Widening participation Bristol-fashion: embedding policy and practice at the Universities of Bristol and the West of England

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Structured Abstract

Purpose:
The paper reviews, compares and contrasts the experiences of two neighbouring universities, the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England, in the introduction, pursuit and institutional embedding of widening participation (WP) policies and programmes.

Methodology/approach:
Comparative analysis of, and commentary on, the historical and on-going experiences of the two universities' WP activities.

Findings:
Contextual differences in the missions and roles played by the two universities inevitably mean their experiences have different underlying logics, but in terms of the practical drivers at work and outcomes more subtle similarities are also evident.

Practical implications:
Making direct comparisons between the parallel experiences of universities sharing a common geographical setting can be illuminating, as can examples of their joint working and collaboration. Other neighbouring universities could follow suit.

Social implications:
The ‘takes’ on WP by different universities inevitably reflect the types of institutions they are and aim to be, but successful WP practices and policy embedding is not the prerogative of any particular university type.

Originality/value of paper:
The direct inter-university comparison of WP policy offered here is rare within the literature.

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1. Introduction

Like many British provincial cities, Bristol houses two very different Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs). As their responses to the national widening participation (WP) agenda show obvious differences, the temptation to regard them separately as ‘case studies’ is strong. But we prefer to explore them comparatively, stressing similarities and the inevitable differences. Not only do their students live as undergraduates in the same city environment, seeking accommodation in the same housing market, term-time employment in the same local economy and share leisure and entertainment facilities, the WP trajectories of Bristol’s HEIs intersect in other ways too. This is especially so when considering how each has ‘mainstreamed’ WP into its institutional fabric, and set
about delivering WP among existing and potential future students, effecting substantial changes in their practices and ethos.

2. Institutional contexts

Four miles separate the University of Bristol (UoB) campus, amidst city centre buildings, from the University of the West of England (UWE), mostly on a greenfield city-fringe site. In many ways they typify the national ‘binary divide’ of pre- and post-1992 institutions. UWE, previously ‘Bristol Polytechnic’, has nearly 30,000 students, 80% of them undergraduates of whom 20% are part-time, taught across about 600 programmes (see Evans (2009) for a historical account of UWE). Its neighbour, founded in 1876 (see Carleton 1984/6), is smaller (c13,000 undergraduates) and more dependent on full-time students, especially for its undergraduate programmes (over 98%). It teaches fewer programmes (about 400), specialising in a more ‘traditional’ academic diet, while UWE has relatively more ‘applied’ subjects. UoB belongs to the Russell Group of research-led universities, UWE to the University Alliance, those with both a research and business focus.

The social composition of the two HEIs’ 2007/08 intakes are sharply different, with UoB’s drawing 62% from state schools (UWE 89%), 14% from low social class households (28% at UWE) and just 3% from low participation neighbourhoods (LPNs) (UWE 9%). In common with such ‘elitist’-intake universities, UoB’s retention rates, at c98%, are among the highest nationally. So Bristol’s HEIs also typify the stereotypical ‘old’ and ‘new’ WP landscape, one with a traditional intake mostly staying the course, the other a more socially-representative intake, suffering greater subsequent attrition.

To support their WP work, both institutions have established a raft of key performance indicators (KPIs), targets and ‘milestones’ too numerous to detail. UoB has more of these milestones than any other UK university (unpublished
survey of university access agreements by one of us (AGH)), and now distinguishes between those for students it initially attracts and those eventually recruited. With its somewhat lower entry standards, retention rates and more regionally-focussed mission, UWE’s KPIs include entry tariffs, and targets for subsequent progression to first employment and recruitment from the South West region.

3. Actions

Both universities offer a persuasive case for firmly embedding WP in institutional missions and practices. While the fine print is inevitably varied (and detailed - UWE’s recent HEFCE WP Strategic Assessment runs to 71 pages plus 14 appendices!) both can support such claims by:

- A University-wide *Widening Participation Strategy*
- A dedicated and sizeable unit tasked with leading and managing its delivery
- Expectations placed by the *Strategy* ‘horizontally’ across all faculties and student-facing central services
- A ‘vertical’ structure of supporting, reporting and accountability stretching to Senior Management (Deputy Vice-Chancellor level)
- A reflection of WP principles in other policy and strategy domains, notably Admissions, Equality and Diversity, Education and the overall Mission statement.

