Widening participation between 2001 and 2021: A systematic literature review and research agenda

Aaron Tham
University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia, mtham@usc.edu.au

Maria Raciti
University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia, mraciti@usc.edu.au

Joshua Dale
University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia, jdale@usc.edu.au

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Abstract

Widening participation has been a vehicle to facilitate access and support towards the successful completion of university studies for underrepresented groups who are less likely to pursue higher education. Yet, despite its widely accepted importance and adoption across countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom, studies to date remain largely fragmented – often employed through the lens of a single institution, or a particular priority group. Amidst this backdrop, universities and other higher education providers are increasingly probed as to their role in supporting social capital mobility, of which widening participation plays a vital component in delivering wider societal imperatives. In addition, the COVID-19 effect has worsened university participation and completion rates, as the global pandemic has placed vulnerable students (often those involved in widening participation initiatives) in more precocious conditions than ever before. Nevertheless, the purpose of this paper is to conduct a systematic literature review comprising 102 journal articles that derive 15 meta-themes to provide a timely introspection of widening participation, show key trends over time, and chart future areas of investigation for scholars and practitioners in this space.

Practitioner Notes

1. Widening participation should be personalised
2. A collaborative effort involving universities, students and governments can lead to more coherent widening participation processes
3. COVID-19 has triggered a rethink of how to approach widening participation
4. At present widening participation is reactive, and highly fragmented
5. Best practices can help to inform global widening participation practices

Keywords

higher education, tertiary studies, equity, access, student lifecycle

Introduction

Widening participation (WP) is a decades-old agenda in many developed nations, such as the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia (Salmi, 2018). Early discussion around the role and importance of WP centred on human capital benefits. However, today WP is largely anchored in social justice theory and the opportunity that it provides for upward social mobility that results from higher education qualifications (Raciti, 2019). More recently, WP has been framed as a human right (Australian Government Attorney-General's Department, 2022). WP seeks to 'enrich' access, participation, and success in higher education for 'priority groups', being people from underrepresented or marginalised communities. It refers to government-funded strategic projects intentionally designed, delivered, and evaluated by universities to redress educational inequality and achieve population parity for underrepresented groups. Australian WP policy can be traced to the DEET (1990) A Fair Chance for All, which first identified the nation's priority groups, while The Dearing Report (1997) was the original policy document in the UK.

The WP literature is growing in density and dimension and there is a need to consolidate the stock of knowledge to shape a research agenda for the future. Furthermore, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as shifts to delivery models and curricula, have been pervasive for priority groups, further exacerbating the academic attainment divide between traditional and non-traditional students (O'Shea et al., 2021). Importantly, it created opportunities for consolidation, reflection and to take time to forge new paths ahead. As we begin to emerge from the pandemic, this is an appropriate time to systematically review the state of play for WP and offer a research agenda for the 'new normal' of global higher education. Hence, the aim of this article is to identify, evaluate and synthesise the existing body of peer-reviewed, empirical WP publications via a systematic and reproducible approach to clearly formulate a meaningful future research agenda.

This article is organised as follows. A background to WP, including the student life cycle framework, is provided. The systematic review methodology is detailed. Findings and discussion follow prior to the presentation of a research agenda and the drawing of conclusions.

Widening Participation in Australia and the United Kingdom

WP has been the focus of government policy internationally for decades (Salmi, 2018). While the pursuit of educational equity began prior to the popular United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) agenda, SDG4 Quality Education mirrors the purpose of national efforts – to provide inclusive and equitable educational opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). Salmi's (2018) global review of higher education equity policies identified 71 countries with an equity policy, with Australia and the UK countries of England, Ireland, and Scotland as the top performers with advanced policy commitments and comprehensive equity strategies.

