

Counting the costs? The weight of administrative burden in widening participation

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Counting the costs? The weight of administrative burden in widening participation

Jessica Benson-Egglenton, Manuel Madriaga, Jon Rainford

Abstract

Administrative burden theory, emerging from public administration research, centres individuals' subjective experiences of policy implementation as onerous. Its applicability to higher education studies, particularly in the United Kingdom context, has driven our intellectual curiosity. As former widening participation (WP) practitioners and evaluators, we conducted a collective inquiry into the costs of this work, sharing and analysing our experiences through the lens of administrative burden. Our analysis foregrounds three dimensions of cost - learning, compliance, and psychological - surfacing how efforts to make higher education accessible and inclusive to marginalised groups generate significant burdens that remain under-examined, particularly the psychological and emotional labour involved. Through our collective autoethnographic accounts, we identified commonalities amidst our varied experiences highlighting the extent of performativity and opacity characterising widening participation policy enactment. We conclude by arguing that administrative burden offers a valuable conceptual framework for analysing not only WP but other areas of higher education policy where practitioners navigate complex, often contradictory, institutional demands.

Key words: access, widening participation policy, higher education, equality

Introduction

Administrative burden is a concept that feels familiar to us. Most people encounter administrative burdens in their everyday lives, in routine encounters with the state: paying their tax bill; applying for childcare funding; renewing a passport. Those working in higher education face particular sets of burdens in meeting ever-expanding policy and regulatory demands that require us to spend significant time accounting for ourselves (Ball, 2012). Yet, while all of us face administrative burdens, these burdens are not experienced equally. Paradoxically, it is those most in need of additional resources that face the greatest barriers to accessing them; an administrative burden catch-22 (Herd et al., 2023).

Understanding this paradox requires examining where these burdens originate – and who creates them. Research into the administrative burden - understood as an individual's experience of policy implementation as onerous (Burden et al., 2012) - has expanded considerably in recent years, primarily within public administration and policy fields, with growing interdisciplinary contributions (Daigneault, 2025). Yet, the issue of administrative burden within higher education studies in general has been 'relatively scant' (Woelert 2023, 409). To address this paucity in knowledge, we examine the issue of administrative burden in UK higher education (HE) with specific attention to the work of widening participation.

Widening participation has been an enduring policy response to address under-representation in HE. The 'non-traditional' student emerged as a category within WP discourses, with particular connotations to social class, race, gender, and disability (Harrison and McCaig, 2014; Hunter, Hewings and Suddards, 2018; Madriaga et al. 2010; Madriaga, 2023). Thus, WP is a targeted rather than universal policy; it is not for everyone. While national policy provides a steer, the work of interpreting and translating this targeted policy into local settings is done by policy actors in HE institutions, who must decide how to allocate limited resources (Benson-Egginton, 2022). This local steer is often shaped by institutional needs and can be shifted to align better with institutions' existing goals (Rainford, 2017). This work of translating and interpreting national WP policy into enactment spurred us to reflect on our own experiences, our uncertainties, our anxieties as WP practitioners. This led us to question the extent of administrative burden we endured as practitioners and those communities we worked with, which is the purpose of this paper.

We began this study by reflecting on the emotional costs of being a widening participation practitioner. WP practitioners do 'good work', often driven by a desire to reduce social inequalities, sometimes to the point of transgressing official policy to better align with personal values (Rainford, 2021). To varying degrees, they have administrative discretion in delivering and distributing Office for Students' 'state' resources. In this sense, they function as 'street level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980), whose decision-making - perhaps unwittingly - imposes administrative burdens on others, including schools, families, and young people.

As co-authors, we amassed extensive experience over many years in roles related to WP in UK universities, alongside our own empirical research on WP. Together, this provides a rich evidence base to explore how administrative burden has manifested within widening participation practice, using these experiences as a lens to explore the value for further, in-depth exploration of administrative burden in UK higher education. Drawing on our own experiences of working across varied WP roles, we reflected on encounters with administrative burden; both those we were subjected to and ways we have been complicit in inflicting admin burden upon others. Taking Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey's (2014) conceptualisation of admin burden as constituted by learning, compliance and psychological costs, we analyse these reflective pieces collectively to further understanding of the administrative burdens operating in widening participation to address the research question: what role does administrative burden play in widening participation practice?

