

Widening participation: what does it mean for the University of Hertfordshire?



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Summary

Different target groups for widening participation (WP) are surveyed and those most relevant to the university identified. The university is very active in outreach and targeted recruitment. However, an equally important aspect of WP is providing support for WP students within higher education. Suggestions are made for ways in which the university could provide such support, building on its excellent learning and teaching. It is believed that this would be to the benefit of all our students.



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Introduction

The University of Hertfordshire is a good example of a university which has always played a major role in widening participation, even before the term was in common parlance. It is no coincidence that the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) established an advisory group on access and participation (AGAP) when the 'new universities' were established in 1992. This AGAP produced a major report (HEFCE, 1996) on widening access to higher education, and so raised the profile of this topic shortly before publication of the well-known and highly influential Dearing report on HE (NCIHE, 1997) which, not surprisingly, also stressed the need to address issues of participation. This emphasis on WP in a variety of national strategic documents, coupled with the government's enthusiasm for achieving a 50 per cent participation rate in HE, strongly suggests that WP in HE will have a high profile for the foreseeable future.

Universities have many reasons to treat WP as a high priority, not least the fact that the premiums attached to WP students by HEFCE and the funding for a variety of WP initiatives (e.g. Aimhigher, the Lifelong Learning Network, research projects, and summer schools) can add up to substantial sums. A commitment to supporting WP is also a requirement of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), since having an access agreement approved by OFFA is a prerequisite for charging 'top-up' fees. There are less mercenary and highly persuasive reasons for engaging in WP, including the likelihood that, through effective outreach and raising of aspirations, a university can enlarge the pool of good students from which it recruits. The many staff who have been involved in the University of Hertfordshire's WP activities, giving masterclasses, running Aimhigher days or summer schools, or supervising mentors and work-based learning, will have realised how

such work also raises the university's profile with schools, colleges, employers, local, regional and national bodies. Perhaps most importantly, the university engages in WP because it takes its social responsibilities seriously.

What do we mean by widening participation?

It is informative to examine the language used in relation to WP. At its worst, there is an assumption that people who do not participate are in some way inadequate. We see references to students coming into HE through 'non-standard routes', implying that they are in some way abnormal. There is an expectation that students should be 'university ready' so that they can start learning with minimal remedial work. Attitudes such as these blame individuals for being members of under-represented groups.

Those with a more enlightened approach will accept that some groups are under-represented, will aim for social inclusion (implicitly recognising that a process of exclusion is taking place), and will recognise that we must make universities responsive to students.

Whom are we encouraging to participate? For the popular press (and for some academics who want things to remain as they were in their own student days), WP implies recruiting students who should not be at university, who do not want to be at university, and who are not clever enough. For the rest of us, it means a host of different groups: ethnic minorities, the disabled, mature students (although we have to be careful how we use this term!), the employed and the unemployed, students with 'non-standard' qualifications, low socio-economic groups, women (for example in engineering), or men (for example in nursing).

This university has made a particular commitment to the large population of people



who are in employment but have, for a variety of reasons, not participated in HE. Raising the skills of this group is crucial for national competitiveness (Leitch, 2006) and hence employed people without HE qualifications must be regarded as a major WP target. The university's UHEvolution project will play a major role in meeting the needs of this group, and merits a paper of its own.

So WP implies recognition that certain groups of people are not taking up the opportunities offered to them by HE (or by specific parts of HE) although they have the potential to benefit from it. If WP is to have any relevance, it must also be about taking action to tackle this problem: which is a real problem, since the number of jobs open to non-graduates is rapidly declining.

Universities UK (UUK) and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) (2005) noted that the UK is virtually at saturation in terms of the participation rate for school leavers with two or more A levels. This is a clear indication that WP work should be directed towards helping more students achieve an appropriate level of qualification for entry to HE, opening up more routes into HE from vocational qualifications, and providing opportunities for work-based HE through part-time study, distance learning and accreditation of experiential learning. It must be emphasised that there is absolutely no need to lower entry standards in order to widen participation; but we need to recognise that our current definitions of entry qualifications may be too inflexible to include many very able students who do not have the 'normal' background which is so often assumed.

All universities have performance indicators related to WP and it is pleasing to note that UH meets or exceeds all of these. However, we cannot afford to reduce our efforts in this area, since changes beyond our control, such as the introduction of top-up fees, could

quickly reverse our successes. Nationally, under-representation based on gender, disability and ethnicity is being tackled with considerable success, but the socio-economic divide remains problematic, with classes 1 and 2 filling more than 60 per cent of the nation's undergraduate places, leaving classes 4 and 5 with only 10 per cent. Locally, Hertfordshire has participation rates which are well above the national average, but there are some pockets of severe under-representation. The county also has a large number of employed people who do not have HE qualifications. In this article I shall concentrate on students from low socio-economic groups and/or with vocational qualifications, and will also comment on employed and mature students, although many points are equally relevant to other under-represented groups.