The founding policy that underpins WP in Australia is A Fair Chance for All (DEET, 1990), and

established equity as a federal government priority. Australia's A Fair Chance for All identified underrepresented priority groups, declaring that all Australians should have the opportunity to participate in higher education, and this would be achieved by 'changing the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of society as a whole' (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1990, p. 2; Harvey et al., 2016). Several other policy updates have followed A Fair Chance for All, demonstrating a consistent focus on the funding of WP strategies. In Australia, the Review of Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008), Behrendt et al.'s (2012) Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, and Napthine et al.'s (2019) National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy have continued to shape higher education equity policy. Historically, Australia's priority groups have included people from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (SES), Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples (Indigenous Australians), people with disability, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD), women in non-traditional fields of study and those living in regional, rural, and remote (RRR) locales (DEET, 1990). Three of these priority groups are the focus of the current Australian Government WP policy, including people from low SES backgrounds, Indigenous Australians, and people from RRR locales (Australian Government, 2022).

In the UK, The Dearing Report (1997) is the foundational WP policy document that championed the significance of fostering equity in higher education. Despite the diversity in which countries approach student equity across the globe (Salmi, 2018), all countries, including the UK, share the common goal of addressing the underrepresentation of priority groups. The Dearing Report stated that 'higher education institutions have, therefore, a moral obligation to concern themselves with continuing differences in levels of participation by different groups' (Dearing, 1997, p102). The Report was soon followed by the Aimhigher program in 2004 and was among the UK's first full commitments to WP (Doyle & Griffin, 2012), and centred around collaboration with partners to encourage young people from priority groups to make informed decisions about higher education. The UK's identification of priority groups is somewhat consistent with Australia, marking women pursuing high-skill jobs, mature-age students, ethnic minorities, people from low SES backgrounds and people with disability as having the greatest need for WP enrichment (Dearing, 1997; Hubble et al., 2021).

Widening Participation: Activities across the Student Lifecycle in Australia and the UK

Members of priority groups have an ongoing need for WP enrichment. While not formally defined, WP is largely understood to be an umbrella term describing the various fully or partially federally government-funded strategic projects that aim to redress educational inequalities and achieve population parity for underrepresented groups (e.g., Robinson et al., 2021). WP enrichment occurs across four stages of the student lifecycle: a) pre-access, when students are at school and in the process of self-actualisation; b) access, when students are enrolling or being enabled to enrol in higher education; c) participation, when students are transitioning into their studies and engaged within the university community; and d) attainment and transition out, when students are being conferred a degree and are preparing to continue onto further study or employment (Bennett et al., 2015).

In Australia, funding for WP enrichment is provided to eligible universities by the federal government via the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). The

HEPPP enables universities to implement projects that improve access to undergraduate courses as well as the retention and completion rates for people from low SES backgrounds, Indigenous Australians, and people from RRR locales (Department of Education, 2022). In developing the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF), Robinson et al. (2021) synthesised the four stages of the student life cycle to create a typology of four types of WP activities: a) information and experiences, sharing information about higher education or related interactions or experiences; b) skills, developing individual attributes or skills; c) resources, providing physical goods or financial assistance; and d) institutional development, upgrading institutional systems to enable greater educational opportunity. Figure 1 conceptualises enrichment under the SEHEEF.

