

POLICY RESPONSE

Schools that work for everyone – MillionPlus response to the Green Paper

December 2016

USING ACADEMIC EXPERTISE TO IMPROVE ATTAINMENT, ASPIRATION AND PARTICIPATION

The academic expertise of universities is already being brought to bear on the schools system. In fact, the academic expertise of universities is arguably one of the biggest influences on schools, considering the role that many universities play in the initial training of teachers before they begin their careers and continuing professional development as they progress through those careers. Academic expertise is also brought to bear through the pedagogic research undertaken in universities. The most recent assessment of education research noted that “many universities ... produce work which is among the best from anywhere in the world”¹.

MillionPlus supports the government’s ambitions to promote social mobility and widen participation in higher education. Modern universities, in particular, have done much to widen access to higher education. Overall, participation has increased significantly over the last decade, in particular by students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Increasing participation

The monitoring undertaken by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) confirms that universities are investing nearly £800m per year on work with schools to raise awareness of higher education, increase aspirations to apply to universities and improve participation.² The work done by universities, through outreach programmes and retention activity funded partly through access agreements, has led to a steady increase in participation by students from the most disadvantaged background over the last ten years.

The entry rate for 18 year olds in England now stands at 18.5%, up from 11% in 2007. The analysis conducted by UCAS indicates that there has been a 65% increase in the number of young students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds in England progressing to university.³

UCAS statistics also confirm that the entry rates for the students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have seen a greater increase (+4%) compared to the entry rates of students from the most advantaged backgrounds (+1%). This has had the effect of reducing the participation gap in England, with students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds 2.4 times less likely to enter university than those students from the

¹ 2014 Overview report by UoA Sub-panel 25 (Education), REF, January 2015

<http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/expanel/member/Main%20Panel%20C%20overview%20report.pdf>

² Outcomes of access agreement monitoring for 2014-15, OFFA, May 2016 <https://www.OFFA.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2016.04-Outcomes-of-access-agreements-monitoring-1.pdf>

³ End of Cycle Report 2015, UCAS, December 2015 <https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/eoc-report-2015-v2.pdf>

most advantaged backgrounds. The gap in participation rates remains a matter of concern but the evidence confirms that it is lower than it has been in the past.

Reports by HEFCE, OFFA and the government demonstrate that the investment and engagement of universities working with schools are having positive impacts on increasing participation - not just overall, but among students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, disabled students and students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups (BAME). Universities have also improved retention rate and the qualification levels achieved by these students, improving their chances of getting a good job after graduation and their resilience in the labour market compared to their peers with the same pre-entry qualifications but who choose not to study for a degree.

However, there is still clearly more to do and MillionPlus has supported the strengthened Ministerial Guidance issued to the Director for Fair Access in February 2016 which for the first time focuses on the progression of white working class boys. Universities are also engaged in supporting the investment from HEFCE into the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), and the government's commitment to increase participation even further by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The announcement in December 2016 confirmed that over 200 providers will work with schools in nearly 1000 areas of low participation to increase the number of school leavers entering higher education.⁴

HOW UNIVERSITIES CAN RAISE SCHOOL-LEVEL ATTAINMENT

OFFA has evaluated the work undertaken by universities as part of their access agreements and this has led to improvements in the targeting and focussing of activity on what makes a difference to students. This has led to changes in practice by universities and better outcomes for students. Similarly, the new HEFCE-funded National Collaborative Outreach Programme has drawn on the evidence available to understand where investment in university will make the biggest difference – areas often referred to as 'cold spots.' This means that the new funding will be targeted on supporting those parts of the country that will most benefit from work to increase participation in higher education.

It is also focused on collaboration. Creating coalitions of universities to collaborate in supporting schools in their areas will enable economies of scale that ensure more students can benefit from engagement with universities and academic expertise that help them (the students) to raise their aspirations, increase their attainment and boost their participation in higher education.

Not all students progress to higher education from schools. Many progress to university from further education colleges, university technical colleges and sixth form colleges. Modern universities have strong links with further education colleges which provide important progression routes and have direct links with UTCs.

