funders nominating trustees. Several trustees are also prominent figures connected to other TSWPOs or selected for their influence and involvement in widening participation policy, such as Professor Sir Les Ebdon, former Director of Fair Access, or Mary Curnock-Cook, former Chief Executive of UCAS. The recruitment and selection process for Trustees is not always clear, though some TSWPOs noted that they have taken action on this in recent years, specifically seeking to diversify their Trustee boards and recruiting publicly for candidates. This does appear to be an area where there has been improvement in transparency, with some TSWPOs having surveyed their trustees to identify gaps in both knowledge and experience. However, with several TSWPOs having not only trustee boards but also advisory boards and boards comprised of funders, transparency over decision making and selection of candidates for all of these bodies is still an area of risk.

Questions about the diversity of Trustee boards also extend to the diversity of employees and volunteers within TSWPOs. There is currently no complete data held

about the characteristics of widening participation practitioners, whether in HEPs or outside them, but some interviewees in this research noted tendencies for those founding and working within TSWPOs to come from similar social backgrounds, often with similar professional and educational experiences. The circumstances around availability of funding for TSWPOs has meant that several have been supported by founders' connections to Teach First and/or the Sutton Trust, as well as to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Although interviewees do point to a more diverse range of experiences than is apparent from the public image of TSWPOs, they identify that it is white male voices that have dominated public debate about widening participation, including from TSWPOs. Some TSWPOs do appear to recognise this as a limitation, taking steps to address socio-economic and racial diversity within their employees, including working with 'diversity recruiters' and offering internships and apprenticeships to young people from their target cohorts.

10.4.3 Funding and flexibility

One TSWPO CEO noted during their interview that one of the major challenges for their organisation was 'making sure we don't just do things that people will fund us to do', something they acknowledged had been a temptation when resources were scarce. Other interviewees from TSWPOs noted restrictions around funding that made them cautious about pursuing certain sources of funding, particularly if it would form a large part of their income. These restrictions often related to the target audience for activity, with more funding available to work with young people aged 16-18 than with younger years. There were also restrictions around 'mutual benefits' for funders, with relationships requiring the participation of employees or students as volunteers, in the case of corporate or university funding. Almost no TSWPOs have a tightly defined target beneficiary for their activity, preferring terms like 'less advantaged' or simply 'young people'. This enables mobility in how they attract funding, able to adapt to the changing measures applied by government in measuring widening participation. The vagueness and impreciseness of targeting language and criteria has been an ongoing identified issue in widening participation, with regular criticism of national measures of

socio-economic disadvantage, but whereas HEPs have some freedom to determine at least some of the measures that they will use to target based on their own student intake, TSWPOs have no similar measure to guide their activity. HEPs are also often in receipt of longer-term funding, meaning that even when targeting guidelines might shift their focus, this can happen over a longer term.

Without a specified group of beneficiaries or identified target of who they are widening participation for, the link between TSWPOs and the problem that they are trying to solve is sometimes weakly defined, presenting issues in terms of evaluation, the legitimacy of advocacy positions and participatory practice. Identifying whether an activity works for a particular group and to what extent is far more challenging when funding might require a TSWPO to engage with multiple different groups for short periods. The ability to also refine activity to meet the needs of a defined group is also hampered where relations with that group are necessarily short-term, determined by the interests of a funder. In not having defined beneficiaries, the opportunity and validity of TSWPOs taking up an advocacy position, acting for or on behalf of a particular group, is also less clear. In defining the problem of WP as rates of HE participation, as many funding streams and TSWPOs themselves can do, the different groups targeted by widening participation might be considered as broadly similar, but their experiences and the challenges that they face can be distinct and specific. Shifting between differently defined groups on a short-term basis presents challenges for TSWPOs in tailoring their work to the needs of a specific audience or in enabling that target group to play an active role – it is easy to fall into a model of 'doing to' than 'doing with'. Funding is not the only challenge TSWPOs face in advocacy or participatory work, with the age and interest of participants and building relationships with them and those around them also major challenges. Some TSWPOs have sought to engage former participants as trustees, advisors or co-creators to strengthen a link with the groups and individuals their mission is directed towards. However, this has limitations in engaging only those who have positive experiences with a programme of activity. For some TSWPOs and particularly those who articulate their mission around the policy problem of WP (i.e. framed as creating economic or social benefit to society,

rather than around the needs and rights of a structural disadvantaged group or individual), strengthening their links to a beneficiary group is not part of their work. The limited engagement in WP work of those who it is supposedly intended to benefit – the 'disadvantaged' - raises questions of in whose interest WP activity is designed and whether, without their input, such work could be considered to be meaningfully challenging that disadvantaged position.

10.5 Recommendations

As suggested in the introduction to this concluding chapter, the title of 'recommendations' may be suggestive of advice for organisations of how to better influence policy or how to advance their interests. Instead, I would suggest that organisations should first consider the reasons why they want to influence policy, to what end and in whose interests. The desire of TSWPOs to be 'part of the conversation' and the limited investment in policy-focused activity suggests that most are not seeking policy change, yet they still choose to engage with policy as a means to preserve their position. Doing so appears to offer advantages in securing funding and building relationships for the organisation, though these are also sometimes restrictive and not in line with an organisation's mission. Few organisations seemed entirely happy with their policy engagement or appeared to feel it was effective. Some noted that engagement required compromises, including having to appeal to a public or policy narrative of WP they did not personally agree with. It was not always clear who policy engagement is intended to benefit and in what ways. More than promoting any changes to WP policy or practice, the policy participation of several organisations motivated to protect their funding and delivery models appears to have reinforced existing hierarchies and market models of education. That is not to say that TSWPOs have not, through policy activity, secured any benefits to the young people who are their beneficiaries, but they have not, in policy, altered the system that disadvantages those beneficiaries and others like them. In line with this viewpoint that engagement with WP policy is not necessarily, in itself, a desirable end, the recommendations that follow are based on considering under what conditions TSWPOs could engage with WP

policy and practice in ways that would advance a transformative model of widening participation. As noted, many of the practices and structures that work against a transformative model of widening participation are equally present for widening participation practitioners in other contexts and hence many of the recommendations that follow apply to the whole sector.

