

## **WIDENING PARTICIPATION in HE – PERCEPTIONS**

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In my March 2007 report for the LEP, the Widening Participation (WP) initiatives of LSBU were summarised, in the context of STEM transition issues in engineering. It may be helpful to those engaged in STEM transition and concerned about retention to examine both positive and negative perceptions of WP initiatives, in order to arrive at a consensus which can be applied to the National Engineering Programme.

These perceptions, from a wide range of stakeholders, have been identified through discussion, research papers, media commentary or student and staff surveys. It should be noted that some perceptions could be placed as either positive or negative depending on viewpoint. The main viewpoint adopted is that of a prospective student and their families with exposure to national media and to a lesser extent that of employers. They are presented in principle stakeholder categories, and largely linked to online references.

### **Positive perceptions of Widening Participation initiatives in Higher Education**

#### **1. Academic stakeholders**

- Focus on high achieving candidates (Calman)
- Admissions staff trained to avoid culturally narrow stereotyping (HEFCE 2)

#### **2. Supporting family stakeholders**

- More students attracted from families or communities w/o prior HE experience (ESC)
- Attractive to those with ability but currently of 'Not in Employment, Education or Training' status (NEET)
- Engages with the Gifted and Talented Network (LG&T)
- WP benefits from prolonged contact and support by HE for schools (Oxford)

#### **3. Student stakeholders**

- "Guaranteed" places in HE via successful completion of a Foundation Course (FETB)
- Increased number of pathways to HE, through work based learning and e-learning (LLN)
- Support network offered (UKRC)
- Mentors offered to ease transition (UKRC)
- Inclusive of disabled and dyslexic students
- Particularly addresses gender and ethnic minority issues in HE
- A route to better financial prospects through vocational learning (LLN)
- Diploma option for partial completion of a course
- An opportunity to succeed after failure during an earlier disadvantaged school career
- Candidates ability assessed by admissions staff wrt their own school's benchmark
- Credit transfer *may* be guaranteed (HEFCE)
- Progression agreements considered morally binding, at least (HEFCE)
- Helps you ( the student) to 'become what you want to be' (LSBU)
- Comforting to be amongst equally poor students (Wolverhampton, POLAR)

- Prospect of a bursary from professional bodies or the government if enrolling on a science degree course with a view to teaching (Frean; DfES)
- Gives people a second chance to climb out of chronic poverty (id21)
- Most students to HE under WP programmes complete their courses and secure relevant employment (according to anecdote, pending survey results)
- WP is a passport to a better life for asylum seekers
- Appealing to those in employment (from junior to senior positions) seeking upskilling

#### 4. Employer stakeholders

- Supported by large companies who are in a position to support the further internal training of graduates (ESC)
- Supported by companies able to release staff for part-time study
- A way to reduce long term the socio-economic ills of the nation through the encouragement of life long learning, personalised learning plans, etc (LLN, Aspire etc)

### Negative Perceptions to Widening Participation initiatives in Higher Education

Amongst academic staff, supporting families, employers and student stakeholders, the following negative perceptions of Widening Participation have been identified, with possible solutions indicated in the following table. Some of the issues identified have been raised by more than one stakeholder group, and all of them are of concern to HEFCE and Government promoters of WP initiatives. The remedies to negative perceptions have a wide range of resource implications. However, they are vital to ensure a healthy take-up of Courses.

Negative Perceptions of Academics	Remedies
Back to basics approach needed by already stretched academic staff	More dedicated staff and streaming of students
Some support offered for weaker students only; students drop out of HE due to inadequate levels of support	Enhanced Fast Track STEM within Faculties, with drop in session and good publicity
Lowering of academic standards or dumbing down of courses to accommodate WP students	Separate remedial classes from mainstream teaching
Devaluing of some Degrees through WP (Vignoles)	Publicise success stories and engage Accrediting bodies
Increased workload for academic staff	More HPL's or visiting lecturers from industry
Inadequate data collected and publicised to gauge effectiveness of WP initiatives	Evaluate specific Course demographic data and highlight shortcomings to Management and external stakeholders
WP awareness patchy amongst HE staff	Regular publicity via website, Newsletters and staff Forums
The route to sustainability for post-1992 HE institutions <i>only</i>	Publicise that WP is for the whole of UK HE
Of little relevance to the sustainability and maintenance of academic standards in the Russell	As above Publicise that WP is for the whole of UK HE