The role of university teacher education departments

One of the most important factors in progression and attainment at school is the quality of teaching and the ability of teachers to access professional development not only in their early careers but also throughout their careers. In contrast to other high-performing countries, the role of universities in delivering initial teacher training and professional development has been downgraded since 2010. Unlike many other graduate professions, teachers have no entitlement to professional development opportunities which are

⁴ The new National Collaborative Outreach Programme will invest £60m in 29 local consortia projects in nearly 1000 areas of disadvantage in England: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newsarchive/2016/Name,111712,en.html>

largely determined by schools and often focus on delivery of initiatives such as changes in exam and other regimes.

There is an opportunity to take a different approach by revisiting the entitlement of teachers to professional development, building on the partnerships between university education departments and schools and better utilising the expertise of teacher and subject educators in universities and schools.

MillionPlus has also advocated that areas of low HE progression and lower attainment by LEP area should be targeted with a multi-agency approach which involves universities, colleges, schools and local authorities.

We therefore strongly support not only HEFCE's NCOP programme but also the announcement that DfE will fund 6 education opportunity zones in specified areas and support the Department's ambitions to add more geographic areas.

UNIVERSITIES AND SCHOOL SPONSORSHIP

MillionPlus does not agree that universities should be required to sponsor schools as a condition of being able to charge fees above the lower fee cap (£6000 in 2016-17).

Diversity and difference

The best way to ensure high quality and effective engagement of universities with schools is to encourage diverse and different relationships. Mandating a single approach, based on an input measure rather than an outcome measure, is likely to distract from long-term partnerships and relationships that impact on raising aspirations, attainment and participation.

Making sponsorship a condition of fees may encourage perverse behaviours in both schools and universities, with governors of each making decisions based not on what is best for their organisational strategy, but in order to meet a specific target.

By promoting, prioritising and privileging one element of engagement with schools over all the other work undertaken by universities, this proposal runs the risk of discouraging long-term, strategic, effective partnerships in place of simply finding a school to sponsor.

The value of a voluntary approach is demonstrated by the fact that as at December 2015, according to HEFCE data, around 40 universities were already involved in sponsoring schools.⁵ However, a mandatory approach is not the most effective way to ensure that a university's academic and other expertise can be linked with schools. It also risks ignoring the different strengths of universities and schools but also assuming that such an approach lends itself to engagement regardless of geography and locality.

The policy as stated in the green paper is potentially confusing. It uses the word 'universities' and the term 'higher education institutions' interchangeably, even though these two refer to different organisations. The new Higher Education and Research Bill refers to higher education providers, as part of its attempt to ensure a level playing field across the sector. The DfE, therefore, needs to be clearer in stating how the policy will apply, should it be implemented.

The risks of a mandatory approach to school sponsorship

⁵ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/workprovide/schools/academies/>

A mandatory approach has the potential to undermine the government's other objectives. For example, free schools are designed to be driven by the interests and needs of parents in a particular area where they feel a school is not fulfilling the local demand. This demand may not include a desire to link with a university, but the policy will undoubtedly place pressure on a free school proposal to move in this direction.

There is also a risk inherent to the policy that the competitive element within the secondary school system will mean that universities feel pressure to draw away from working with a range of schools in their local areas, and focus only on the one (or ones) with which they have a formal sponsorship arrangement. This would be to the detriment of students at those other schools, particularly if they are not linked with another university.

Basing a judgement of success on the Ofsted assessment of a school is arguably too blunt. The nature of universities' relationship with schools is diverse, long-term and strategic. The judgement of success needs to be based on outcomes in the broader context of attainment and participation at university. Using an Ofsted rating system will risk significant levels of investment by universities in outreach programmes in wider communities, which would be harmed if the funding from those access agreements was no longer available.

In addition, there is a very real issue in terms of the capacity within the system. According to OFFA, a total of 183 universities and colleges in England have approved access agreements for the 2016/17 academic year, indicating the intention of these universities and colleges to charge fees over £6,000. Within this figure, there are 121 higher education institutions.⁶ Given that there are approximately 3,000 secondary schools in England, the burden on supporting them all is very high for institutions.

A key area of concern in this context is the potential for tuition fees paid by students being used to support the overall management of schools, rather than for the investing in the student experience, or for supporting aspiration (as is currently the case). Access Agreements (and in time Access and Participation Plans) should be used to indicate how universities are investing (time and funding) in supporting partnerships and engagement with schools to increase aspiration, attainment and participation.