10.5.1 Funding and security

Funding and its insecurity informs many of the practices of TSWPOs, as it also does in Uni Connect partnerships and WP practitioners within HEPs. For TSWPOs, funding provided through HEPs and through schools is often the most short-term and insecure. It is desirable more for relationships that come with the funding that can support their delivery models (i.e. it enables access to learners and university facilities) than for its financial benefit. Desire to preserve this funding and these relationships provides a perverse incentive for TSWPOs to deliver what is expected by funders and not to challenge expectations. As these funders are frequently engaging TSWPOs to deliver on their own objectives, such as meeting Gatsby benchmarks in the case of schools or Access and Participation Plan commitments in the case of HEPs, the demands placed on TSWPOs to demonstrate progress against quantitative (and often short term, output focused) targets make it difficult for them to evaluate their programmes holistically. Rarely are TSWPOs considered true 'partners' to HEPs or schools, meaning that conversations about targeting beneficiaries, improving practice and longitudinal evaluation are not always broached early on in, nor can TSWPOs budget long-term to address these issues through their own resources as they cannot know whether they will be working with the same beneficiaries or with the same resources. As HEPs have moved to longer term Access and Participation Plans, making commitments around access and participation over multiple years, there is an opportunity for longer-term partnership relationships to be built. These relationships, properly managed. could enable both TSWPOs and HEPs to share knowledge and experience as practitioners and allow a refocusing on beneficiaries.

Recommendation: HEPs and schools should enter into longer-term contracts with TSWPOs that include explicit consideration of how both parties will contribute to holistic evaluation and to improving practice in a way that is meaningful to beneficiaries. Other funders, such as government and grant awarding bodies, should offer funding relationships that build capacity, not only in terms of organisational reach, but in terms of relevant practitioner and practice development.

10.5.2 Closed networks

The networks that TSWPOs have formed as part of their activities, policy related or otherwise, are not always readily apparent. Gaining access, particularly to those networks that involve policymakers or funders, appears to require building relations with existing members in ways that are not perceived as threatening to existing hierarchies or competition within a market. Some networks are explicitly closed – the Sutton Trust have noted preferring personal introductions to secure funding from them and the Fair Education Alliance have historically recruited members through invitation and elements of screening. Gaining the support of an influential figure or organisation appears to be an early and necessary step for new organisations and it is unclear on what basis this support is given. Personal relationships have enabled many TSWPOs to develop their activities but, since their continued survival often depends on competing for funding and relationships, these connections and knowledge they produce are not always shared. The competitive and closed nature of networks in WP presents a barrier to diversity of background and opinion within WP practice and to sharing of knowledge and experience within it.

Recommendation: New and existing formal networks should explicitly consider how they can be inclusive and actively encourage diversity within their activities and membership. Processes for gaining access to networks should be transparent and public. TSWPOs should explore how professional expertise, including in securing funding and improving practice in a TSWPO context, might be shared in ways that take account of their competitive context.

10.5.3 Accountability

Linked to the above recommendation is the observation that the accountability structures for TSWPOs, including Trustee boards, advisory boards and participant fora, are not always transparent and frequently draw on existing networks of influence. It is not always clear how accountability structures might impact on the governance and decision making of TSWPOs, especially when these interact with staffing positions and funding. The inter-relationships between Trustees, founders, CEOs, staff and funders are often complex, without any apparent guidelines for how these roles and responsibilities might be kept distinct. Beyond formal governance structures, the lack of defined beneficiary groups and consultation with these groups as part of TSWPO activity further complicates the question of in whose interest TSWPOs are acting.

Recommendation: TSWPOs should explore opportunities to meaningfully engage with beneficiaries and the communities that their work is intended to benefit to inform the direction of their work, including in policy. Where possible, TSWPO missions should more clearly identify in whose interests they are acting.

Recommendation: the roles and responsibilities of trustee boards and other advisory/consultative boards, their recruitment processes and membership should be made public or, at least, available to relevant parties.

Recommendation: TSWPOs should seek to diversify their governing bodies and staff, as well as providing training and support for existing staff and governors on inclusive governance and leadership.

10.5.4 Professionalisation

As has already been noted by other researchers, training and development for widening participation practitioners is patchy at best (Rainford, 2019). The understanding of practitioners of the lives of those their activities target is variable. Particularly in the field of evaluation, there is little recognition of practice-based knowledge or awareness amongst practitioners of how to utilise this to improve their

practice or evaluate activity (Gazeley et. al., 2019). This not only hampers the development of practitioners themselves but means that widening participation practice is highly variable. Without an established framework of expectations around knowledge and skills also leaves entry to the profession subject to the judgements of those already working within it and brings a vagueness to recruitment of 'suitable' practitioners that can reinforce bias or dissuade those not already familiar with the profession. For TSWPOs, there are fewer opportunities to engage in the already limited professional development activities open to those within HEPs. Operating on a smaller scale, they rarely have access to research journals and lack the funds for membership of practitioner networks and participation in their conferences and events. Consideration of how to extend any professionalisation activity outside of HEPs should form part of the development of the profession.

Recommendation: Training aligned to a national framework and making use of expertise and knowledge from other in-practice training such as teaching could establish expectations for entry, practice and progression as a widening participation practitioner. This could be developed through qualifications, such as a PGCert, as recommended by Harrison et. al. (2018) and could include accreditation of prior knowledge, as noted by Rainford (2019). Development and provision of any national qualification should not exclude those working outside HEPs. Partnership relationships between HEPs and TSWPOs could include supporting access to networks and to informal professional development such as in-house training or discussion groups.

10.6 Further research

This research focused on the knowledge and interpretations of TSWPOs and senior figures in WP policy. As a result of the research focus on policy influence, those TSWPOs and others who engaged with this research were those who felt that they had something to contribute. For a fuller picture, examining the activities of TSWPOs who were not active in policy and who occupy marginal positions within the networks identified may reveal other means of influence and could give indications of the

impact, if any, of networks on the work of less policy engaged organisations. Further research involving WP practitioners within HEPs and their experience of engaging with policy could establish whether the policy influencing practices identified within this thesis apply across all organisations, something suggested by TSWPOs. This would provide further indication of which organisations are able to gain access to and exert influence within networks. This would also enable further exploration of how 'authority' is understood and exercised as a component of policy within WP.

This thesis has identified, also noted by Rainford (2019), that there is no recorded information about who works in widening participation. Many of the recommendations noted above would benefit from having a more comprehensive understanding of who currently works within the sector. TSWPOs are often missed from consideration of the WP 'sector' but, if efforts to professionalise the sector and to understand the interpretations of those who enact WP policy are to be successful, they need to be included in future research.