Theoretical framing

While the implementation of widening participation policy ensured capacity and resource throughout the sector, it also brought compliance, accountability, and administration. It is the latter phenomenon which is being magnified here as there are costs and burdens in this work, which impact both students and staff. Moynihan et al.'s (2014) notion of administrative burden is helpful here in reflecting upon these costs. They introduced three components of administrative burden: (1) learning; (2) compliance; and (3) psychological (Moynihan et al. 2014, 46). In the case of accessing WP activities, students, for instance, must *learn* about widening participation and determine whether they are eligible. Students must also complete the necessary forms and documentation of their standing to participate in activities in the spirit of *compliance*. In the *learning* and *complying*, there will also be *psychological* costs: administrative practices can be stigmatising and create a loss of autonomy (Moynihan et al., 2014, 49). These different components also intersect and overlap so that an action may have more than one cost associated with it.

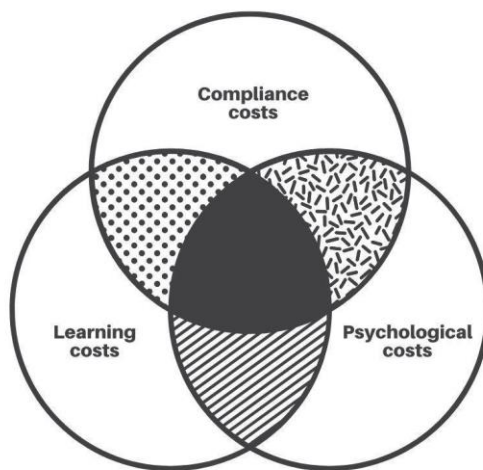


Fig.1 - overlapping costs of administrative burden

Ball's (2003, 216) development of the concept of performativity, defined as 'a technology, culture and mode of regulation' intersects productively with administrative burden. Performativity's regulatory dimension clearly speaks to compliance costs, while the guilt and pride that performance information can engender relate to psychological costs. Ball argues that these seemingly objective performance measures, designed to increase transparency, can actually make things more opaque. Drawing on Shore and Wright (1999, cited in Ball, 2003), he concludes that this opacity is maintained by design.

Methodological approach

To examine the extent of administrative burden in carrying out WP work, this paper draws together the experiences of three researchers who have worked as practitioners within HE. Jon, as a widening participation officer and later manager. Jess, as a widening participation evaluator, and Manny, as a researcher within a widening participation policy unit in a teaching-intensive university. All three authors have been situated in the third-space (Whitchurch, 2008) at points in their careers and these reflections traverse the boundaries of research and practice. Whitchurch and Healey (2024) have argued that the third space is one that is elusive and hard to categorise but is often adopted by those working in widening participation, learning development and community engagement. These are often spaces inhabited by academically highly-qualified staff who occupy roles designated as professional services or academic-related.

Taking a collective autoethnographic approach (Chang et al. 2012), the authors constructed a reflection based upon their own work within HE and the ways in which administrative burden has presented itself in both their research and practice. Collective autoethnography was selected as it offered a rigorous way to identify points of connection and disconnection within our extensive professional experiences. Whilst other approaches could have been adopted, this autoethnographic approach allowed us to collectively analyse our experience and consider what this might reveal about administrative burdens - not as a fully realised answer to the research question, but as a means of exploring this under researched concept and establishing a basis for further research.

To conduct this study, each of the authors wrote a vignette of around 750 words reflecting on their experiences of administrative burden during their professional career in HE. We approached this as a reflective task, focusing on the notion of administrative burdens but without any specific framing of how this should be approached to allow each author to foreground how they experienced the concept across their careers. We each read these initial vignettes independently before collectively discussing them, noting initial points of comparison and divergence. The divergence between our experiences matter as it demonstrates how varied our administrative burdens were under the banner of WP, particularly in weighing-up discourses around gender with Jess, disability with Manny, and social class with Jon. As we collectively read each account, we reflected upon our administrative burdens of implementing and evaluating WP initiatives to specific categories of young people. Given the significance of our varied experiences, we have presented our own accounts as vignettes below (Doharty et al. 2021). Where relevant, these draw on targeted revisiting of material from the authors' prior interview data prompted by the concept of administrative burden, rather than a full re-analysis or new coding of the dataset. These vignettes enable us to bring to life our administrative burdens having worked in WP. We regularly met online after sharing our initial vignettes to make sense of our experiences, our data. Informed by Braun and Clarke's (2024) reflexive thematic analysis, we upheld our reflexivity as researchers, taking a latent approach in coding each of our reflections for elements of (1) learning; (2) compliance; and (3) psychological costs. We each independently coded the three vignettes against these three elements before collectively

discussing and reconciling any differences. This iterative process of coding and discussion helped to ensure the robustness of the analysis. Finally, each author took one of these themes to draw together the initial analysis for collaborative discussion.

