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Michael Hedley
Northumbria University

Emily Parkin
Northumbria University

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REFLECTING ON STORIES OF PITFALLS AND PERSISTENCE

Michael Hedley, Inclusion Practitioner, Northumbria University, UK

Emily Parkin, Student Experience & Enhancement Manager, Northumbria University, UK

Higher education globally is now explicitly aware of differential student experiences. However, as the students' contributions illuminate, there are significant pitfalls we potentially create but are not yet mitigating.

As practitioners working in the 'widening participation' (WP) space, we regularly work with colleagues to define WP in their contexts. This often inspires sharing of their previous lived experience of being a student, with characteristics which would have categorized them as WP.

Our stories are important. Many of us working in higher education have had bumps in the road when it comes to getting to where we are today. This piece encourages us to reflect on our own journeys and the role persistence played in getting us through them, whilst identifying how our roles as practitioners can be key to repairing dangerous pitfalls before students reach them. Persistence can only get us so far.

A Reflection on my Student Journey and How it Shaped my Work Today—Michael Hedley

When I was asked to write this piece, I didn't know where to start. It brought back the familiar feelings of not being confident to write academically, 17 years since I was asked to write my first essay as a first-year archaeology student. I was oblivious to any support that was available as a student and persisted in struggling, believing that everyone must feel the same. The term 'widening participation' (WP) was foreign to my vocabulary and is a term that I wouldn't become familiar with until I was in my thirties—around the same time that I realized I had been a WP student myself. Below is a short reflection of my experience as a WP student throughout my student journey: from prospective student to the present day as an inclusion practitioner.

One of my first experiences of higher education came when I was visiting a university for an open day. It had been a long journey down from Newcastle, and I had left when it had been snowing. Upon arriving at the university, parents were ushered away, and students were led into a room for an informal 'meet and greet' with fellow prospective students, and lecturers. Noticing that many students had suits on or wore the uniform of their private school, I began to feel out of place. Worse was to follow when I was asked by a lecturer about which school I attended and where I was from, their response being: "Oh, you're the one from the state school." This left me feeling out of place, so that within 30 minutes of the open day starting I had already decided I wouldn't be attending that university.

My actual university experience was generally quite good: I made lots of friends and I had a good time. However, I never enjoyed the academic side of university. I found it frustrating that I would be marked down for spelling and grammar ("please check your work") and was often

deflated when I thought a good piece of work was unfairly judged. I remember friends laughing at my handwriting, but I brushed it off as ‘lads’ banter.’ I even transferred courses so I could do some modules that were more factually based. Despite never really getting to grips academically, I managed to persist and achieve a 2:1—by the skin of my teeth! Job done. It didn’t matter that I struggled—I was done. Or so I thought.

Like for many graduates who emerged from higher education during the late 2000s, the financial crisis meant jobs were limited. I was working at Beamish Museum in County Durham and enjoying it, and thought I should continue my studies in something related. So, I embarked on a Masters, as so many graduates do when they’re unsure of their next steps. Again, I had a great experience, but it was the same old story in terms of the academic side. This time, though, it was a different overall experience as I was living at home and didn’t have the freedom of my undergraduate degree. Again, I struggled through, with a mixture of good and bad marks.

After graduating for a second time, and after another stint working at Beamish, I found employment at Northumbria University. I worked in various teams, gaining a breadth of knowledge of how services worked. A pivotal moment in my work life, and indeed in my WP status, came when I started working for the Disability and Dyslexia Team. Part of my role was giving guidance to students who wanted to get tested for dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties. It soon became apparent when I was talking to students about their experiences that I had shared the same difficulties as them. Eventually, I was tested and discovered I did indeed have dyslexia and dyspraxia. This diagnosis was a relief; it made a lot of things make sense. Even though it was too late to rectify all the difficulties I had had while studying, at least I now knew that it wasn’t entirely my fault. I don’t blame anyone for not picking up on the difficulties I had, but I do sometimes think: would my university experience have been even more enjoyable with the appropriate support?

So, that is my story: in my thirties, I discovered that I was a WP student. I hope what my own story shows is that it is important to be proactive rather than reactive. It is easy to focus on what is in front of you—in my case, the assignment feedback. However, it is important to join the dots to see if there is a wider issue. This may have helped in my case.

As practitioners, we all want to support the student with the particular issue they have come to us with. However, it is important to think of how and why the student has got to this point, and what could be done to support the student more holistically.

The Value of Reflection—Emily Parkin

The stories I have read throughout this project highlight to me that there is some work for us to do, and I believe reflection is the starting point. I have my own pitfalls to reflect on from my student days, but as cis, white members of staff from the North East, Michael and I have found the student contributions extremely valuable in enhancing our reflective practice and adding intricacies that were not available to us solely through our personal stories.

We will not always be able to directly relate to our students' individual circumstances. But by slowing down and understanding that there are points when we personally could have benefited from additional support, being directed appropriately or through a more considered approach to a conversation, especially during open days, we can each do our bit to contribute to an enhanced sense of community and belonging, rather than each of us having to persist on our own.

I survived my own WP student journey even after failing my first year (not at Northumbria), but I definitely did not thrive. However, through some persistence, some luck, and some opportunities which my cis, white privilege afforded me, I am proud to continue working in higher education in a role which enables me to contribute to social justice in a unique way. Whether I am successful in my role depends solely on my ability to reflect on what *I* can do, rather than expecting our students to 'fit' into a space which isn't yet set up to help them thrive rather than survive. When we are facilitated to critically reflect as a collective university community, and embed this fully into practice in all teams, then I believe we may start seeing all our students thriving.