Widening participation and recruitment

Having identified under-represented groups of students, how can we raise their aspirations? How can we help them to improve their performance so that their achievements more closely match the universities' entry requirements, and how can we break down any barriers which prevent these groups from applying to university?

The university's Education Liaison Office has an extensive programme of recruitment and outreach activities, including talks (general and subject-specific), visits, masterclasses, briefings for teachers and open days, many of which include WP students. This work meshes well with a range of projects funded and run through Aimhigher, a national WP initiative funded by HEFCE, which brings together key partners to boost the aspirations of students in schools and colleges and to make it easier for students on vocational courses to progress to HE. HEFCE (2006) reported that Aimhigher was regarded as a highly effective initiative and so its funding

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has been extended to 2011.

The main partners in Hertfordshire's Aimhigher project are: the children, schools and families team of the county council, Connexions, the Hertfordshire further education colleges, the University of Hertfordshire, 14–19 consortia, Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce, and the Learning and Skills Council. Locally, Aimhigher has focused on a number of areas of activity, each with its own coordinating group: vocational and FE routes to HE, mentoring, schools and colleges opportunities, work-based learning, and higher education information. Collectively, these projects are providing a huge amount of support for students in the 'cold spots' of Hertfordshire and are believed to be having a very positive effect on student aspirations and achievement. However, much of the work is concentrated on students in the early years of secondary education (where it is felt that there is most chance of changing attitudes), and so it will be a few years before the full impact on progression to HE will be seen.

These outreach activities would be impossible without the enthusiastic and expert support of staff in all the university's faculties, and it cannot be stressed too strongly that WP is everyone's responsibility – not something to be left to a core team.

Few academics would accept that they are consciously discriminating against able students with vocational qualifications, yet, just as with other types of discrimination, our policies and approaches can have the unintended effect of discriminating against WP applicants. Connor, Sinclair and Banerji (2006), on the basis of research in 14 universities, observed admissions tutors requiring supplementary evidence about subject knowledge from 'vocational' applicants in circumstances where they did not ask for the same information from A level applicants,

although the tutors were no more familiar with the content of the A level syllabus than of the vocational course. Clearly, there is sometimes a level of unquestioning trust in A levels which is not extended to vocational qualifications. Could this be because most admissions tutors came through the A level route themselves and so feel that they understand the qualification, although A levels have evolved considerably? Connor et al (2006) discovered this assumption that A levels are the norm extends to the design of degree programmes, where it is often assumed that entrants without A levels will have to do some remedial work. This is certainly something that we should guard against, given that, in many subjects, a minority of our students come to us with A levels.

Controversially, Vickers and Bekhradnia (2007) have questioned whether there really is discrimination against vocational qualifications and suggest that 'vocational' students are simply less academically able than those taking A levels. At this university we start from the position of accepting the UCAS tariff and the assumption that we should not require different tariff points dependent on the type of qualification being offered. However, as with all types of qualification, the university must regularly review its admissions policy in the light of analysis of student performance on our courses.

The University of Hertfordshire takes pride in being receptive to new vocational qualifications. We not only recognise vocational qualifications and alternative types of evidence of ability, but we make it clear in our recruitment literature that we welcome applicants with such qualifications. We are also working on mapping routes from FE into HE and have signed some accords guaranteeing progression to suitably qualified applicants. Our partner FE colleges have developed a bridging programme for their students, called Unibridge (Fitton and McQuaid,

2004), which we will regard as contributing to the applicant's UCAS tariff points.

The university's strategy contains a commitment to 'work with local schools and the further education colleges to widen participation into higher education'. This approach is in keeping with the recommendations of HEFCE (2006), which observes that 'HEIs act effectively when they work in a sustained way, in partnership with schools and colleges, and with other HEIs where appropriate'. In this spirit we have established the Hertfordshire HE Consortium (HHEC) with the county's four FE colleges, through which we are able to offer foundation degree initial year courses to many applicants who have not yet reached the standard required for direct entry to the first year of our honours degree programmes. We already have many examples of the HHEC taking in students who have been written off as failures by their schools but have then flourished in the supportive environment of the colleges and have gone on to achieve first class honours degrees at the University of Hertfordshire.

Widening participation and student support

The university's access agreement, approved by OFFA, undertakes to maintain a high level of outreach activity, work closely with consortium colleges to provide routes into HE through foundation years and initial year courses, provide generous bursaries based on financial need, and offer scholarships based on academic ability. At present the agreement makes no reference to student support, perhaps because we already put considerable resources into learning and teaching; but this does appear to be an omission which should be corrected when the agreement is next revised.