In applying a model of policy as authority, expertise and order, this thesis has sought to provide a framework for exploring how, in the absence of evidence of influence on policy change, organisations and individuals may be nonetheless attempting to shape policy. It provides a model for understanding how their actions can relate to policy and for understanding the extent of their influence, as influence within a single aspect of policy appears to be limiting. This model could be applied in other contexts, particularly in contexts of networked governance where relations between multiple organisations and policy change are not transparent.

Philanthropic donations, for both TSWPOs and for HEPs are beginning to form a notable part of WP funding. Further research into how the interests of these funders are represented within WP practice and how they might shape WP would be beneficial. Understanding why it is that donors choose particular restrictions around WP funding would also be beneficial, particularly for TSWPOs and HEPs who may be seeking to engage funders with more transformational models of WP.

10.7 Contribution to knowledge

This thesis contributes to knowledge of widening participation policy and practice, and to the study of policy influence, in four ways. Firstly, it is the first research study to specifically examine the activities of third sector organisations within widening participation policy and to provide an account of their emergence and policy activities. Secondly, it provides a detailed examination of policy activity within the field of widening participation, revealing a previously unexamined series of practices employed by TSWPOs and other organisations to develop their position within widening participation policy. Thirdly, this thesis identified the role of TSWPOs as networked experts within WP policy, setting out how, within this role, they have been part of shaping ideas about widening participation in terms of establishing the fair access strand of widening participation and establishing evaluation practices. Finally, this thesis employed a model of policy as expertise, authority and order as a framework for examining how organisations seek to influence policy and where their influence can be identified within these three aspects of policy.

10.8 Concluding comments

This thesis made several distinct contributions to studying policy influence and to widening participation. Chapters two and three told a history of WP policy and TSWPO involvement. Chapter four provided the first account of the emergence of TSWPOs and their recognition in WP policy. Chapters seven and eight examined their activities in shaping policy and how these related to their status as 'third sector' organisations. Chapter nine then examined these activities through the framework of policy as authority, order and expertise as a means to understand the limits and extent of their influence on widening participation. These organisations have gone largely ignored within prior research on widening participation, yet this thesis has demonstrated where they are contributing to policy and practice and how they may continue to do so, thereby providing a background for future research that incorporates their contributions and practice contexts. Through examining the activities and

interpretations of these organisations, this research also contributes to a wider body of research about policy networks within education policy, going beyond mapping networks and ideas to looking specifically at the practices which support and restrict the mobility of policy ideas.

This study took place during major social and political changes in the form of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. This concluding chapter has sought to explore how these and still emergent higher education policy changes might affect the status and activity of TSWPOs in future. The current political climate, with restricted funding for education and much of this directed towards a skills agenda to be delivered through sub-degree qualifications, presents a challenge to the model of widening participation established over the previous two decades. It offers opportunities to develop inclusive and flexible education routes for young people and adults, but at the same time appears to be shaping a system in which access to the most socially exclusive universities and careers remains restricted. In this environment, the role that TSWPOs could play is unclear. Without government or institutional funding to support their activities, and without the surrounding structures of university widening participation activity, they may face significant challenges in delivering their missions. How TSWPOs choose to navigate this period, and whether they choose to do so alone, in collaboration with other TSWPOs and/or HEPs, could determine whether their activities support a transformative version of WP that challenges who is 'deserving' or supports one that limits the judgement of who is 'deserving' to a select few.

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Appendices

Appendix i: Full list of identified organisations

Establishment date is taken as the earliest date indicated by either organisational histories provided on organisation websites, annual reports or charity reports. Where this is not available, date of charitable registration or, in the case of WPOs, company registration is used.

Designations are based on the categorisation of organisations described in chapter six of this thesis. Briefly, this translates to:

TSWPO: active charities registered in England with widening participation forming a major part of their established work and mission

TSWPO (Specialist): As above but with an interest in a specific sub-section in terms of target group (e.g. care leavers) or academic/professional area (e.g. accountancy). For these organisations, WP work is not consistently part of their activities and they primarily engage with other vertical and horizontal policy fields to carry out their missions.

TSO: active charities registered in England with some connection to or interest in WP policy but as a minor interest or without established work.

WPO: organisations, mostly not-for-profit, with widening participation forming a major part of their established work and mission but not with charitable status

n/a indicates that an organisation was not established or identified as involved in WP in 2018.

Organisation name	Established	Designation 2018	Updated designation 2021
Accelerate and Access Foundation	2012	TSWPO	TSWPO
Access Accountancy	2014	TSWPO (Specialist)	TSWPO (Specialist)
AccessED	2019	n/a	TSWPO
Action on Access	2002	WPO	WPO
Aimhigher West Midlands	2011	WPO	WPO
Applied Inspiration	2016	WPO	WPO
Arts Emergency	2011	TSWPO (Specialist)	TSWPO (Specialist)
Become Charity	1987	TSO	TSO
Brightside	2003	TSWPO	TSWPO
Causeway Education Ltd	2012	TSWPO	TSWPO
Coach Bright	2014	WPO	TSWPO
CU Trust	2007	TSWPO	TSWPO
Debate Mate	2007	TSWPO	TSWPO
Fair Education Alliance	2014	n/a	TSO
First Star Scholars	2017	n/a	TSWPO (Specialist)
Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE)	1992	TSWPO	TSWPO
Future First	2010	TSWPO	TSWPO
Future Frontiers	2013	TSWPO	TSWPO