Experiences of administrative burdens

Jess: Reflecting on 'Balance' and the Black Box of WP Selection

I came to widening participation work as an evaluator, rather than a practitioner. From 2009-2020 I worked across three London-based institutions which shared a position of admissions selectivity common to 'pre-92' universities.¹ Looking back, I have wondered if working in roles of this kind, where you are more often than not dealing with numbers, can make you more susceptible to becoming distanced from the people that WP aims to serve. Working with spreadsheets and dashboards of performance metrics, it can be easy to lose sight of the holistic, complex individuals who become fragmented into disconnected data points. Moving from evaluation roles within WP teams to research examining WP and education inequalities has given me space to reflect on my own complicity in these processes of distancing.

In these kinds of institutional contexts, applications to WP outreach programmes can reflect the competitiveness of admissions. Among more intensive programmes for older year groups, in particular, there can be much greater demand than places available. In response to this, WP teams tend to employ complicated points-based systems for sifting applications. Alongside this point score based on 'WP criteria', young people are usually required to meet an attainment threshold – strong GCSE performance and, often, that they are 'on track' to achieve high grades at A-level.

In general, selection processes for outreach programmes operate as a 'black box' for the individuals applying. HEIs publish eligibility criteria and may even indicate that some are weighted higher than others, or that those meeting more criteria are more likely to be offered a place but, in my experience, it is not possible for a young person to work out their score or what a score would mean for their chances of success.

My direct role in informing these selection rationales was the beginning of my preoccupation with who is positioned as the target of WP and the implications of doing so. In 2020, I interviewed nineteen WP practitioners who were working in various roles and institutional contexts across England, about their experiences and understandings of targeting (Benson-

¹ One of these was a small specialist performing arts institution so while not selective in terms of prior attainment, it was highly selective in its own right.

Eggleton, 2022). Thinking with the concept of administrative burden brought back into focus something I recall clearly from having conducted that research, and from my own time in WP roles: how often the notion of 'balance' surfaced, particularly among those working in higher status institutions. Balance is a phrase that sits easily with the language of fairness and representation and is a term I would have used myself many times working in WP. Despite being well-intentioned, attempts at achieving balance create an additional, invisible layer of selection.

Practitioners spoke about needing to 'balance cohorts' across various characteristics, for example one WP officer who told me: 'We want the balance of students from different schools, we want the balance of genders, we want the balance of ethnicities'. The most common dimension I've encountered in relation to balance talk, in both my research and time as an embedded evaluator, is gender. Except for a small proportion of programmes aimed exclusively at boys or girls, gender is rarely an advertised eligibility criteria. Yet, responding to an under-representation of boys in HE and in applications to many outreach programmes, a balancing of cohorts toward boys shapes selection decisions behind the scenes. This balancing is not conceptualised as targeting proper. Rather, as one practitioner phrased it, that team's 'sometimes engineer that a bit'.

Another practitioner described what an institutional commitment to a 50/50 gender split looked like in practice. Describing a programme that would typically receive 600 applications for 100 places: 'we normally get four applications from girls for every one application we get for a boy... so you're going to hit a lot less of our eligibility criteria for a boy and still get a place on our programme.' Or, as a practitioner in a different institution more bluntly put it: 'if you're a boy and you've got a pulse, you're going to get placed'. There was at least one example of this disadvantage compounding at the intersection of gender and race, where Asian young women who met multiple WP indicators and attainment criteria were squeezed out by 'balance' concerns: effectively penalised for being in a group that was 'too successful' at meeting the entry requirements.

Jon: What do we say when we make the choice not to target individuals?

