



“IN PARTNERSHIP WITH YOU AND YOUR COMMUNITY”. OPENING DOORS FOR PARENTS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

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Summary

This presentation builds on contributions to the EADTU conferences in 2005 and 2006 in which we outlined The Open University's collaborative approach to widening participation and a set of principles for good practice (2005) and described our developing work with Trade Union Learning Clubs (2006). It describes how our developing practice has been evaluated, drawn together and linked with public policy to create a nation wide “parents, families and communities” programme of outreach activity, acclaimed by government as “innovation at the heart of government policy in widening participation”.

The programme has been built through ongoing action research, evaluation, evidence based investment of resource, building strategic links between widening participation in higher education and public policy around families, children and social exclusion, and building ground level partnerships with local organisations with complementary objectives: extended schools, children's centres, unions, voluntary and community groups. Through this we have developed new models of outreach and course delivery which overcome widely experienced barriers to higher education participation in disadvantaged communities.

This is a unique programme of activity which builds on the distinctive strengths of the OU, tailors these to local circumstances and creates for the OU a distinctive market niche in higher education in the UK.

Introduction

This presentation builds on contributions to the EADTU conferences in 2005 and 2006 which outlined The Open University's collaborative approach to widening participation and a set of principles for good practice (2005)¹ and described our developing work with Trade Union Learning Clubs (2006)². This presentation describes how our developing practice has been evaluated, drawn together and linked with public policy to create a nation-wide “families and

¹ Hart, M. (2005) *Supported open learning, collaborative delivery and widening participation; key findings and student experiences from The Open University's Widening Participation Programme*, EADTU

² Hart, M. and Nelson, A. (2006) *Widening participation in the workplace: a partnership between the Open University, Aimhigher and unionlearn* EADTU

communities” programme of outreach activity, acclaimed by government as “innovation at the heart of government policy in widening participation”³.

Widening participation in higher education in Britain

The fastest period of growth in higher education in Britain took place between about 1988, when 15% of young people participated, and the early 1990s. By the turn of the century that figure had risen to around 38% (HEFCE, 2005)⁴. In 2003, the government set a target that by 2010, 50% of young people between 18 and 30 should be participating in higher education. The importance of this was reinforced by Lord Leitch’s influential review of skills (2006)⁵, which argued persuasively that a step change in the attainment of higher level skills amongst the British population is essential to enable Britain to maintain its place in the global economy. At present 40% of young people in Britain take part in higher education (Higher Education Initial Participation Rate)⁶. A further challenge lies in the demographic profile of those participating. Those young people who live in the most advantaged 20% of areas are five to six times more likely to enter higher education than those living in the least advantaged 20% of areas. So “widening participation in higher education has a key focus on bridging the social class gap, which despite progress in broadening the socio-economic composition of the student population, remains stubborn and persistent”. (HEFCE, 2005).

Much of the government’s attention has focused on raising aspirations of young people through the Aimhigher initiative⁷ which encourages young people to think about the benefits and opportunities of higher education, and on enhancing vocational progression routes from further education colleges to higher education through the programme of Lifelong Learning Networks⁸. Concerns that progress in raising participation rates were stalling, led to government guidance on targeting for Aimhigher partnerships and institutions in 2007. This guidance aims to channel resources more effectively to those areas where participation is lowest. Alongside this has been an increasing recognition that there is a need to work with young people and children from an earlier age, and with the family and community networks which influence young people. This reflects the findings of HEFCE’s (2006)⁹ review of widening participation research which concludes that “characteristics which are set very early in life – age, gender, family background and initial schooling – predict later “lifelong learning trajectories” with 90% accuracy”.

Widening participation outreach in The Open University; the policy context

The Open University (OU) was set up “to promote educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential”. Its open access policy has always been seen as central to this, and continues to be important. However, in line with public policy more widely, a more targeted approach is now required. The Open University’s Widening Participation Strategy Review, 2009-12, approved by Senate in January 2009 set out a single focus for widening participation recruitment, aligned with public policy and funding drivers. This focus is on students who live in the 25% most disadvantaged communities, and who have no higher education qualification. Such students currently constitute 15.8% of our new undergraduate population.

³ Denham, J.(2007) Secretary of State Internal presentation to The Open University

⁴ HEFCE (2005) *Young Participation in Higher Education*

⁵ HMSO (2006) Leitch Review of Skills *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills*

⁶ <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/trends/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.showIndicator&cid=4&iid=23>, accessed 9th March 2009.