Figure 1

The conceptualisation of government-funded WP in Australia (Robinson et al., 2021, p. 50)
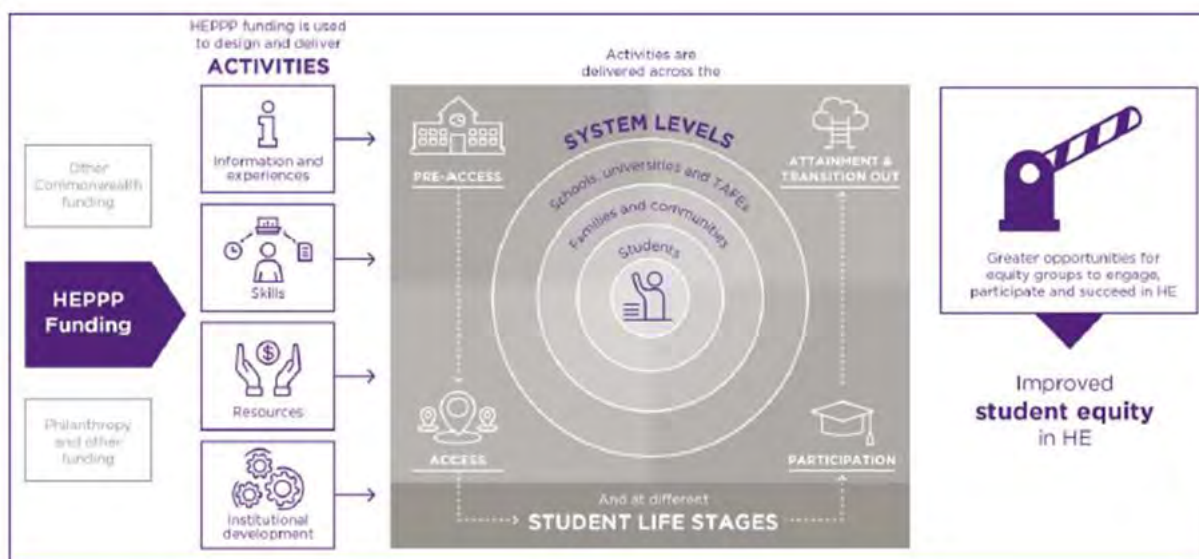
SEHEEF took inspiration from the approach used in the UK's Higher Education Access Tracker (2021) (HEAT) system to evaluate WP programs. HEAT was developed by approximately 91 member institutions and is a data management, analysis, and reporting service of all WP activities for participating institutions. Student details (including their educational history) and their involvement in activities are recorded, with institutions providing details of activities (e.g., taster days, mentoring) and access granted to key government agencies such as the UK Department for Education. Linked datasets provide information on university applications, access, progress, postgraduate education, and employment destinations, allowing for a comprehensive assessment of WP impact. A range of profile tools and filters enable granular assessment (e.g., by postcodes, activities, and student attributes) (HEAT, 2021; Robinson et al., 2021).

Method

A systematic literature review is the method of choice employed for this research. Systematic literature reviews follow a prescribed sequence of steps with the aim of synthesising the dominant themes of a body of work surrounding a topic and deriving knowledge gaps and, as such, documenting avenues of future investigation (Xiao & Watson, 2019). While this may appear consistent with how others undertake a literature review, a key distinction is that systematic literature reviews have a broader scope of investigation rather than specific gaps characterised in other studies (Snyder, 2019). In addition, systematic literature reviews have been undertaken in the context of higher education in areas such as marketing, gamification, and sustainable development, especially where there has been a considerable body of work devoted over time (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Subhash & Cudney, 2018; Wu & Shen, 2016). Nonetheless, it is essential for each systematic literature review to state its intended outcomes and provide a transparent protocol of how the research has been undertaken to address its research question(s) of interest (Badger, Nursten, Williams & Woodward, 2000).

The research approached the systematic literature review steps following PRISMA conventions, a widely utilised process that provides greater transparency of steps and replicability of the work done, even in the context of higher education (Jones & Nangah, 2021; Sonderlund et al., 2019). As such, this research first ascertained the keywords and their derivatives to be employed for the systematic literature review. Informed by extant literature, the exact phrase 'widening participation' was used to collate an initial body of work surrounding this topic. The search term was entered into two main source databases, namely Google Scholar and the institution's library subscriptions, that draw from Scopus and Web of Science material, consistent with the practices elsewhere (see for instance Heaslip et al., 2017; Kalocsanyiova et al., 2023).

Then, a second step involved the delineating of material between 2001-2021, which provided a good timeframe to examine trends within widening participation from when it was earliest introduced to higher education, to practices that occurred prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a timeframe is consistent with the practices of other studies examining literature across years within higher education (inter alia Singh & Thurman, 2019; Valverde-Berrocoso, Garrida-Arroyo, Burgos-Videla & Morales-Cevallos, 2020).