Generating Genius	2005	TSWPO (Specialist)	TSO
Helena Kennedy Foundation	1998	TSWPO	TSWPO
Impetus	2002	TSO	TSO
In2Science	2010	TSWPO (Specialist)	TSWPO (Specialist)
Inclusive futures	2020	n/a	WPO
IntoUniversity	2002	TSWPO	TSWPO
Making the leap	1993	TSWPO	TSO
My Big Career	2013	TSWPO	TSO
NEON	2011	WPO	WPO
NNECL	2013	WPO	TSWPO (Specialist)
Oxbridge Prospects	2014	TSWPO	Inactive
Project Access	2016	TSWPO	TSWPO
Push	1992	WPO	WPO
Saturday Club Trust	2009	TSWPO	TSWPO
Scientists and Co.	2019	n/a	TSO
SEO Scholars	2000	TSWPO	TSWPO
StandAlone	2012	TSWPO (Specialist)	TSO
Target Oxbridge	2017	WPO	WPO
TASO	2019	n/a	TSWPO
The Access Project	2008	TSWPO	TSWPO
The Bridge Group	2009	TSWPO	TSWPO
The Brilliant Club	2011	TSWPO	TSWPO
The Brokerage Citylink	1996	TSWPO	TSO
The Elephant Group	2018	n/a	TSWPO
The Social Mobility Foundation	2005	TSWPO	TSWPO
The Sutton Trust	1997	TSWPO	TSWPO
The Unite Foundation	2012	TSWPO (Specialist)	TSWPO (Specialist)
Unboxd	2014	TSO	Inactive
Universify Education	2016	TSWPO	TSWPO
up2uni	2011	TSWPO	Inactive
UpReach	2012	TSWPO	TSWPO
Villiers Park Educational Trust	1909	TSWPO	TSWPO
zero gravity	2020	n/a	TSWPO

Appendix ii: TSWPOs identified for interviews

Organisation name	Established	Charity registration	Size (NCVO)	Foundation and Trust funding
Accelerate and Access Foundation	2012	2015	Small	Sutton Trust
Brightside	2003	2015 (re-registered as CIO)	Large	Sutton Trust; Social Business Trust
Causeway Education Ltd	2012	2017	Large	Sutton Trust
CU Trust	2007	2007	Medium	Sutton Trust
Debate Mate	2007	2007	Large	Garfield Weston Foundation; Dulverton Trust
Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE)	1992	1984 (reconstituted and new mission in 1992)	Small	
Future First	2010	2010	Large	Sutton Trust; Garfield Weston Foundation
Future Frontiers	2013	2015	Medium	
Helena Kennedy Foundation	1998	1999	Medium	
IntoUniversity	2002	2007	Large	Sutton Trust; Garfield Weston Foundation; Esme Fairbairn; Dulverton Trust; Wolfson Foundation; Impetus PEF
Making the leap	1993	1996	Medium	
My Big Career	2013	2013	Small	
Oxbridge Prospects	2014	2014	Unknown	
Project Access	2016	2017	Medium	
Saturday Club Trust	2009	2016	Medium	Sorrell Foundation
SEO Scholars	2000	2003	Medium	
The Access Project	2008	2011	Large	Sutton Trust; Impetus PEF; NESTA; UPP; The Bulldog Trust; Garfield Weston Foundation; Esme Fairbairn
The Bridge Group	2009	2015	Medium	
The Brilliant Club	2011	2012	Large	Sutton Trust; Kusuma Trust; Garfield Weston Foundation; Esme Fairbairn; Dulverton Trust; Impetus PEF; EY Foundation; Social Business Trust

The Brokerage Citylink	1996	1996	Medium	
The Social Mobility Foundation	2005	2006	Large	
The Sutton Trust	1997	2012	Large	Garfield Weston Foundation; Esme Fairbairn; Wolfson Foundation
Universify Education	2016	2016	Medium	Kusuma Trust
up2uni	2011	2011	Unknown	
UpReach	2012	2014	Medium	
Villiers Park Educational Trust	1909	2018 (re-registered)	Large	

Appendix iii: Consultation engagement and public reviews

The summaries and government responses to 21 public consultations relevant to widening participation and social mobility policy from 2011-2019 (detailed below) were searched to identify if responses from TSWPOs had been received. Very few mentioned specific respondents, several had no summaries published and some were still pending published summaries. In addition, TSWPO participation in four invited consultations on WP was also examined. Given the very limited number of responses by TSWPOs, the below only records those who responded or participated.

Title	Type	Date	TSWPO Respondents
Students at the Heart of the System	Public Consultation	Jun-11	The Bridge Group
Social Mobility and Child Poverty review	Public Consultation	Aug-11	No details published
Targeted support for higher education students	Public Consultation	Mar-13	No details published
Child poverty: a draft strategy	Public Consultation	Feb-14	No details published
Information about learning and teaching, and the student experience	Public Consultation	Oct-15	No details published
Establishing common measures of socio-economic background	Public Consultation	May-16	The Bridge Group; The Sutton Trust
Part-time undergraduate maintenance loan	Public Consultation	Nov-16	None
OfS: registration fees for HE providers	Public Consultation	Dec-16	No published response
Analysing family circumstances and education	Public Consultation	Apr-17	No published response
OfS: registration fees (stage 2)	Public Consultation	Oct-17	None
OfS: regulatory framework for higher education	Public Consultation	Oct-17	The Sutton Trust; Into University; Brightside
Market access: degree awarding powers and university title	Public Consultation	Oct-17	None
Designation of a body for English HE information	Public Consultation	Nov-17	None
Accelerated degrees: widening student choice in higher education	Public Consultation	Dec-17	None
OfS: monetary and financial penalties	Public Consultation	Dec-17	None
Augar Review	Public Consultation	Mar-18	Details pending
Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework: subject-level	Public Consultation	Mar-18	None
A new approach to regulating access and participation in English HE	Public Consultation	Sep-18	No details published
Identifying schools for support	Public Consultation	Jan-19	None
Independent review of TEF: call for views	Public Consultation	Jan-19	None

Character and resilience: call for evidence	Public Consultation	May-19	Details pending
Panel on Fair Access to the Professions	Invited Consultation	2009	Brightside; IntoUniversity; The Social Mobility Foundation; The Sutton Trust
Child Poverty and Social Mobility Commission	Invited Consultation	2012	Brightside; The Bridge Group; The Social Mobility Foundation; The Sutton Trust
National Strategy for Access and Student Success	Invited Consultation	2014	Brightside; Future First; The Bridge Group; The Sutton Trust; UpReach
Social Mobility Advisory Committee	Invited Consultation	2016	Brightside; FACE; Future First; IntoUniversity; The Bridge Group; The Brilliant Club; The Sutton Trust; Villiers Park Educational Trust
APPG on Social Mobility	Invited Consultation	2017	Bridge Group; Brightside; Sutton Trust; UpReach

Appendix iv: TSWPO official network participation

Note: Based on participation as of 2022. Does not include participation where an organisation may have been a prior member.