⁷ <http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk/practitioner/home/>, accessed 12th March, 2009

⁸ <http://www.lifelonglearningnetworks.org.uk/>, accessed 12th March, 2009

⁹ HEFCE (2006), *Review of widening participation research; addressing the barriers to participation in higher education*

As a distance teaching university in which the majority of students are mature learners, The Open University is positioned to make a distinctive contribution to raising aspirations of young people, and one which complements the focus of most other higher education institutions on the young people themselves. That distinctive contribution is to provide parents and communities with locally based opportunities to engage in learning at higher education level. There is an increasing body of evidence about the impact of parental involvement on outcomes for children (e.g. Cabinet Office, 2008¹⁰, DfES 2003¹¹, DfES 2005¹², Fernstein, L. and Duckworth, K, 2006¹³). The Cabinet Office summarises this with the statement that “parents’ interest in their children’s education has been shown to have four times more influence on attainment by age 16 than socio-economic background”. It also notes that the immediate neighbourhoods in which people live appear to have stronger influences on their outcomes than their wider area or region, and therefore argues in favour of an area-based, co-ordinated multi-agency approach, focusing on a small geographical area. Under the government’s social exclusion and Every Child Matters¹⁴ agendas, there is a plethora of initiatives which seek to create better outcomes for children and families. These include a nation-wide programme of Sure Start children’s centres and extended schools, which are commissioned not only to work with children, but also to work with the families and communities in which those children spend their lives. The Open University’s outreach programme with parents, families and communities is designed to capitalise on the synergies between these objectives.

Widening participation in The Open University: the development of practice

“Some of my kids’ drawings made me want to delve into their minds and see what planet they’re on! So when both of my kids went into full-time education it gave me the perfect chance to find out.

I was nervous at first – it had been so long since I’d written an essay and my writing was a mess! But I soon got back into the habit, and my tutor was fantastic – I really didn’t feel like I was being judged or had to prove myself. Now, studying is simply part of my day, and because my kids see my commitment, I feel I’m inspiring them to learn too.

Being a single mum, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to afford to study, or have the time, but with The Open University my course is free and flexible. It means I can look after my family and learn at the same time – which is perfect for me and my kids”. Zaynab Mansoor, psychology student, who studies through a partnership with extended primary schools in Great Horton, Bradford.

Widening participation outreach practice in The Open University has evolved over a number of years. My paper to the EADTU (Hart, 2005), outlined an emerging set of principles which make this work effective, including a student focus, long term and sustainable outreach activity through partnerships with local organisations, flexibility in course design and delivery and marketing material which positively welcomes non-traditional learners. Successful outcomes for students can be increased by providing support tailored to individual students’ needs and including regular, face-to-face support with peers in familiar surroundings.

¹⁰ Cabinet Office (2008), Aspiration and attainment amongst young people in deprived communities

¹¹ DfES (2003), The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment; a review of the literature

¹² DfES (2005), Involving parents, raising achievement Desfourges, C. and Abouchaar, A.

¹³ Fernstein, L. and Duckworth, K. 2006, Are there effects of mothers’ post-16 education on the next generation? Effects on children’s development and mothers’ parenting. In “Wider Benefits of Learning”, London Centre for research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Institute of Education

¹⁴ <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/> accessed 9th March 2009

A further significant financial investment in this activity in 2006 enabled us to expand this work in the four regions of Britain that have the highest levels of deprivation: London, the North West, Yorkshire and the West Midlands, and to set up a small core widening participation team with a brief to co-ordinate, monitor and evaluate this activity. Outreach practice is managed through our regional offices to enable responsiveness to local conditions, whilst centrally based co-ordination, monitoring and evaluation enables the development of an independent evidence base, and mechanisms to feed learning from practice into wider institutional systems. The evidence base includes rigorous statistical monitoring of numbers of students recruited and their background characteristics, together with information about course completion, attainment and progression rates. It is noteworthy that in the early stages of this activity, the information generated about participation of target group students was often at variance with the subjective perceptions of practitioners of the outcomes of their activity. This reflected the wider issue in higher education of the difficulty of reaching target group students. Statistical information in the evidence base is complemented by qualitative case study analysis of projects and partnerships and of the student experience. This evidence base, and the ability to feed learning into wider systems and policies, are critical elements in enabling us to break down the barriers and remove constraints for students in our target groups.

Building on this basis, it has been possible to progress our activity in a number of key areas, each of these aimed at increasing the number of target group students who participate in Open University study, and/or enhancing the outcomes of their studies. These include:-

- Reaching our target groups more effectively. Our target group students can be identified by a combination of postcode and information about previous educational qualifications. This information has been inputted into a database, through which practitioners can track how many of the students they are recruiting meet our widening participation criteria, and monitor their progress. Aggregating this information enables us to identify which networks and locations are most effective in reaching our target groups. Neighbourhood based partners, such as junior schools, voluntary sector groups and regeneration agencies have generally been more effective in reaching our target students than have more dispersed networks such as trade unions and workplaces. The recruitment, training and modest reward of existing students as “community ambassadors” has proved a valuable mechanism for reaching out to new students, particularly in London.