The third step involved the decision to only include journal articles for this research. Such documents are accepted to be more credible due to having undergone peer review and this is consistent with the practices of prior studies utilising systematic literature reviews (Iden & Eikebrokk, 2013; Roehrich, Lewis & George, 2014; Watts & Robertson, 2011). Duplicates were also removed during this step to ensure that all remaining records were unique.
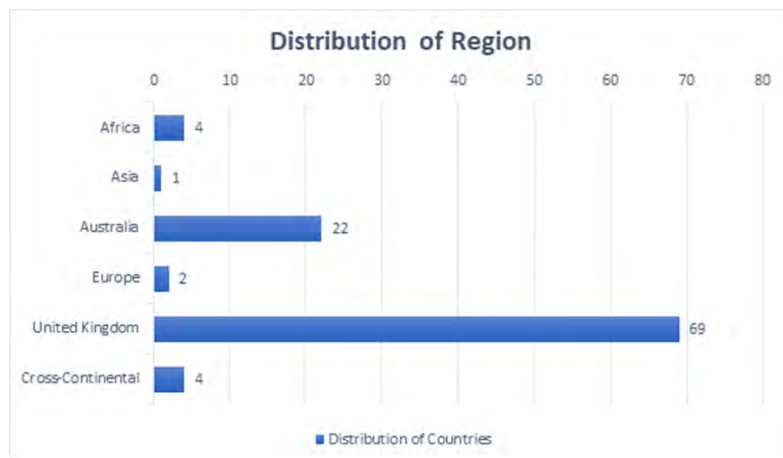
The fourth step was the final stage and involved applying an inclusion/exclusion criterion. This was undertaken to remove journal articles that were not fully in English, or papers that had a fleeting mention of widening participation without specific mention as to its focal areas e.g., financial incentives and assimilation programs. Papers that were focused on WP in primary or secondary education were also excluded as this research was framed in the context of higher education. Following the above-mentioned four steps of this systematic literature review led to a compilation of 102 journal articles selected for analysis.

Results

This wide scope review began with a 'bean counting exercise' to profile the recurrent characteristics of extant WP research. Of the 102 records reviewed, there were notable distributions by region, methodology and year of publication. First, despite no geographic restrictions being imposed upon the review, WP research tended to be conducted in either Australia (22 studies), the UK (69 studies), or between both (4 studies) (Figure 2). This was not unexpected given the advanced commitment to WP in these regions (Salmi, 2018), however it was notable that the proportion of Australian studies was lower than anticipated. In retrospect, this may be attributed to the tendency for Australian WP research to be funded and take the form of 'grey' literature such as organisational reports, e.g., the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE). These records, while offering a wealth of information relevant to this research, would not have met the inclusion criteria for this paper, thus accounting for the lower than anticipated representation of Australian studies.
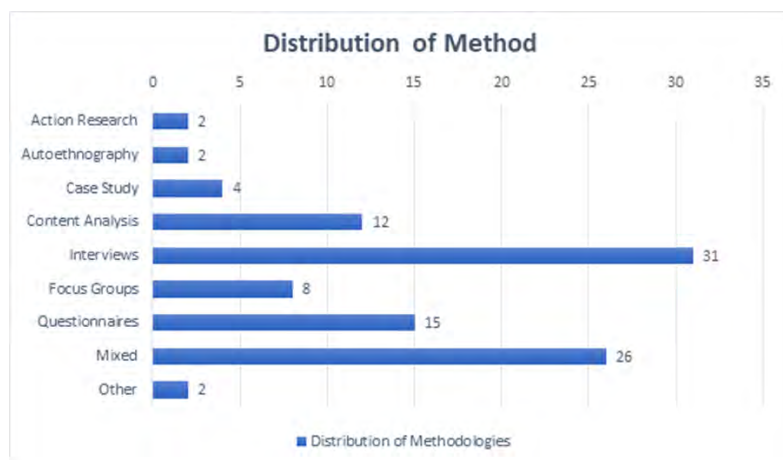
Figure 2

Distribution of papers by region

Distribution of Region

Africa — 4
Asia — 1
Australia — 22
Europe — 2
United Kingdom — 69
Cross-Continental — 4

■ Distribution of Countries

Second, the literature was comprised of a variety of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method methodologies. The most frequently observed methodology was qualitative (59 studies) and consisted of interviews and focus groups, content analyses, case studies, autoethnographies and action research. A substantial number of studies were quantitative (26 studies), which were largely comprised of questionnaires, database analyses or quantitative evaluation data. Finally, multiple papers used a mixed-method methodology (17 studies) and drew on both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. This distribution (Figure 3) shows that the extant WP literature is largely qualitative, which is consistent with previous systematic reviews (Kettley, 2007; Moore et al., 2013). WP research is descriptive and nuanced and aims to understand the lived experiences and challenges of priority groups, thus explaining why WP scholars tend to take a qualitative approach to their research.