I started in WP as an outreach officer in a large post-92 university in 2014. It immediately struck me how transformational this work can be. As my career developed, the tensions within this work became as prominent as the positives. In retrospect this wasn't my first experience of the tensions of WP. On my first teacher training placement in 2010, I was introduced to the form group I was shadowing and informed that some students were absent because they were in 'the AimHigher group'. I asked what that meant. Casually the teacher replied 'oh, they are the ones we expect to go to university'. This made me wonder what that meant for the others. Whilst a targeted approach seems sensible, this act of framing some students as eligible for an initiative

had shifted in what the teacher was saying to being about their futures compared to the rest. AimHigher ended in 2012, yet this framing of the students who are deemed 'worthy' of the opportunities to consider university still endures due to limited resourcing.

Once those students are engaged in an outreach intervention, the way in which practitioners engage with those young people also matters. Higher education is a highly-marketised field, yet how those market logics are internalised and replicated by practitioners differs. There are two extremes, either practitioners believe their employer is the 'best' place for the students they work with, or they might promote aiming as high as you can. Both positions neglect to consider the aspirations of individual students. In a session, being delivered by a colleague, I once overheard them say to a young person 'Of course you'd go to a Russell group if you could'. This remark, rooted in understandings of symbolic capital of university degrees and prestige, whilst potentially well-meant and aspirational, positioned other young people in the room - for whom that post-92 was the best destination - as in deficit.

From 2014-19 I conducted a PhD to explore these differences between policy and practice, analysing access agreements (the precursor to access and participation plans (APPs) we have now) and interviewing practitioners in both pre and post-92 universities. Here I realised that I was not the only one that saw the importance of the individual needs in the enterprise of widening participation. One participant told me 'I think sometimes, I do come across WP students who I think, do you know what? I wonder, you know university is great, but I wonder if university is the right route for you. You know, would you be better suited to doing a fabulous apprenticeship'. In my previous work (Rainford, 2019;2023) I argue that some practitioners can position themselves transgressively, that is adopting a position that deviates from institutional policy. However, for some practitioners, employment relationships constrained this. For others it was lack of knowledge of other contexts that constrained it. Despite this, other practitioners were more pragmatic and used the fuzziness of policy to find work arounds to best support individuals. For one practitioner who adopted a more rebellious position, this quote encapsulated their approach: 'I don't always fit with the institutional line, and there's been times occasionally I've been told 'don't say that in public again because that doesn't really fit with what the sector's trying to do'. My job is not to make every young person want to go to university but it's about making sure that they are aware of all the range of options at every stage in their life'.

On another occasion, I went to visit a school that was thankful I had come as their previous university partner had decided they were no longer 'deprived enough' to be a target school. The metrics for deciding eligibility, POLAR at the time, has been updated and this school now fell into a higher quintile. What this quantification missed was that the school's postcode, and the students' postcodes were very different. So, whilst the school's area had high levels of progression to HE, the young people still came from an area of low progression. Their objective circumstances had not changed, but the metrics had. On paper, the previous university had made a reasonable decision of how to channel its resources, but it omitted to understand the messiness and complexity of the individual circumstances of learners. Practitioners in my PhD study also talked about similar challenges of targeting. In one of my post-92 study sites, a practitioner said 'In terms of what we are doing for the young people we are working with, I think

what we are doing is fine. So, we give them advice and support but it's probably actually more what we are not doing for them, for the young people we're not actually working with'.

Manny: Burdens dehumanise both staff and students

In my earlier WP work with disabled students, I uncovered burdens that map onto Moynihan et al.'s (2014) framework (Madriaga et al. 2010). Disabled people interested in pursuing HE often lack awareness of the support mechanisms available (Madriaga and Goodley 2010). There is a learning burden for disabled people to search and understand the support given for university study and the application process to receive it. To ensure equal access to learning, teaching, and assessment, disabled students must disclose their impairment to their respective university, completing necessary forms. In addition to this act of compliance, disabled students must gather the necessary medical evidence to justify resource and support to gain some sense of equity in engaging in their learning (Nieminen 2023; Tai, Ajjawi, and Umarova 2021). There is a psychological cost to this process, as discussed with a colleague on the topic of inclusive university assessments (Castillo-Montoya and Madriaga 2025, 595), 'There is emotional labour and mental anguish in having to disclose a condition to others. It is, as if, disclosure is an act of submission to categorizations of "not normal".'

