Title: **A critical examination of Widening Participation (WP) strategies in Further Education and Higher Education sectors in the UK**

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Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- have a Bourdieusian understanding of notions of (dis)advantage in the UK Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) sectors.
- have opportunities to critically engage with the endemic irony that characterizes UK educational leadership and management (Hoyle and Wallace, 2007), that is, the gap between the Widening Participation (WP) rhetoric / policies and the lived experiences of students from WP backgrounds in UK FE and HE sectors.
- reflect on their own approaches and discuss how they could facilitate an inclusive 'institutional habitus' (Thomas, 2002) in their own organisations.
- explore how adoption of emancipatory / critical pedagogy principles can improve their practice(s) as they journey towards designing an inclusive curriculum where all students are visible and have a sense of belonging irrespective of their backgrounds.

Overall, the session will illuminate the field of widening participation and facilitate formulation of strategies for supporting students from the marginalised section of the population.

Session Outline

Introduction of the researcher's positionality as a 'cultural insider' and 'situated-knower' (Geertz, 1983) with privileged knowledge of the FE and HE sectors in the UK and issues affecting the engagement, progression, retention and successful completion of students from widening participation backgrounds (Thomas, 2002; Social Mobility Commission, 2016; Universities UK, 2016).

The researcher as a critical ethnographer: Drawing on Freire's critical pedagogy, the presenter will argue that education is a social good, and thus educators have a moral obligation to be immersed, gain a native perspective, unmask inequality, challenge dominant orthodoxy and the taken for granted perceptions (Hammersley, 1991, 1992; Denzin, 1997; Brewer, 2000; Alvesson et al, 2009).

Politics of representation: Who speaks for whom? Do marginalized groups have a right to speak for themselves? (Freire, 1972, 1979; Harding, 1986; England, 1994; Kobayashi 1994; Hekman, 1997). Reflection and discussion around what participants do / could do differently in their own practice to give students from marginalized backgrounds a voice.

The role of the FE sector: Plenary discussion on the notion of elitism in UK education. Why is the FE sector paradoxically important and insignificant? What are the implications of the sector's unique position in the UK education system?

Case studies: presentation and critical engagement with the 'lived experiences' of students from WP backgrounds at a university based in the South of England.

Conclusion: Summary of the obstacles.
Lessons learnt and 'take aways' for ameliorating the situation or improving the learning experiences of students from WP backgrounds?

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

[0-5min] - **Introduction:** The researcher introduces the aims of the session and his positionality as a critical ethnographer in the field of Widening Participation.

[5min-15min] - The researcher presents findings from his FE based PhD research – focusing on the sector's (i) unique position in the education system, (ii) heterogeneity, (iii) low status due to the section of the population that it serves. This will facilitate a clear understanding of the consequences of class-based thinking in the UK education system.

[15min-25min] - Using a short video clip, the presenter encourages attendees to critically engage with issues that most educators avoid - issues that are key in the understanding of ideological advantages and disadvantages in education.

[25min-35min] - The researcher presents case studies of the 'lived experiences' of students from WP backgrounds in UK HE.

Plenary discussion of the data presented and reflection on how tokenism could be avoided to facilitate genuine and resilient change in the UK HE/FE education system. E.g. the power of collaborative approaches (systems thinking) in supporting students.

[35-45mi] **- Conclusion:** Presenter projects a number of statements on the whiteboard and challenges attendees to consider their implications on practice and policy. Individuals asked to come up with three 'take away' goals (short-term goal, medium-term goal and long-term goal) on how they will support students from WP backgrounds in their institutions to:
   (i)   have a more enjoyable learning experience;
   (ii)   feel visible and have a sense of belonging; and
   (iii)   stay on their programmes, progress and complete with good degree grades.

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