Both universities also support the institutional embedding of WP through research activities. UWE colleagues led a major investigation into low participation neighbourhoods of south Bristol (Raphael Reed et al., 2007), and the co-ordination of that report’s umbrella ‘Four Cities’ study for its funder (HEFCE, 2007), while work by Harrison and Peacock (2009), and Waller (e.g. 2006) further illustrate a diverse and vibrant WP research agenda. At UoB
corresponding research has been triggered by questioning the University’s own WP experiences. So Paton and Surridge (2005) surveyed the on-course experiences of different ‘WP’ student groups, while the Sociology Department twice investigated the reasoning of candidates turning down offers of a place at the University (Levitas et al, 1991; Levitas et al, 2006). In the 2004-09 WP Strategy such research was placed on a firm institutionally-supported and -funded footing through establishing the WP Research Cluster (WPRC), dedicated to provide an evidence base for UoB’s WP policies and practices. The WPRC has hosted two national research seminars, and peer-reviewed publications (eg Hoare and Aitchison, 2009; Hoare and Johnston, 2011). It led the University’s 2008/09 review of WP milestones, now based on empirically-verified evidence of ‘educational disadvantage’. The University’s rationale here is that WP facilitates the entry of students of the necessary academic potential from whatever background, as captured by the strap-line of the 2004/09 Strategy – ‘Quality through Diversity’.

The two university WP chronologies have also been similar. UWE can trace WP mainstreaming to the establishment of its Community Action Centre in 1995. UWE’s first WP Strategy was approved in 2001, and the Outreach Centre (which oversees its WP activities) began in 2005. UoB also recognised the need to respond swiftly to Dearing’s WP agenda. Its first ‘Participation’ strategy was published in 1999, with further iterations in 2001 and 2004, leading to the current (2009-16) Strategy. Its WP Office was established in 2000.

Today, each university’s involvement in WP activities touches every faculty and most academic departments somewhere. Both universities are heavily involved in outreach, admissions processes and on-course support, with UWE also supporting WP students seeking employment.

Finally, we should note some important collaboration. The two HEIs jointly deliver much of their local outreach, from contacts in primary schools to parents’
evenings and the Aimhigher roadshow. And since 2006/07 academics and WP managers have met regularly to compare experiences and launch joint research projects, including one funded by a substantial Leverhulme grant, tracking the longitudinal experiences of ‘matched pairs’ of new students from Autumn 2010. This chapter is another such output.

4. Effectiveness

As we have seen, using the qualitative criterion of significant and widespread institutional impact, their WP agendas have been effective agents for change in both Bristol’s universities. What of their more publicly-visible success on the quantitative measurements used by the HE academy? As, the percentage of undergraduates drawn from WP groups has steadily risen nationally attributing any university’s KPI improvements to its WP endeavours is over-simplistic. However, UWE’s achievements are still impressive and consistent with raising WP’s three ‘As’ of awareness, aspiration and attainment. Since the first (1999) set of such KPIs, UWE has seen a steady increase in the diversity of its intake, in the take-up of student bursaries and growth of many other WP activities. UoB has fewer such quantitative markers of success, though can point to growing enrolments on its Summer Schools and local ‘Access to Bristol’ programmes. However, it has been less successful on its nationally-benchmarked KPIs and self-generated Milestones. The University’s fine-grained (down to Department level) annual profiling of achievements against its WP milestones produces a wealth of detail. Results have inevitably been varied, but fewer clear and consistent trends to increased diversity are apparent. As its HEFCE Strategic Assessment noted, while the 2008/09 admissions’ cycle saw a slight rise in Black and Minority Ethnic and low social class students, mature student recruitment remained static and LPN, state school and low-performing school intakes were lower. An over-arching review of these milestones led to a more sharply-focussed and evidence-based set of revisions: that for Intake
(rather than Applications) now concentrates on mature students and ‘school performance’. For the latter, UoB now has evidence of an ‘educational disadvantage’ gap between prior attainment and degree potential, with appropriate information on applicants provided to admissions’ tutors at the point of decision-making. As noted in the recent national ‘Harris’ report on WP in selective universities, UoB’s pioneering methodology and rationale has sector-wide application, providing, for the first time, a robust defence against ‘social engineering’ charges, while ensuring applicants are still treated holistically, as individuals (OFFA, 2010).