Figure 3

Distribution of studies by research methods

Distribution of Method

Action Research — 2
Autoethnography — 2
Case Study — 4
Content Analysis — 12
Interviews — 31
Focus Groups — 8
Questionnaires — 15
Mixed — 26
Other — 2

■ Distribution of Methodologies

Third, each paper was examined for its year of publication within the last two decades. The material was categorised into five-year periods between 2001-2020, in addition to a category for papers published in 2021 or later, which included the most recent, post-pandemic literature

(Figure 4). The data showed steady growth in the number of WP papers published between 2001-2015 (33 studies) until 2016, after which the number of publications doubled within five years (39 studies). The WP agenda has been gaining traction in both academic and government spaces since the publication of A Fair Chance for All (DEET, 1990) and The Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997), and this, alongside other seminal research (Bradley et al., 2008; Behrendt et al., 2012) has evidently helped to bring WP research into the mainstream. This upward trend has markedly continued into the post-pandemic era, with a considerable number of studies being published in only the last two years (30 studies). Research is often reactive, as a response to policy levers, and thus the recent focus on student equity in Australian higher education will likely prompt a greater proportion of Australian WP studies in the next few years, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19 that has placed the spotlight on university engagement and participation among diverse groups (Mulrooney & Kelly, 2020).

Figure 4

*Distribution of studies over time*
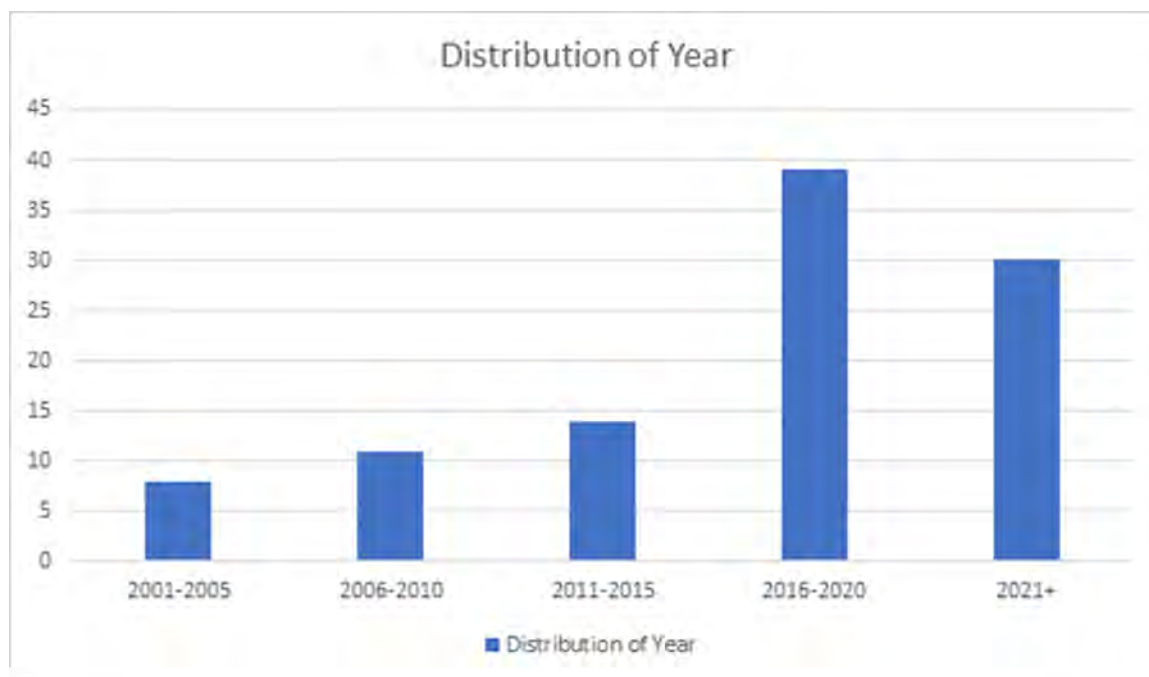
Extant WP literature largely centred around the levers of higher education aspiration, participation, and success as well as equity project design. In developing a meaningful research agenda, it is vital to compare how past findings align with current equity priorities. In Australia, the SEHEEF has built an evidence base to inform and improve equity policy and practice and to deliver better higher education outcomes for equity groups (Robinson et al., 2021). Of the 102 papers, 75 had findings linked to equity project design, all of which were in alignment with the typology of activity categories noted in the SEHEEF. The three dominant categories were Information and Experiences (30 studies), followed by Institutional Development (23 studies), then Skills (15 studies). The remaining literature did not fit this typology but nonetheless reported important findings. While there is an abundance of literature exploring how to enable or enrich institutional equity and equity projects, the benefits of providing resources such as scholarships or physical