It is not clear from the proposal whether every school should have a formal relationship with a university, and a large number of schools are already sponsored by other partners. Moreover, the proposal does need appear to take account of some of the inherent challenges within the system. For example, whether the schools or the universities are in the right places to partner, whether the university has the expertise the schools need, and whether other existing sponsors might be better able to support the school(s) in question. In some parts of the country there are no universities at all, or only one in a large geographical area, meaning coverage and compliance with the policy could be inconsistent, with differential outcomes and benefits for students.

Since the majority⁷ of secondary schools are already academies with sponsors, it means that those that are still yet to convert may well be the kinds of schools that need expertise in turnaround, leadership and management in addition to strong teaching and learning practitioners. Universities may be able to support teaching and learning, particularly those with education departments, but they may not have the right expertise to turn around a school in special measures. Other academy sponsor groups with success in this

⁶ Access Agreements for 2016-17: key statistics and analysis, OFFA, July 2015 <https://www.OFFA.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Access-agreements-for-2016-17-key-statistics-and-analysis.pdf>

⁷ The DfE's latest Academies annual report states that 58% of secondary schools are academies: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/573234/Academies_annual_report_academic_year_2014-to-2015.pdf

area may be a more effective option for these schools. In addition there may be better ways for a university to be involved in existing sponsorship arrangements, rather than being assumed to be the lead sponsor in each case. The route to sponsorship is also the responsibility for the relevant school commissioners in the local, and in respect to free schools is often driven by parent demand. This means that universities have to consider sponsorship in the context of specific local arrangements.

The way forward

In order to achieve the government's ambitions to promote social mobility and increase attainment and progression to higher education, MillionPlus believes that the proposal should be modified.

Ministerial guidance should be issued to the Director for Fair Access so that the latter requires universities to consider sponsorship of schools as a possible, but not mandated, option to demonstrate commitments to OFFA (and subsequently the Office for Students) criteria.

OFFA guidance should outline the benefits to schools and universities from a sponsorship arrangement, drawing on the experiences of those already engaged in these partnerships. This would enable universities that are yet to sponsor schools, to understand the challenges and opportunities of the partnership, and to reflect on lessons to be learned from the experiences of others.

The guidance should also consider the different types of engagement that universities can have with schools at different levels. This could include guidance on:

- strategic support for governing bodies (including being represented on the governing body)
- professional development for middle and senior leaders
- academic and subject knowledge training for teachers
- initial teacher training
- pedagogy and curriculum development
- appropriate intervention support for students regardless of ability levels.

Allowing time for successful policy implementation

The timing and deadlines applied to the guidance need to be given careful consideration. Universities are currently engaged in reviewing metrics and evidence as part of their TEF submissions. The ratings from TEF will be announced by June 2017 in order to enable universities to be clear about their tuition fee levels for entry in 2018.

The current suggestion is that the OFFA guidance to be published in spring 2017, for universities to outline their plans in access agreements to influence fees for entry in 2018, will include the sponsorship criteria. This timing will not give universities adequate time to properly investigate opportunities for sponsorship, nor will it enable schools governors to consider whether the university is the appropriate partner for them. The risk is that such tight timescales lead people to make unwise decisions about sponsorship simply to meet an arbitrary deadline.

A far better approach would be for the Secretary of State to ask the Director for Fair Access to set out in the guidance a proposed direction of travel with interim timescales that will enable universities to demonstrate how they are moving towards a deeper level of engagement with schools that is focused on raising attainment. This would be more effective in the long-term than expecting immediate sponsorship of schools by universities in order to secure an access agreement for 2018. In response to the government's agenda in

this area, Ofpa is already providing significantly more guidance to universities about how they can work with schools to raise attainment and participation.

A possible timetable could be for the guidance next year to set out new criteria for universities to address in their 2018 access agreements, and then expecting universities to build on these in their first access and participation plans submitted to the Office for Students. That would give universities time to plan effectively to ensure that further engagement with schools has the opportunity to benefit students positively.

Summary

Universities already invest significant time, staff and expertise in outreach programmes. There is scope to deepen their engagement with schools to support improvements in pupil attainment, including through teacher education departments. The emphasis has to be on outcomes – that is, an improvement in attainment and participation in universities. Sponsorship is only one way in which universities and schools can work together. Diversity of provision and experience is a hallmark of higher education, so it seems right that this principle should apply to engagement with schools, rather than mandating a one-size-fits-all approach.