Organisation name	Fair Access Coalition	Fair Education Alliance	NEON
Accelerate and Access Foundation	No	No	No
Brightside	Yes	Yes	Yes
Causeway Education Ltd	Yes	Yes	No
CU Trust	No	Yes	No
Debate Mate	No	Yes	No
FACE	No	No	No
Future First	No	Yes	No
Future Frontiers	No	Yes	No
Helena Kennedy Foundation	No	No	No
IntoUniversity	Yes	Yes	Yes
Making the leap	No	No	No
My Big Career	No	No	No
Oxbridge Prospects	No	No	No
Project Access	No	Yes	No
Saturday Club Trust	No	Yes	No
SEO Scholars	No	No	No
The Access Project	Yes	Yes	Yes
The Bridge Group	Yes	Yes	No
The Brilliant Club	Yes	Yes	Yes
The Brokerage Citylink	No	No	No
The Social Mobility Foundation	No	No	No
The Sutton Trust	No	No	No
Universify Education	No	Yes	No
up2uni	No	No	No
UpReach	Yes	Yes	Yes
Villiers Park Educational Trust	Yes	Yes	No

Appendix v: Named Interviewees

In addition to organisational interviewees, who were anonymised throughout this research, several interviewees indicated that they were happy to be named within this research. As it became apparent that the roles of all interviewees, both named and anonymous, were more complex than originally anticipated, with almost all interviewees speaking from multiple positions of experience and authority, the decision was taken to attribute quotes in relation to these positions of authority and expertise, rather than to individuals. As readers of this work may not be familiar with the multiple roles held by named interviewees, this was intended to provide more clarity on the relevance of their expertise. However, in accordance with the permissions granted by interviewees, these interviewees are named below, with their organisational affiliations at the time of interview.

Graeme Atherton, Director of NEON; Trustee, upReach

Louis Coiffait, London Metropolitan University

Professor Sir Les Ebdon, former Director of the Office for Fair Access, Chair of NEON.

Professor Sir Lee Elliot Major, former Director of the Sutton Trust and Professor of Social Mobility, Exeter University.

Jude Heaton, Director, Teach for All; Trustee, Bridge Group

Nick Hillman, Director of HEPI

Johnny Rich, Director of Push

John Selby, former Director, HEFCE; Trustee, Brightside

John Storan, Director of FACE

Tessa Stone, former Trustee and founder of the Bridge Group, former CEO of Brightside, Executive Director of the Devon Guild of Craftsmen

Rae Tooth, CEO of Villiers Park Trust

Appendix vi: TSWPO documents

The below list summarises the documents accessed in researching the activities and histories of organisations identified as TSWPOs. In addition to the below, the twitter pages of each organisation, where available, were accessed.

Organisation name	Document Type	Reference	Details
Accelerate and Access Foundation	Website	http://aaaf.org.uk/	Current site only
Accelerate and Access Foundation	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2016-2018
Accelerate and Access Foundation	Annual Report	Published on website	2017
Brightside	Website	http://www.thebrightsidetrust.org/	Including archived versions from 27 August 2003-28 April 2021, accessed via web.archive.org
Brightside	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2016-2019
Brightside	Impact Report	Published on website	2018
Brightside	Consultation Response	Published on website	OfS Evidence and Impact Exchange Consultation, 2018
Causeway Education Ltd	Website	https://causeway.education/	Current site only
Causeway Education Ltd	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2018-2020
Causeway Education Ltd	Annual Report	Published on website	2018-19
CU Trust	Website	http://www.childrensuniversity.co.uk/	Current site only
CU Trust	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2015-2019
CU Trust	External Evaluation	EEF, available on EEF and CU Trust websites	2018
CU Trust	External Evaluation	Published on organisation website	UFA Young Researchers and Evaluators, 2017

Debate Mate	Website	https://debatemate.com/	Current site only
Debate Mate	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2014-2018
Debate Mate	Annual Report	Published on organisation website	2017-18
FACE	Annual Chairs Report	Published on organisation website	2007-2019, includes accounts
Future First	Website	http://futurefirst.org.uk/our-purpose/	Current site only
Future First	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2014-2018
Future First	Annual Reports	Published on organisation website	2013-14 to 2017-18
Future Frontiers	Website	https://www.futurefrontiers.org.uk/about	Current site only
Future Frontiers	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2015-2019
Future Frontiers	Impact Reports	Published on organisation website	2017-18; 2018-19
Helena Kennedy Foundation	Website	https://www.hkf.org.uk/	Current site only
Helena Kennedy Foundation	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2014-2018
Helena Kennedy Foundation	Impact Report	Published on organisation website	2018
IntoUniversity	Website	http://intouniversity.org/content/our-history-0	Current site only
IntoUniversity	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2013-2018
IntoUniversity	Impact Reports	Published on organisation website	2013; 2017; 2019
IntoUniversity	Research	Published on organisation website	Rural Aspiration Report
IntoUniversity	External Report	Published on organisation website	New Philanthropy Capital, "Making an Impact", Oct 2012
IntoUniversity	External Report	Published on organisation website	Impetus PEF Case Study 2018

Making the leap	Website	https://makingtheleap.org.uk/	Including archived versions from 1 October 2014-28 July 2021, accessed via web.archive.org
Making the leap	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2015-2019
Project Access	Website	https://projectaccess.org/	Current site only
Project Access	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2018
Saturday Club Trust	Website	http://saturday-club.org/our-vision/	Current site only
Saturday Club Trust	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2017; 2018
SEO Scholars	Website	http://www.seo-london.org/	Current site only
SEO Scholars	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2014-2018
The Access Project	Website	http://www.theaccessproject.org.uk/	Current site only
The Access Project	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2014-2018
The Access Project	External Report	Published on organisation website	Impetus PEF Case Study 2018
The Bridge Group	Website	https://thebridgegroup.org.uk/about/	Including archived versions from 7 May 2016-31 May 2021, accessed via web.archive.org
The Bridge Group	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2016-2018
The Bridge Group	Impact Report	Published on organisation website	2019
The Bridge Group	Research	Published on organisation website	Rudd, P. (2011) Interventions to Promote Improved Access to Higher Education: Exploratory Paper : Evidence resource for the Bridge Group.
The Bridge Group	Research	Published on organisation website	Graduate Outcomes, 2016
The Bridge Group	Research	Published on organisation website	The Influence of Place, 2019
The Bridge Group	Resource	Published on organisation website	Social Mobility Toolkit, 2012