5. Reflections

All significant WP developments at Bristol’s universities can ultimately be traced back at least to if not before the national agenda initiated by Dearing. Thereafter both universities were swiftly out of their blocks. Subsequent political imperatives, WP financial provisions and reporting obligations framed their management of WP affairs. But both also exercised strong local control, setting a distinctive proactive imprint to their actions, allowing identification of key drivers and facilitators on their WP stories.

Neither university has felt constrained by HESA Performance Indicators over setting KPIs and WP targets; these were in place before the first tranche of Access Agreements made them mandatory. With their growing institutional commitment, both have employed block grant funding to support WP activities, with supplementation from Alumni, particularly UoB, with its limited HEFCE funding-formula income from specifically recruiting ‘WP’ students.

Both also responded to different geographical imperatives in their WP landscapes. UWE has been heavily involved in local and regional outreach: its relative emphasis on part-time study makes it particularly attractive to locally-resident students with other home- or work-centred commitments. Its greater
involvement with local academies, trust schools and college Federation partnerships and hosting the regional Aimhigher centre reflect and reinforce this local/regional engagement.

UoB’s student catchment and operational sphere are more widespread; its involvement with the Sutton Trust educational charity’s summer schools, and their potential inter-university common ‘compact’ scheme are nationwide, while its discussion forums for WP and admissions issues are through the nationwide Russell Group rather than regional consortia.

At the risk of over-generalisation, UoB’s WP engagement has been driven more than UWE’s by desires simultaneously to broaden access and raise academic standards, and informed by its ‘high-vis’ media profile. Most courses are strongly ‘selecting’ rather than ‘recruiting’, and assured of a stream of well-qualified applicants from its traditional markets. Recently, UoB has sometimes topped the UK university league table in applications-per-place, not needing more high quality applications to fill its courses.

However, that UoB still moved speedily to joined-up delivery on the Dearing WP recommendations owed much to the energy and charisma of a then DVC, Professor David Evans, who skilfully led the early tentative footsteps of the WP programme. An early buy-in from senior management was also crucial in winning hearts and minds within the University. The growing role of WP research also chimes with UoB’s wider self-portrayal as among the sector’s research elite.

At UWE, in contrast, the case for WP support is more fundamental and self-evident. While widely recognised as one of the most successful British post-1992 universities, research has traditionally been less of a priority than at UoB, but its dependence on local recruitment and teaching-related income stronger. Greater financial dependence on non-traditional student groups gives its WP efforts a sharper economic cutting-edge. In moving progressively to a more joined-up
programme there, as in UoB, an on-campus campaign had to be won, and here too the engagement of senior management and evidence of the success of past WP practices and spending proved crucial.

Of course, everything has not always been plain sailing. Some initial unease with the WP agenda, especially at UoB, has been confronted with argument and evidence. In the uncertain times ahead most HEIs are likely to face ‘rationalisations’, and WP-facing staff will not be immune, though this could increase the cost-effectiveness advantage of the UoB’s applications-based, ‘contexting’ approach to WP, over the higher-labour cost, harder-to-evaluate alternative of outreach. There may be other campus-specific challenges too. Time will tell if UWE’s KPI on higher entry tariffs will harmonise with its WP agenda, while UoB will find it harder to stand against using the A* A Level grade (consistently opposed on WP grounds) if its rivals increasingly do. Tighter management of UCAS offers and any centralisation of their management away from departments could have similar implications.

Such uncertainties aside, as we write each university has its immediate WP future strategy firmly in place and in different ways, both Bristol universities appear in good heart to confront the difficult times ahead for WP throughout the sector. So UoB will continue its emphasis on ‘outstanding outreach, ‘diversifying intake’, ‘student support’ and ‘monitoring and research’ while at UWE the overarching future goal to continue embedding inclusive WP policy and practice throughout the student journey, from pre-entry to post-graduation employment.

Inevitably, at Bristol’s universities two sets of WP policies and practices have been forged in separate and distinctive institutional contexts. Unsurprisingly, its universities’ experiences contrast significantly. Comparing them directly, as WP literatures rarely do, shows these in sharp relief. But in other respects, these experiences are remarkably similar – both are ‘good news’ experiences, spanning similar time periods with similar casts of leading characters and story-
lines. They have recognised their differences and played to their strengths, to the benefit of their WP agendas. Finally, their collaborations here provide the chance to share experiences, discussing and promoting joint ventures in ways that otherwise would not have been glimpsed, let alone delivered. Other same-city universities could do the same.
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