“The childminders were particularly encouraged by the experiences of The Open University student ambassador. Some of the childminders had not embarked on any “formal studies” for years. They were quite nervous about having to up skill their qualifications”. Children’s Centre manager, Stockwell School, London

- Developing more effective models of outreach practice. Long term and sustainable partnerships have repeatedly been shown to be more effective than “one-off” interventions, and those which are most cost effective to the university involve the active engagement of partners in recruitment of students, and in support such as assistance with course fees and child care. The importance of face to face group support to complement mainstream models of telephone and on-line tuition are repeatedly identified by both students and partners as being critical in developing confidence and motivation. These face to face sessions are led by university employees, who may have differing backgrounds, but share an ability to work with less confident students in group settings, offer a wide range of study skills support across different curriculum areas, and liaise effectively with course tutors who continue to provide the academic support which is integral to any individual course.

In partnership with Stockwell Primary School in London, childminders, teaching assistants and managers studied the short introductory Openings courses, "Understanding management" and "Understanding children". The OU's input included providing initial taster sessions, face-to-face study skills groups and individual telephone tutorials. The childminders used their existing weekly drop-in sessions as a self help group for their study. The Children's Centre manager acted as a "learning champion", working with the childminders to develop their study skills, to provide physical space for them to meet and discuss course related issues, and to feed back to the OU any areas of concern.

- Building a business case for a UK-wide programme of activity. As a consequence of activity in the last three years, we are now able to quantify both the number of students that each outreach worker can realistically recruit and support, and the added income that each student will bring to the university. A financial case for extending this activity across the UK has been developed drawing on the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)'s widening participation income stream, which significantly incentivises recruitment from this group. Furthermore, a range of additional features of this work which will bring long term benefits to the university have been identified. These include connecting the university with disadvantaged communities, raising our profile in those communities, increasing the university's understanding of the needs of those communities and students, creating visibility and bringing reputation benefits.

"Openings for the Future@Bridges" enhances the support already available at Bridges and develops the educational and employability outcomes for our clients. The project actively demonstrates what the OU has to offer in terms of access to higher education and in terms of "top up" courses to enhance employability and professional development. It's great!" Maggie Lennon, Director of Bridges work experience programme for refugees and asylum seekers in Glasgow.

- Identifying key themes for influencing wider institutional policy. The combination of statistical analysis and in-depth qualitative understanding of students built through this activity is enabling us to identify and influence barriers within the university as well as externally, i.e. to mainstream and embed widening participation through a process of "in-reach" as well as "out-reach". (UUK/SCOP, 2005)¹⁵. This learning has had a significant influence on the Widening Participation Strategy Review, 2009-12 approved by the University's Senate in January 2009. This review highlights actions to be undertaken by Student Services and by academic units in support of enhanced rates of retention and attainment of our low socio-economic group students. Each academic unit will develop its own action plan to set out the contribution that it can make in this area, based on an analysis of current student profiles, and with a focus on progression from introductory courses to longer Level 1 courses, and on pedagogy, curriculum development and cross-unit working. Alongside this, Student Services will continue to focus on refining the Fees and Financial Support strategy, Learner Support Framework and activity in relation to English as an Additional Language to ensure that these most effectively meet the needs of target group students.

A further, and important area, to be progressed jointly by Student Services and by academic units is activity to "Bridge the digital divide". The government's new Digital Inclusion action plan¹⁶ notes that "17 million people in the UK still do not use computers and the internet and

¹⁵ Thomas, L. and May, H.(2005) *From the margins to the mainstream: embedding widening participation in higher education*, UUK/SCOP

¹⁶ DCLG (2008) *Delivering Digital Inclusion; An Action Plan for Consultation*

there is a strong correlation between digital exclusion and social exclusion". As the university increasingly depends upon ICT both to deliver its courses and to communicate with students, there is a significant risk that those students who lack access to ICT or confidence in using it will become excluded. Our programme of activity to address this is featured in a parallel presentation to this conference by my colleague Dr. Allen¹⁷.

Conclusion

The Open University's national reach, its part time, supported open learning model, focus on mature students and social justice mission, combine to make it an institution which is unique amongst British higher education institutions. In recent years, widening participation activity has focused on identifying ways in which these characteristics can most effectively be harnessed to make a distinctive contribution and develop a distinctive market niche within the context of developing social policy and understanding of social exclusion. This paper has outlined the ways in which the "parents, families and communities" programme has developed on the basis of learning from practice, and ways in which wider learning from the programme can be used to embed widening participation in mainstream policy and practice in the university.

¹⁷ Allen, M. (2009) *Overcoming the skill gap: the IT access, skills and confidence of "non-traditional" distance learners in higher education*, ICDE