goods to students have been neglected. Of the total dataset, 31 studies specifically examined student support as an enabler of higher education participation, highlighting that offering support in all forms, including resources, is a priority.

Figure 5

Distribution of widening participation activities
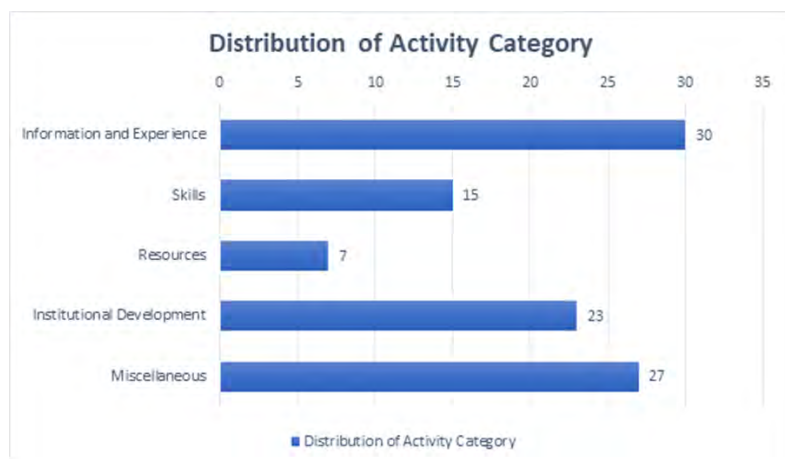
The importance of providing ongoing support throughout all student life stages has also emerged as a foundation of equity policy in recent years (Bennett et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2021). Despite 91 records aligning with at least one stage of the student lifecycle, the literature has largely been focused on the Participation (57 studies) and Pre-Access (20 studies) stages. Examination of equity during the Access (7 studies) and Attainment and Transition (7 studies) has been minor, and this may be the result of the shorter duration of these life stages, or else a perception of being 'secondary' as students are only transitioning in and out of university. Existing research has highlighted the importance of delivering regular, early outreach (Gore et al., 2017) and offering sustained support throughout a student's degree (Naylor et al., 2013), and while both are essential, a greater academic exploration of the other student life stages could reveal new ways to strengthen student transitions both in and out of higher education.

Figure 6

Distribution of widening participation enablers
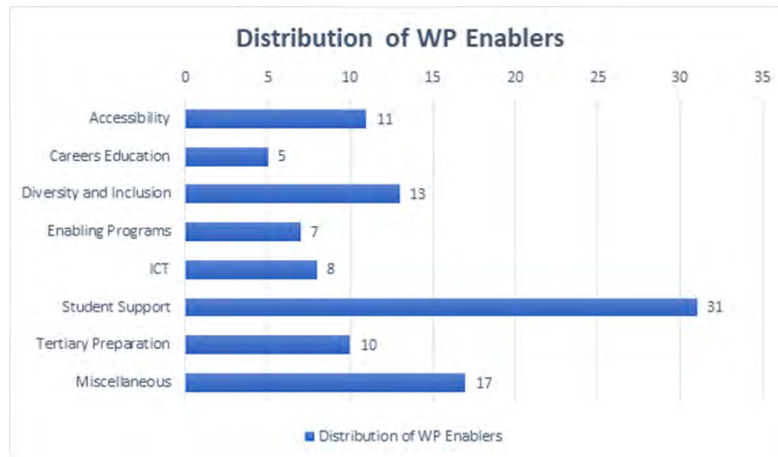
After developing the profile of the records, thematic analysis of the literature began. Emergent themes in WP discourse were identified in two phases. First, an in-depth review of the records revealed 40 unique themes, each of which was discussed among the research team for clarity and adapted from literature to ensure their rigour. Second, identified themes were scrutinised for overlap and consolidated in order to develop a smaller number of meta-themes. 15 meta-themes were created in this process and can be viewed in the Appendix.

