

The Ruler or the Ruled? Exploring meaningful measures of success for a diverse student population

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Student diversity and the Open University UK

At the Open University UK, strategic focus on diversity of the student body gathers strongly around the UK's 'widening participation' agenda. The term Widening Participation (WP) became understood in England from 1997 onwards as a New Labour government policy agenda around tackling social exclusions and inequality, although efforts to widen the social base in Higher Education (HE) can be traced back to the 1960s. In England, students that are the focus of such WP activity include non-traditional learners such as those with:

- Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds
- Disabilities
- Disadvantaged social & economic backgrounds (as a proxy for social class)
- No prior family background in HE
- A background in the care of Local Authorities
- Opportunity to only study part-time
- Non-traditional qualifications

The policy around widening participation is sufficiently open to allow variable interpretation and operationalization at institutional level. Universities are, to a large extent, able to pursue the tackling of under-representation in higher education in whichever manner they see most appropriate. There have been recent moves to increase the accountability of institutions, which can be seen as a response to the further lifting of the cap on maximum tuition fees chargeable by English institutions to domestic students, through more careful scrutiny of Access Agreements, which each university must agree with a non-governmental organisation called the Office for Fair Accessⁱ, in order to demonstrate how they are directing additional fee income towards widening participation.

Current strategy and targets

Access

The current institutional strategic response to widening participation at the Open Universityⁱⁱ is articulated in its Widening Participation Strategy 2009-12ⁱⁱⁱ. This strategy sets out a commitment to tackling under-representation of students from more socially deprived backgrounds. It focusses on promoting and enabling the *access* of such students and sets out targets to increase the proportion of students from more socially deprived backgrounds in the overall student body.

The institution uses a proxy measure of social deprivation derived from students' postcodes. The UK Indices of Multiple Deprivation are an "important tool for identifying the most disadvantaged areas in England so that resources could be appropriately targeted" (p3. Noble et al. 2008) and are used for a variety of purposes across the UK as way of allocating resources. The indices make use of data from a wide variety of sources and focus on seven 'deprivation domains' which relate to income, employment, health, education and training, housing, crime and living environment^{iv}.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England^v (HEFCE) distributes additional funding to HEIs that attract students from more socially deprived areas identified by the Indices of Multiple Deprivation and the funding is weighted so as to be higher for the most deprived students. Therefore, students in the most deprived quintile attract twice the funding of the second most deprived quintile. Students in the least three deprived quintiles attract no extra funding to institutions^{vi}. Similar funding methods which reward institutions that attract students from more deprived areas have been used in Wales and Scotland.

The Open University chose to closely mirror the HEFCE method of identifying a student as being from a more socially deprived background and it adopted for the period 2009-2012 a definition of target students living in the 25% most deprived areas measured by the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, who also have no previous experience of higher education. Due to nuances in policy and statistical measurements across the four UK nations – England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland – the Open University has adopted discrete targets for each nation. Latest data suggests that all four nations are exceeding targets in terms of *access*.

Success

The Strategy also sets out a commitment to improving the *success* of students from more socially deprived backgrounds, and provides targets to narrow the attainment gap between the most and least socially deprived students.

One further commitment is to increase the attainment of students from Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds, for which a similar target is set to narrow the attainment gap between BME and non-BME students.

Whereas there is at the Open University a reported positive trend in improving *access* in terms of the proportion of students from more deprived areas, narrowing the attainment gap between both more and less socially deprived students and BME and non-BME students remains stubbornly elusive, notwithstanding a research programme aimed specifically at addressing this attainment gap.

Reviewing the measures

The current university Widening Participation Strategy is now under review. The contemporary context of higher education in the UK, most especially in England, is one which is opened up to market forces brought about by the further lifting of the cap on maximum tuition fees chargeable and severe cuts to the teaching grants available to higher education institutions. It has created new challenges for tackling under-representation in higher education. There is widespread concern that notwithstanding a proposed new ‘fairer’ mechanism for repayment of tuition fees through the student loans system, students from more socially deprived backgrounds will be more debt averse and so less likely to enter a higher education with dramatically higher tuition fees (Moore et al, 2011). A revised Strategy for the Open University is likely to focus very narrowly on students that will be able to benefit from a new government funding stream available through a National Scholarship Programme announced by the Government’s Department for Business, Innovation and Skills^{vii}, which is likely to be able to support around 2,500 students at the Open University by funding a large proportion of their tuition fees. Eligibility for this support is to be assessed primarily on students’ household income. Notwithstanding this narrowing of focus, the university has made an express commitment to a number of priority groups in its activity to support diversity to:

- Students who are socio-economically disadvantaged
- Disabled students
- Students in prison (subject to funding arrangements)
- BME students who are socio-economically disadvantaged

- Carers

in addition to a commitment to maintain the current proportion of more disadvantaged students represented in the overall student body. Considerable uncertainty remains over the Open University's (or any other English HEI's) ability to maintain previous commitments to widening participation and student diversity, including much uncertainty over what measures should be used to assess diversity and student success in the future.

References

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2011) *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*, June 2011, Cm 8122. Available at: <http://discuss.bis.gov.uk/hereform/> [Accessed November 4, 2011].

Moore J, McNeill J and Halliday S. A. (2011) 'Worth the Price? Some findings from young people on attitudes to increases in university tuition fees', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 13(1), 57-70.

Noble M, McLennan D, Wilkinson K, Whitworth A, Barnes, H (2008) *The English Indices of Multiple Deprivation*, Communities and Local Government: London. Available at <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/733520.pdf> [Accessed November 4, 2011].

ⁱ <http://www.offa.org.uk> The Office for Fair Access is responsible for the promotion and safeguarding of fair access to higher education for lower income and other under-represented groups following the introduction of higher tuition fees in 2006-07.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.open.ac.uk> The Open University (OU) is the United Kingdom's only university dedicated to distance learning. The University has an open access policy, and for most courses no previous educational qualifications are required. Teaching is undertaken through a model described as supported open learning. Students learn in their own time and place by reading course material, working on activities and assignments and sometimes working with other students. The University has around 150,000 undergraduate and 30,000 postgraduate students. Nearly all the OU's students are studying part time, and 70% are in full time employment. More than 25,000 students live outside the UK, some studying directly with the OU and some studying through partnership institutions.

ⁱⁱⁱ Available at

http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/wideningparticipation/files/wideningparticipation/file/ebook_widening-participation_strategy%282009-12%29_I3.pdf

^{iv} These domains are mapped to geographical areas called Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs), which each have a population of around 1,500 individuals and which represent one of the smallest geographical statistical units in common usage. There are 32,483 LSOAs in England. Each LSOA can be ranked according to their scores against the seven domains of deprivation.

^v www.hefce.ac.uk The governmental body responsible for distributing higher education teaching and research funds.

^{vi} <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/fund/0809/postcode.htm>

^{vii} <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/nsp/>