Having worked within student services, in particular disabled student support, early in my career, I am aware of the burdens placed upon university staff particularly those working alongside disabled students. Constant policy and government funding changes required new learning and methods of compliance. Moreover, our team had to constantly weigh-up interpretations of disability legislation, particularly the Equality Act (2010), as it pertains to disabled students to ensure the university is making 'reasonable adjustments' towards equal access to learning and assessment. University teachers had agency and discretion in how they interpret 'reasonable adjustments.' For me, there was always a question as to whether teaching colleagues had knowledge of disability legislation, particularly when they perceived extra support as unfair or expressed deficit-oriented comments about disabled students. I am happy to have worked with others to raise awareness of the attitudinal barriers and discrimination encountered by disabled students (see Madriaga and Goodley 2010). It was here where I learned first-hand that WP is not only about access; it is also about retention and success.

The introduction of APPs with the Higher Education Act (2017) married the compliance regimes of WP and fair access, calling for universities to constantly work towards improving equality of opportunity for students from underrepresented groups. This policy change brought administrative burdens upon universities, shifting resources, restructuring organisations, moving WP work to admission offices with contextual offers, and equality, diversity, and inclusion offices to ensure oversight of APPs.

It is this shift where WP workers have been burdened with new learning such as grasping principles of theory of change, developing logic models inclusive of data drawn from quasi-experimental research designs. Amidst this change, there have been psychological costs. For

students, this change has homogenised them into one category of 'students from underrepresented groups'. Discourses of inclusive pedagogies which were initially applicable to disabled students have been mapped on to other groups of students in university APPs (Madriaga 2020). Diversity of student experiences go misrecognised. Inclusion has become a catch-all antidote without highlighting the dehumanising processes perpetuating inequity within higher education (Castillo-Montoya and Madriaga 2025).

WP workers have recognised such dehumanising processes in widening access policy in which some groups of marginalised communities are recognised and others are not (Madriaga 2025). Reflecting upon previous work, I recall a respondent 'Jackie' who was committed to the 'good work' of WP (Rainford 2019) and sought out ways to engage with the local Gypsy Roma Traveler community. This ethnic group has been historically marginalised from UK higher education (Myers 2018), however ethnicity was not recognised by WP policy (see Higher Education Act 2017). There was a psychological burden for Jackie to weigh-up resources and compliance demands. She eventually found a way forward but it had taken up a lot of her own energy to ensure WP resources were directed toward this particular community (Madriaga 2025, 1840).

Commonality of burdens

We reflect upon our experiences here to both illustrate the applicability of administrative burden theory, and to make sense of the varied burdens we, alongside others, endured in interpreting and implementing WP policy. This collective analysis weaves our reflections together (Doharty et al. 2021; Wang et al. 2012) foregrounding the tensions and ambiguities characterising our work. While the different dimensions of administrative burden often overlap, as captured in Figure 1, we attempt the necessarily imperfect work of untangling learning, compliance, and psychological costs, presenting analysis of each separately.

Learning costs

Looking across the three reflections, some learning costs are more immediately evident than others. In both Manny and Jon's vignettes, a lack of awareness of available support emerges as a learning burden. For some disabled students, an initial learning step is recognising that they have a disability after arriving at university. They must then familiarise themselves with not only institutional support systems, but also their legal rights and how to advocate for themselves. As Manny's vignette illustrates, they cannot assume that staff they encounter will have knowledge of disability legislation or share an understanding of what 'reasonable adjustments' means, given the discretion teachers have in interpreting this. In Jon's vignette, the selective provision of HE advice to young people positioned as future university students creates an asymmetry of awareness between young people in the same school year group.

Once students become aware that programmes of support exist, they face the burden of decoding eligibility criteria. As Jess' reflection highlights, eligibility criteria can involve complex,

points-based systems that take into account a range of different factors, some relatively straightforward for a young person or their family to gauge (e.g. state school attendance), some more challenging (e.g. having ever been eligible for free school meals), and some impossible to determine (e.g. Acorn classification)². Eligibility criteria vary by institution and are not static, as different target groups move in and out of focus within WP policy. Even when a criteria remains constant, eligibility can change, as illustrated by Jon's example of the school rendered ineligible through the POLAR dataset update despite their pupils' circumstances remaining unchanged.