It is all too easy to forget that recruiting particular groups of students is only the start of our responsibilities. We are quite good at

recognising this when the students are disabled, and can pride ourselves on the support we give to such students and the adjustments we make for them. So why is there no equivalent provision for the needs of our WP students once they have enrolled here? One explanation could be that their needs are varied and hard to predict. We should certainly not assume that these students will have any less knowledge or poorer skills than the rest of their cohort, since we apply the same entry criteria to all our students, but they might be relatively lacking in confidence and could find the transition to an essentially academic environment quite challenging.

Significantly, HEFCE recognises that WP students will often need more support than the traditional entrant and, indeed, 80 per cent of the WP premium (which amounts to several million pounds annually for UH) is intended to fund this extra support. So there is an expectation that we should not only widen participation but also do all we can to make sure that the WP students are as successful as any other students when they start their HE courses. UUK and SCOP (2005) acknowledge that widening participation is likely to present HEIs with issues related to student retention and they encourage the use of drop-in facilities, enhanced induction programmes and personal tutoring, with an emphasis on supporting students in their first year at university.

While there seems little scope to question the value of enhanced student support, there is considerable debate over whether this should be targeted specifically at WP students. It is tempting to think that this would be the most efficient and effective use of resources, but UUK and SCOP (2005) found that such targeting was not very common in HEIs. This could be partly because defining and identifying a WP student is difficult, and also because it is likely to be self-defeating (not to say insulting

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and probably incorrect) to brand such students as deficient compared with 'normal' students. It is gratifying to note that HEFCE (2002), in a review of case studies related to WP, points out that 'where a strong study support system is embedded in an institution, mainstreaming is taken for granted'. The university is well on the way to this being the case. I suggest that we should choose to 'mainstream' our WP students while bearing in mind their likely needs when designing the support which will be provided for all our students.

It is widely accepted that a student's experience in the first few weeks at university is a major factor in determining whether he or she will stay on and complete the course successfully. Most of the university's schools would struggle to provide regular personal tutor support for every student throughout their time here, but I am convinced that having timetabled slots with a tutor for one-to-one meetings in the first semester of the first year is an investment of time well worth making. This only works if there is a reason for the meetings, so the sessions could, for example, be linked to the assessment of generic skills, or be used to return marked work to the student. Without such an academic reason for the meetings the students most in need of attention will simply opt out. Personal tutoring, with an emphasis on the first year, is strongly recommended by UUK and SCOP (2005) and identified as good practice by Connor et al (2006).

HEFCE (2006) recommend 'strengthening central student support services' as one element of an effective campaign to improve student retention, and an example which has been used successfully at UH is the student drop-in centre. This approach, which is endorsed by UUK and SCOP (2005), was first used at UH to support mathematics but is now being rolled out to cover study skills and communication. However, as with personal

tutoring, there is a danger that the students most in need of this type of support will be the least likely to use it, which suggests that drop-in centres should be linked with a mechanism of referral from academic staff to identify students who could benefit from the support. In this connection, it is strongly recommended that formative assessment should be built in to the first few weeks of programmes so that students receive an early indication of whether they are reaching the expected standard and staff are able to identify struggling students as soon as possible.

Conclusion

The university should continue to invest in its successful outreach activities, and must ensure that its admissions policies present applicants with only one hurdle – having the intellectual ability to succeed on our courses. All our students, and especially the WP students, would benefit from a strong system of tutor support which is heavily weighted to their first term at the university and linked to formative assessment.

We have been very successful in many aspects of WP but, in general, (nursing being the main exception) the university could do far more to provide for students who are in employment but have not participated in HE, especially those who are unable to take time off work to fit in with our timetable (which is largely based on the needs of full-time students) (Watts, Cullen and Mills, 2006). Widening our student population to include such people is an important part of the UH Evolution project (funded by HEFCE to develop new approaches to engagement with business and the professions) and will demand completely fresh approaches to entry qualifications and course delivery – an exciting challenge for us all!

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Biographical notes

Stephen Boffey is Dean of the Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies and Pro Vice-Chancellor (Regional Affairs) of the University of Hertfordshire. As Chair of the university's Recruitment and Admissions Policy Committee and the management committee for the Herts HE Consortium he has responsibility for widening participation strategy and policy. He is a member of the Board of the Lifelong Learning Network for the East of England and of the University Vocational Awards Council and also represents the university on various county, regional and national bodies supporting widening participation. Previously he was Associate Dean (AQ) for the Faculty of Natural Sciences and has recently completed three years as Vice-President (Education and Training) of the Institute of Biology.