The Brilliant Club	Website	http://www.thebrilliantclub.org/	Including archived versions from 5 Sept 2011-6 Nov 2021, accessed via web.archive.org
The Brilliant Club	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2013-2018
The Brilliant Club	Strategy	Published on organisation website	The Path to Outcomes, 2016-2021
The Brokerage Citylink	Website	https://www.thebrokerage.org.uk/	Current site only
The Brokerage Citylink	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2016-2019
The Social Mobility Foundation	Website	http://www.socialmobility.org.uk/	Including archived versions from 12 Aug 2007-24 Nov 2021, accessed via web.archive.org
The Social Mobility Foundation	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2014-2018
The Social Mobility Foundation	Annual Report	Published on organisation website	2018-19
The Social Mobility Foundation	External Evaluation	Published on organisation website	IFS, "An Evaluation of the Impact of the Social Mobility Foundation Programmes on Education Outcomes"
The Social Mobility Foundation	Consultation Response	Published on organisation website	Ofqual Exams Consultation, April 2021
The Sutton Trust	Website	https://www.suttontrust.com/about-us/	Including archived versions from 18 Oct 2000-9 Oct 2021, accessed via web.archive.org
The Sutton Trust	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2014-2018
The Sutton Trust	Impact Report	Published on organisation website	Student Destinations, 2006-2016
The Sutton Trust	Select Committee Submission	Published on organisation website	Sutton Trust submission to the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee on Social Mobility and Education and Access to the Professions
The Sutton Trust	Research report	Published on organisation website	Blair's Education: an international perspective, June 2007
Universify Education	Website	https://universifyeducation.com/	Current site only
Universify Education	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2017-2018

Universify Education	Annual Report	Published on organisation website	2017-18
UpReach	Website	http://upreach.org.uk/index.php/	Including archived versions from 4 Oct 2012-6 Oct 2021, accessed via web.archive.org
UpReach	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2015-2018
UpReach	Impact Report	Published on organisation website	2016-2018
Villiers Park Educational Trust	Website	https://www.villierspark.org.uk/	Including archived versions from 22 Aug 2002-17 Jun 2021, accessed via web.archive.org
Villiers Park Educational Trust	Annual Accounts	As submitted to the Charity Commission	2014-2018
Villiers Park Educational Trust	Impact Report	Published on organisation website	2017; 2019
Villiers Park Educational Trust	Funder's Report	Published on organisation website	The Baring Foundation. Activities Report 2007.

Appendix vii: Interview schedule (TSWPO)

The following interview guide was used with staff within TSWPOs, with some variation according to their roles and responsibilities. For example, questions about the financial and governance structure of the organisation were used less with delivery and policy roles.

Interview topic guide - TSOs

To explore how third sector organisations (TSOs) concerned with widening participation in higher education are influencing policy and practice, specifically looking at:

- *How and in what ways they are shaping policy and practice in relation to higher education access and success, both at national level and in local contexts (e.g. specific HEIs, Opportunity Areas, nationally funded outreach programmes)? What are the implications of this for the project of widening participation?*
- *How and in what ways do TSOs involvement in national policy formation, and in the delivery of state and university-funded widening participation interventions, impact on their status as charitable organisations?*

Housekeeping

- Thank you
- Confirmation of timing (expecting any interruptions? Any time restrictions to be aware of?)
- Check consent received and understood – clarify position on anonymity and withdrawal (If you decide after the interview that you want to withdraw, you have 2 weeks in which to contact me. Also if you have any questions at any point, feel free to get in touch)
- Any preferred reference within research (I.e. job title or position)
- Outline interview process – this interview is part of my PhD research looking at the role of third sector organisations in widening participation policy and practice. I have a series of prompts for our discussion but it's relatively freeform and I'm expecting it to be around an hour. I may ask questions which seem quite obvious but sometimes need to be articulated – feel free to point me to resources elsewhere if needed.
- Clarify what I mean by 'widening participation' and 'TSO' if needed.
- Any further questions? Happy to start recording?

Schedule

Question	Prompts/Notes	Purpose
Background – Interviewee (5 mins)		
Tell me about your current role and how you came to work in this area?	*Have you previously worked in widening participation/the third sector?* *Which other roles do you work most closely with within the organisation?*	Starter, identifies any areas for probing later, useful for describing role
Background – Organisation mission and purpose (15 mins)		
Tell me about [TSO] – your overall purpose, your activities and your history as an organisation.	*How long has the organisation been running?* *Have you always been the same in terms of mission, what you deliver or structure?* *How long have you personally been at the organisation?*	Understanding how they describe their work – open question, should be limited scaffolding in terms of language and probing

	How would you describe your organisation to someone who had never heard of you?	
Why does [TSO] exist? What would need to change for [TSO] not to be needed?		What is their framing of the problem (not in a policy influence context)
What has shaped your purpose as an organisation? What drives what you do as an organisation?		More depth on social purpose/problem framing – do they identify influences at this point? Are they internal/external to the org?
Do you feel that [TSO] has influenced *widening participation* policy or practice since you began? In what ways? What field/fields of policy are you working within?	*If not widening participation policy/practice, are there other areas of policy/practice you think you have influenced?* *Expand to education and/or social mobility policy if helpful* *What do you think you are doing/have done that changes the way WP or social mobility is done or understood?* *Is there anything about the way you work as an organisation that shapes what you can do to influence WP?*	Setting context of conversation to come back to in the following detail questions. Identify points for probing later. Establish whether they feel they fit as a WP org or otherwise.
Taken from the national survey of charities and social enterprises (5 point scale) - Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your ability to influence government decisions that are relevant to your organisation? - To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: local statutory bodies in your local area involve your organisation appropriately in developing and carrying out policy on issues which affect you? - To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: local statutory bodies consult your organisation on issues which affect you or are of interest to you?		
What compromises do you have to make as an organisation to be able to deliver your		