Beyond understanding formal eligibility, those navigating the administrative burdens of WP must develop knowledge of how to 'play the game'. In the context of limited resources, young people must learn the ways in which they 'tick the boxes' and understand how to present themselves in the right way to maximise their chances of success. In this sense, they must learn to create optimised versions of themselves, what Ball (2003) terms 'fabrications' – strategic representations produced for the purposes of being seen and judged. For practitioners, learning costs involve understanding the boundaries of discretion and where possibilities for transgression lie. Jon's reflection shows how experienced practitioners learn to use the 'fuzziness of policy' to find workarounds, while less confident practitioners may be more rigidly fixed to implementing systems they believe to be imperfect. Manny's example of Jackie working to engage the Gypsy, Roma and Traveler community - a group at the time unrecognised by government policy - illustrates how practitioners with greater knowledge and experience can identify routes to act in accordance with their values (although drawing on much personal energy to navigate).

However, knowledge of how to play the game can only go so far when elements remain opaque. In Jess' account, the full range of factors influencing selection processes are never fully visible to applicants. While HEIs publish eligibility criteria, it is not possible for a young person to work out their score or what it means for their chances. The practice of 'balancing' cohorts operates outside of young people's view, creating an impossible learning burden: no amount of research or effort can reveal rules that operate invisibly.

Compliance costs

The burden of compliance was present in all three vignettes of WP practitioners. Weighing our reflections, we see this burden impacting upon all those involved such as prospective university students, school teachers, and WP workers. As Jess described, there are duties to extract performance data for monitoring and evaluating intervention strategies. This is part of being compliant due to Government oversight. This regulatory requirement is to ensure Government resources are distributed as policy intended to the benefit of young people from particular

² Acorn is a proprietary geodemographic segmentation tool which, unlike with publicly accessible datasets like the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), does now allow non-subscribers to determine the classification of their postcode.

marginalized communities. The WP mission is to reduce barriers for young people to access HE. In carrying out this work within the parameters of compliance, practitioners have agency and discretion.

As Jess has observed in her work, practitioner discretion can lead to more burden, what she refers to as an additional, invisible layer of selection. There are already compliance costs placed upon practitioners and school teachers in identifying young people who can benefit from WP initiatives. Jess reflected upon practitioners weighing-up 'balance', particularly gender balance, in how WP cohorts were configured. This is problematic as it not only goes beyond the remit of policy, as gender is not WP criteria. It is also discriminatory, running counter to the ethos of the WP mission. There was no need to burden oneself in determining gender balance. More importantly, this invisible layer of selection is indicative of the 'opaque nature of administrative burdens' (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2014, 43).

In illustrating this opacity further, Jon's reflection on his work and research demonstrated how WP practitioners and schoolteachers conjured a notion of 'worthiness' in determining who can participate in activities when there are many who can benefit. It becomes a question of how best to spend resources and determine who is worthy to receive it. Like Jess' reflection, Jon's observation shows another invisible layer of burden, beyond the remit of compliance. There is already a compliance cost in identifying young people who can participate in outreach activities. But, for the practitioners he observed in his work, this move beyond compliance in determining who *really* is 'worthy' demonstrates scope of their agency and discretionary use of government-funded resources.

Conjuring 'balance' or 'worthiness' is an added-on cost to compliance which practitioners employ to determine best use of finite resources. Disabled students, as Manny has observed in his own work, must demonstrate their worthiness to receive additional learning support to ensure equal access to their university studies. To receive such support, they must endure compliance costs of disclosing their impairment to university and providing necessary medical evidence of their disability status. They must provide evidence that they are not a 'normal' university student which intertwines psychological costs in the act of compliance.

Psychological costs

Whilst the three vignettes are substantively very different, in terms of the psychological costs of this work, there are several recurring themes. In all three cases, these relate to the psychological costs for those involved in selection and the psychological costs for those who are potentially not chosen to benefit from work to widen access, success and progression.

If we start by considering the psychological costs for those involved in selection, Jon's reflection ends with a point about a practitioner's concerns about students who were missing out. This can be seen to overlap with Manny's discussion of the need of his teams to 'weigh up interpretations of disability legislation' and Jess' reflection on the ideas of balance and how this creates an invisible layer of selection. The psychological costs of knowing you are working within an

imperfect system, trying to do the best job possible whilst also knowing it is not enough, can result in cognitive dissonance where their values and ethics conflict with the choices they are required to enact. One way that practitioners can mitigate this is as Jon highlights, to work in a pragmatic way and go against the grain of institutional policy. In doing so, this can create new psychological costs of being 'found out' and having to justify why you have deviated from policy.