From the Appendix, there is significant variation across the 15 meta-themes in terms of what they contain, and the terminology used by different scholars across various contexts. Most studies are concentrated in the space of experience design, though there is also a considerable focus on curriculum delivery associated with WP, recognising the non-traditional learning trajectories of these students of interest.

Research Agenda for Widening Participation: Where to From Here?

Given the growing importance of WP to the higher education landscape, a research agenda derived from the systematic literature review is needed to provide direction and better shape the widening participation endeavours, both in terms of scholarship and practice. The findings reveal some insights into where the dominant themes are for WP across time and place, and these are poised to inform a future research agenda in this space. The following questions are offered as starting points for investigation:

• During what student life stages are [specific barriers] most significant?

• During which student life stages should intervention for [specific barriers] occur?

• What type of activity is most effective at addressing [specific barriers]?

• How can we better evaluate equity project outcomes that address challenges for priority groups?

Extant work is focused on pre-access and access as per the main impetus of WP, but future work should focus on participation (throughout the duration of their studies), and on the transitioning

out of university (e.g., career preparation and employability). Evidently, this necessitates a triple/quadruple helix approach to WP (industry/government and civic society to the successful outcomes). After all, WP should be intentionally designed for those in the early formative years of middle to high school education so that interested parties can become aware of the possibility of attaining university qualifications, the WP resources that are available, and the socio-economic mobility that comes with it.

Importantly, this research aligns with the call for policies to go beyond levelling the playing field for WP, and instead open wider conversations as to what higher education represents and manage expectations for those contemplating making such decisions (Rainford, 2023). In the Australian context, the initiation of the Australian Universities Accord is aimed at undertaking a comprehensive review of the higher education sector, of which WP is an important aspect. Educators and practitioners advocate for WP to be extended across multi-sector players, such as vocational, university and other private providers (Patfield et al., 2023), as well as from undergraduate to postgraduate transitions (Mendick & Peters, 2023), and short-term mobility trips (Brooks & Waters, 2023).

In addition, this research prompts the need for WP to consider new students from challenging backgrounds, such as forced migration (Burke et al., 2023; Olsson et al., 2023; Whelan et al., 2023). Some of these individuals have been displaced as a result of political turmoil or wars, yet these continue to have the drive and passion towards completing university studies for a range of reasons. Another aspect of WP that will attract future scholarly attention is the notion of Universal Design principles for learning, as called for by Dempsey et al. (2023). Altogether, the research triggers avenues for future research directions to examine both academic and policy implications of WP.

Such outcomes are significant on a global stage as higher education shifts towards global mobility of students across borders. Whether by choice or compulsion (refugee/war conditions), higher education remains a lofty aspiration worldwide as it delivers a sense of personal achievement and social capital mobility (Murray & Gray, 2023). In the aftermath of the COVID-19 landscape, WP is a further integral conversation to have as higher education institutions globally negotiate what it means to have hybrid campuses, and the ramifications on an already existing inequality in the form of digital divides (Arday, 2022; Rainford, 2021). The findings from this research, therefore, present greater credence and gravity to examine philosophical, cultural and national approaches to identify best WP practices around the world, where some success stories are emerging in non-English speaking landscapes (Singh & Kakkar, 2023). For instance, rather than building exorbitant campus buildings across different locations, universities may wish to perhaps consider the innovative use of pop-up campuses in various locations, where such buses can operate as mobile classrooms/libraries and support students in their local areas on a periodic basis (Kuruvilla, 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper set out to map the current body of literature surrounding WP, and how its nomenclature is similar or different across various geographical locations. The systematic literature review revealed a highly fragmented approach to WP, often framed through the lens of a single institution, or a particular student segment. Nonetheless, the research indicates strong

preferences towards student support mechanisms, where these mostly target students already within the university system.