Group of HE institutions	
The route to sustainability for post-1992 HE institutions only	Publicise that WP is for the whole of UK HE
Marginalisation of WP candidates is expected in pre-1992 Universities as competition for HE places increases with greater A-Level attainment in the UK	Demonstrate value of alternative pathways, with case studies and ensure message gets to employers
<b>Negative Perceptions of Supporting Families</b>	<b>Suggested Remedy</b>
Not particularly effective in bringing in poorer social groups to HE	Offer generous Bursaries to those with ability for HE
Not enough work experience likely to be on offer or encouragement for PT work while studying	Engage closely with willing employers and adjust timetable/course length to allow for more work experience
HE may not have sufficient facilities for STEM to support those arriving through WP initiatives	Enhance lab and online VLE facilities
A waste of time without good A-Levels for many <i>professional</i> pathways. Likely career to be as <i>technician</i> .	Publicise success stories of part-time students, late returners to education etc
LPN (Low Participating Neighbourhoods) image of WP persists	Publicise wide remit of WP
Enables lads with ASBOS to reform and lead meaningful lives via education (Morgan)	Prepare incoming students for a wide diversity of intake, based on ability
<b>Negative Perceptions of Employers</b>	<b>Suggested Remedy</b>
Not of particular interest to SMEs struggling to develop joiners to become managers	Engage with SME employers and seek support for them, with 'seedcorn' grants, etc
Globalisation of enterprise requires able and adaptable all-rounders	Support students to attain the desired status in the workplace
WP will fail without funding and resources for prolonged contact and support by HE for schools (Oxford)	More funding for dedicated HE staff prepared to work in schools and colleges
School usually do not train students how to study, nor address expectations of HE	Widespread availability of 'Learning Performance Seminars', in schools, with HE staff involvement

<b>Negative Perceptions of Students</b>	<b>Suggested Remedy</b>
Lowering of starting salaries with increased participation in HE/influx to the job market	Publicise courses and employment which values graduates
Desire by some (e.g. female) students not to be treated as a 'special case' and to be treated equally with majority intake	Assure students that WP and diversity checks on the curriculum will benefit all
Success in HE may depend on rapport with an assigned mentor	Ensure opportunity to change mentor
Encouraging those weak in STEM to risk having a	Enhance STEM skills before

debt-ridden future	entering HE, via FE/HE collaborations
Targeted largely at disabled or dyslexic students	Emphasise inclusiveness
Encouraging those weak in STEM to risk having a debt-ridden future	Enhance STEM skills before entering HE, via FE/HE collaborations
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The (bursary) money does not go with the WP talk	Financial carrots are essential to entice some groups to HE
Novice staff, poorly trained in WP issues, typically engage with Year 1 students	Ensure senior staff inspire Y1 students wherever possible
Academic staff, especially some HPLs, may not always treat mature students with respect/professionally	Seek HPLs from an Adult Education background and trained to engage with diversity
Mature students under WP do not wish to mix with school leavers in class/studies/teamwork and vv.	Resource implications if classes split

### Conclusions

The range of issues identified indicates that Widening Participation means different things to different people, sometimes coloured by their own life experiences, their attitude to competitiveness in education as well as to life in general. It is clear that some of the issues are emotive and that competent and substantial surveys of both students and their mentors should give a better understanding of the impact of the widening participation agenda on those to whom it is targeted. Complete and reliable statistics on young people being tracked through the system to graduation and beyond are vital in order to assess the effectiveness of WP programmes.

### Recommendations

As an initial move, contact should be made with the 'Linking London' Group headed by Birkbeck College towards funding for an LSBU study, via an established questionnaire directed at current students studying in ESBE at LSBU. In addition, SE London Lifelong Learning Network should be approached for funding to identify particular issues affecting retention or progression of WP candidates at LSBU. Research should be identified or carried out on the value of 'affirmative action' approach to widening participation as practiced in the USA.

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DfES Bursaries for prospective STEM teachers

[http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn\\_id=2005\\_0060](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2005_0060)

ESC, Engineering Subject Centre: <http://www.engsc.ac.uk/er/wp/index.asp>

FETB, Further Education Training Bill:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmpublic/furthered/070612/pm/70612s02.htm>

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HEFCE – Progression Agreements via LLN

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/lln/progress/>

HEFCE 2– Young Participation in HE

[http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05\\_03/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05_03/)

id21 – Escaping poverty: <http://www.id21.org/insights/insights46/insights-iss46-art00.html>

LG&T: London Gifted & Talented Network

<http://www.londongt.org/homepages/index.php?page=parents>

LLN: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/lln/>

LSBU Ambassadors video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twmU7xjuUxE>

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[http://www.connexions.gov.uk/partnerships/publications/uploads/cp/Tackling\\_NEETs\\_Summary.doc](http://www.connexions.gov.uk/partnerships/publications/uploads/cp/Tackling_NEETs_Summary.doc)

Oxford: <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/po/news/2006-07/jul/05.shtml>

POLAR: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/polar/>

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