This psychological cost of doing the choosing is reflected in the psychological costs for those both being chosen and not being chosen for support. The three vignettes highlight the potential costs of disclosure. Manny clearly articulates this when he discusses the 'mental anguish of having to disclose a condition to others'. Within both Jess and Jon's reflections, these costs are less pronounced but clearly there. Jess talks about the 'black box' for participants applying for selective programmes. This means there can be little awareness of what makes the difference in acceptance, and thus a psychological burden in deciding how much or how little of their story to disclose. This, when viewed against an unequal society can put some individuals in a difficult bind. Having characteristics that result in societal marginalisation can make some individuals wary about sharing too much in fear that it might single them out. Of course, when we are thinking about targeting limited resources, it is precisely this information that is needed. The resultant psychological cost of this can also be seen as not being 'deserving' of support as opposed to the reality where there are limited resources to support more applicants than there are places for many interventions. Therefore, the psychological cost of not being selected can be conflated with higher education not being for them. This is shown in Jon's vignette, where he discusses the AimHigher group being framed as the young people who were 'going to university' and thus the rest of the cohort being seen as the ones who weren't.

Being reduced to a series of characteristics can also be dehumanising, as Manny highlights when discussing the homogenization of groups as 'underrepresented'. Within Jon's vignette, he tackles this idea of dehumanisation from a different angle, that of 'neglect to consider the wishes, dreams or aspirations of individual students. The focus of interventions that cater for policy 'success' over success as an individual might perceive it has huge psychological costs where an individual involved in an intervention is having their future plans framed as in deficit over progress to a top-tier university.

Conclusions

As this analysis of the various costs of administrative burden demonstrates, they are multiple, overlapping, and unequal. In a system defined by performativity, these costs often seem opaque. This opaque system involving the targeting and administering of limited resources has created a system which demands high levels of learning and compliance costs. Furthermore, as this lens has illuminated, there can be high psychological costs to this work. This is important as rarely does WP research explore the emotional labour and associated psychological costs of policy enactment, something this analysis has foregrounded. Therefore, this theoretical approach offers a novel way to examine work done under the broad umbrella of WP policy. This article contributes an important perspective to the literature, namely an understanding of how administrative burden is experienced in widening participation in UK higher education and

shines a light on some of the costs this creates. While our collective autoethnographic approach has foregrounded the ways in which this has been present in our own experiences, there is scope for more exploration. For instance, this work centred upon our experiences as practitioners and researchers, not as students or potential university applicants. Our standpoint in this work limits our perspectives and the weighing-up of our analysis of administrative burden. Both students and potential university applicants can offer alternative, additional insights on negotiating administrative burdens in accessing HE. Thus, this calls for further qualitative research to systematically explore how administrative burden manifests across the sector.

Whilst this article has applied the concept of administrative burden to one area of higher education policy, we argue that there is scope for using it to examine other areas, in particular quality assurance, or admissions where various costs of administrative burden seem opaque. These are also fertile areas for further research. This application of this lens to all areas of policy should be considered not simply as a critical form of analysis but as a productive way to understand costs that are often hidden, or dismissed as inconsequential (Moynihan et al., 2014). Through developing an understanding of the administrative burdens of enacting higher education policies, we hope our experiences as shared in this paper might also offer a pause for those who make and/or enact policy to consider the learning, compliance, and psychological costs associated with the policies they work with and how they might reduce these where they are impeding practice. Reflecting on ways forward, we end this article with some considerations for fellow practitioners:

- Ensure you have one or two colleagues, whether in the office, corridor, or online, with whom can share and reflect critically on your practice;
- Acknowledge that policy may be opaque and open to interpretation at both institutional and individual levels;
- Be aware that you have agency to interpret and enact policy in ways that enable you to do 'good work' (Rainford 2019);
- Appreciate that enacting policy in our work with students and prospective students can carry psychological costs, which in turn can emotionally impact us;
- Ensure you have colleagues with whom you can discuss and reflect upon the costs of administrative burden, particularly where these contribute to the dehumanising processes which students and applicants from disadvantaged groups may face when accessing HE.

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