mission? What would you like to be able to do differently?		
Organisation – work, structure and identity (15 mins)		
What is it you actually do/deliver as an organisation?/ What are your organisations main activities? i.e. Delivery/research/funding?	*Why these activities?* *Has this changed over time?* *Has how you deliver any of these things changed?* *What is your 'unit of currency'? The main thing you produce or trade on as an organisation to achieve your objectives?* *What aspect(s) of what you deliver are essential to your organisation?* *How do these relate to your mission?*	For context, also to identify specific policy or practice influence activities
Do you see it as your organisation's role to influence policy?	*Why or why not?* *How does this compare to your other activities?*	Background for later questions, brings the focus back to policy, may bring out more examples/context from the above
How do you define yourselves as an organisation? i.e. I've suggested that you fit within the 'third sector' but do you consider yourselves a charity, a social enterprise, a business, a think tank etc.	*What other organisations do you think you are most similar to?* *If they identify a label, why this, why not others?* *What characteristics of that organisation type are important to your organisation?* *Have you ever considered changing to a different organisational structure?*	Positioning vis a vis the sector – either as a TSO or WP org
Is being a registered charity important to your organisation?	*In what ways?* *Why or why not?*	
(CEOs/Trustees only) Can you tell me about how you generate income as an organisation?	*Has that changed over time?* *Do you see that changing?* *Does that affect you as an organisation?*	
(CEOs/Trustees only) What is your structure in terms of strategy/decision making/governance?	*Has that changed?* *Do you see that changing?* *Does that affect you as an organisation?*	
Who are your stakeholders as an organisation? Is that a term you would use?	*Do those stakeholders feed into/influence your work directly?*	Understand relationship with those involved with their work. Who are they working for?
Is there anything distinctive about you as an organisation?	*How does this affect how you work?*	
About TSO – relationship to the sector(s) (10 mins)		
What sector or sectors do you consider [TSO] to be part of?	*Why?*	

	What does that mean for you as an organisation?	
Who do you work with and why?		
How do you work with other organisations also working on widening participation?	*Funding relationship? Partnerships – NCOP? Shared policy work? Lobbying? Co-delivery?*	
What do you see as the most important relationships for you as an organisation?	*Why?*	
Who do you think are the most influential organisations in widening participation?	*Why? Why do you/don't you count yourselves as amongst the most influential?*	
How do you think widening participation has changed in the past 5 years?		Do they identify policy or practice, how do they relate their organisation's role to those changes? Who are the important players? Opportunity to focus more on practice.
Policy Specific (10 mins)		
What policies or initiatives (local or national) have been most influential on [TSO] as an organisation? How and why?	*Change to 5 year APPs*	Expanding out from WP potentially, also identifies what policy is deemed most pertinent and the extent to which they are aware of different policies. May identify which organisations they work with, which branches of government
Same question, but specifically for your role – What policies or initiatives have been most influential on your role? How and why?		Opportunity to get more specific
What, if anything, have you and/or your organisation done to influence policy and policy making? Can be at an institutional, local or national scale.	*What do you feel has been most effective? Is there anything you would/wouldn't do again? Is there anything you plan on doing in future? How does this work rank in relation to your other priorities?*	
What policy changes would you want to see? What would support your organisation? What would most support your mission?		
Summarising/Clarifying (5 mins)		

What are the biggest challenges facing you as an organisation? Have these changed?		
What do you feel are the biggest issues in WP at the moment? How does [TSO] play a role in that? Is there anything we have discussed that you would like to go back to or clarify?		
Is there anyone you recommend I speak to?		

The themes in the interview guide in appendix vii were used as the basis for developing questions for policy experts. Individual schedules that took account of previous engagement with TSWPOs and professional roles were used for each interviewee. Below is an example of that used for the former Director for Fair Access.

Interview topic guide

To explore how third sector organisations (TSOs) concerned with widening participation in higher education are influencing policy and practice, specifically looking at:

- *How and in what ways they are shaping policy and practice in relation to higher education access and success, both at national level and in local contexts (e.g. specific HEIs, Opportunity Areas, nationally funded outreach programmes)? What are the implications of this for the project of widening participation?*
- *How and in what ways do TSOs involvement in national policy formation, and in the delivery of state and university-funded widening participation interventions, impact on their status as charitable organisations?*

Housekeeping

Thank you for agreeing to speak to me.

So just to confirm a few things before we get started – this interview is part of my PhD research looking at the role of third sector organisations in widening participation policy and practice. I have a series of prompts for our discussion but it's relatively freeform and I'm expecting it to be around an hour in total. If at any point you want to stop either the recording or the interview that's absolutely fine, just let me know.

If you decide after the interview that you want to withdraw, you have 2 weeks in which to contact me. Also, if you have any questions at any point, feel free to get in touch.

I've mentioned in the consent that I'll be using names and job titles – what is your current job title/role and are you happy with me using that?

So, before we get started is there anything you want to know?

Great, I'm going to start the recording.

Shared topic guide

- Your professional and personal involvement with widening participation work in England, particularly in relation to third sector organisations
- What ways, if any, you feel that third sector organisations are shaping or have shaped widening participation
- What third sector organisations in WP have done or are doing (or potentially should be doing) to engage with policy and the policy making process

Contextualisation

So obviously I am aware of your role as the Director of Fair Access, having seen that from a university perspective, but obviously prior to that you had a long career in universities and as a vice chancellor and are also now still working so to provide a bit of context, would you mind telling me, as concisely

as you can (!) a bit about what your involvement has been in 'widening participation' or 'widening access' work and policy in the UK?

Prompts: timeline? And currently you are..?

Understanding TSOs in policy

My research is specifically looking at the role of third sector organisations in widening participation and especially where they have influenced policy and practice so…

*terminology check? What do you understand by third sector? By WP?

How did third sector orgs interact with OFFA?

- When did you first become aware of third sector organisations working on widening participation goals? / What was your first engagement with third sector orgs?
- You became Director of Fair Access in 2012, by which point there were a number of third sector organisations involved in WP, some of which had been referenced by your predecessor, particularly in relation to Highly Selective Universities. What was your involvement with them in the early stages of your role?
- How did you become aware of TSOs? Did you encounter them regularly?

What was the role of the third sector from OFFA's perspective?

- What was your sense, as Director of Fair Access, of the role that the third sector could play in WP? Is it different for different orgs?
- To what extent were TSOs seen as part of the 'landscape' of WP?
- Obviously TSOs were not part of the 'remit' for OFFA to carry out its duties but, did you engage with them directly in any ways? Or did they attempt to engage with you?
- I am aware you spoke at a number of third sector conferences, amongst many others of course, was that substantially different from other speaking engagements and was there any particular thought process behind speaking at those forums and not others?
- There was some collaboration between OFFA and TSOs during its lifetime e.g. Sutton Trust and OFFA on evaluation. Were there others and what prompted these?
- I know you personally attended a number of events led by TSOs like IntoUniversity and the Brilliant Club. Was that something you saw as part of your role?
- Many of the TSOs that OFFA engaged with publicly were those focusing on highly selective universities, which obviously was part of your remit. Was that a conscious decision?