The paper is not without its limitations. Journal articles that comprised the research data in this paper were not organised into pre, during and post-pandemic articles. While the pre-pandemic articles were clearly identified, those articles published between 2020 and 2022 may have already been under review, in pre-production or be based on data collected pre-pandemic. Hence, there were difficulties in distinguishing during and post-pandemic articles and this posed a risk to the fidelity of our analysis and findings. The research was also focused on journal articles published in English, which may result in the de-selection of other material, such as the grey literature in the form of industry papers disseminated by NCSEHE. Likewise, book chapters, which are a more popular outlet for Australian WP literature, are omitted from this research. Non-English studies are also excluded, where these sources could paint a different picture of non-English WP spaces. These limitations notwithstanding, the paper has charted avenues for future investigation.

Future studies may seek to investigate post-pandemic forms of WP and how these have evolved to include a greater socio-technological lens. Access to hybrid learning, and its affordances, were not as strong imperatives as they are in the present era of higher education. Another body of work may want to explore WP journeys through ethnography and other forms of data, e.g., diaries, and blogs, to unpack the lived experiences of these students. Finally, some scholars can ascertain WP outcomes on post-graduation careers and long-term quality of life experiences.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at their respective university.

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Appendix 1 - Meta Themes of WP Literature

Name of Theme	Times Observed	Description of Meta-Theme
University Access	**7**	Institutional commitments to enable tertiary education access for a diverse range of students.
Accessibility	3	
University Admission	4	
Aspirations	**8**	Crystallised intentions to pursue specific career or study pathways.
Belongingness	**16**	Feelings of 'fitting in' within a student's community, program, or institution.
Self-Efficacy	**15**	An individual's belief in their capacity to constructively engage in tertiary education.
Confidence	13	
Help-Seeking Behaviour	1	
Resilience	1	
Curriculum Delivery	**21**	Institutional commitments to developing equitable curriculums and course delivery.
Curriculum Design	11	
Online/Blended Learning	10	
Employability and Employment	**9**	Institutional impacts on the employability of tertiary education students.
Employment	3	
Graduate Employability	6	
Engagement Experience Design	**46**	The types of enrichment that institutions deliver as part of their widening participation strategy.
Demystification	4	

Diversity	7	
Co-creation	3	
Commuting	1	
Engagement	9	
Mentoring	4	
Messengers	4	
Peer Relationships	1	
Perceived Risk	3	
Retention	1	
Student Lifecycle	2	
Teacher-Student Relationships	3	
Transition	3	
University Infrastructure	1	
Enrichment Project Design	**19**	
Enrichment Activity Design	5	The distinction of widening participation projects as activities or programs according to the SEHEEF.
Enrichment Program Design	14	
Equity Priority Groups	**17**	
CALD Students	1	References to priority groups.
First in Family	1	
First Nations Students	1	

Low SES Students	5	
Mature Students	4	
Migrant Students	1	
RRR Students	3	
Student with Disability	1	
Financial Hardship	**2**	Challenges to tertiary education participation that pertain to its affordability.
Learner Identity	**7**	Self-actualised descriptions of what it means to be a student and lifelong learner.
Student Identity	6	
Lifelong Learning	1	
Outcomes	**14**	The benefits associated with participation and success in tertiary education.
Positive Outcomes	11	
Success Characteristics	3	
Support Structures	**17**	The types of support tertiary education students may require throughout their studies.
Academic Support	8	
Emotional Support	4	
Resource Support	5	
Skill Development	**5**	Institutional or in-school strategies revolving around skill development for students.
WP Policy	**5**	Governmental, academic, and other references to the state of widening participation.