Who is influencing policy and how?

- In your role, did you come across any 'third sector organisations' that you feel were or are explicitly trying to influence widening participation? <u>In what ways?</u>
- Which orgs would you pick out as being influential in WP and why? Which TSOs?
- What do you think makes an org successful?
- What areas of WP practice and policy do you think TSOs *can* influence?
- We have primarily talked about organisations but who are the influential individuals? Can individuals do different things to organisations?
- How do you see the influence of third sector organisations say relative to universities or other sector bodies like the RG, UUK or even say HEFCE, as was, or OFFA?

- From OFFA, you perhaps had more of an overview of the sector. Did you notice differences in either which universities were engaging with TSOs or the type of TSOs and activities they engaged with?

Personal perspectives on TSOs

- There have been a number of orgs that have emerged in the past 10 years – why do you think that is?
- I understand you are currently a trustee of Villier's Park and are now involved with NEON I believe? As a trustee or board member, do you have any particular feeling about how and if charities should be involved in trying to influence widening participation policy?
- TSOs have often been cited as examples of good practice in WP. Do you think that they have an advantage on universities in terms of their activities and impact? What is it you see them as doing well?
- From your experience, do you believe that there is anything unique about the policy 'space' of WP? (i.e. as opposed to other policy areas)

Summarising

- So, when I first approached you to talk about my research, is there anything you thought we would be discussing that we haven't?
- Is there anyone else you think I should talk to?

The following consent form was used for those within TSWPOs or where anonymity was requested by the interviewee. In addition, a discussion about the limits of anonymity took place at the start of each interview.

INTERVIEW - CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF RESEARCH STUDY: The Third Sector in Widening Participation Policy and Practice

Please answer the following questions by ticking the response that applies

		YES	NO
1.	I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had details of the study explained to me.	☐	☐
2.	My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any point.	☐	☐
3.	I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet, without giving a reason for my withdrawal or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher.	☐	☐
4.	I agree that the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised, may be used in subsequent publications derived from this research project.	☐	☐
5.	I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐
6.	I wish to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐

Participant's signature: _____

Date: _____

Participant's name (Printed):
Contact details:
Researcher's name (Printed):
Researcher's signature:

Researcher's contact details:

The following consent form was used for policy experts, particularly where guaranteeing anonymity was unrealistic given the topics of discussion and the uniqueness of their professional or personal histories.

INTERVIEW - CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF RESEARCH STUDY: The Third Sector in Widening Participation Policy and Practice

Please answer the following questions by ticking the response that applies

		YES	NO
7.	I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had details of the study explained to me.	☐	☐
8.	My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any point.	☐	☐
9.	I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet, without giving a reason for my withdrawal or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher.	☐	☐
10.	I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐
11.	I wish to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐
12.	I agree that the information collected for the purposes of this research study, may be used in subsequent publications derived from this research project.	☐	☐
13.	I agree that my name, job title and place of work may be identified in the final report and waive the right to anonymity for the purposes of this research.	☐	☐

Participant's signature: _____

Date: _____

Participant's name (Printed): _____

Contact details: _____

Researcher's name (Printed): _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Researcher's contact details: _____

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

RESEARCH STUDY: The Third Sector in Widening Participation Policy and Practice

Context

My research aims to understand how 'third sector' organisations contribute to and respond to widening participation **policy and practice** in England. It will contribute to understanding how widening participation policy is developed, understood and enacted in an under-researched part of the policy and practice landscape. As part of this research, I am interviewing key postholders in 4-6 'third sector' organisations focusing on widening participation in higher education, alongside sector policy experts and policy makers. This research forms part of a PhD and has been approved by Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Board.

Participation

I am inviting you to take part in a 1-1 interview, lasting around 1 hour, which can be arranged by phone or video call – whichever is your preference. I will ask you about your experiences of widening participation policy and practice, particularly in relation to third sector organisation involvement. An outline of interview themes will be sent to you before the scheduled interview. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed by me, with the recording, transcript and any associated research data held in restricted access secure storage by Sheffield Hallam University.

Anonymity and confidentiality

Given the small scale of the sector and the uniqueness of roles and organisations within it, there are some challenges in guaranteeing complete anonymity of sector experts without diminishing their contribution. However, it is at your discretion as to whether you would prefer to remain anonymous or agree that the interview is 'on the record'. There are also options for you to state during the interview if there are comments you would prefer not to be attributed to you. If you are speaking in your capacity as an employee or trustee of a third sector organisation, this can be more easily anonymised and it is my intention to do this within the thesis wherever possible. Organisations and individuals will be identified by generic job titles and organisation descriptors (e.g. Programme manager, small social enterprise) and the content of interviews will be analysed thematically, meaning that it should not be possible for your role or organisation to be identifiable. Two versions of the consent form outlining broad 'anonymous' and 'on the record' options are included below. In either case, your personal

details, excepting name, job role and organisation, will not be shared. If you have any concerns about this, please do discuss this with me.

Your rights

You may decide to stop participating in the session at any time without having to provide an explanation. You have the right to ask for anything you have said to be removed from the record of the session and to refuse to answer any question that is asked of you. You can decide not to have the interview digitally recorded. You also have the right to withdraw from the study altogether up to 14 days after the interview by emailing me.

Further information and contacts

For further information regarding this research please contact me at ruth.squire@student.shu.ac.uk or my Doctoral Supervisor, Professor Colin McCaig at c.mccaig@shu.ac.uk.

The University undertakes research as part of its function for the community under its legal status. Data protection allows us to use personal data for research with appropriate safeguards in place under the legal basis of **public tasks that are in the public interest.** A full statement of your rights can be found at https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notices/privacy-notice-for-research.

All University research is reviewed to ensure that participants are treated appropriately and their rights respected. This study was approved by UREC with Converis number ER11211778. Further information at https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/ethics-integrity-and-practice.

You should contact the Data Protection Officer (DPO@shu.ac.uk) if:
- you have a query about how your data is used by the University
- you would like to report a data security breach (eg if you think your personal data has been lost or disclosed inappropriately)
- you would like to complain about how the University has used your personal data

You should contact Professor Ann Macaskill, Head of Research Ethics (a.macaskill@shu.ac.uk) if:
- you have concerns with how the research was undertaken or how you were treated