

GETTING INTO UNIVERSITY

Lessons for widening participation in higher education in England

GOVERNMENTS AROUND the world want more people to go to university. But though politicians like the idea of widening participation in higher education, it is not easy to achieve equal access or an equal experience for students once they arrive.

As Professor Gill Crozier of Sunderland University puts it, most people from any background who go to university find that it enhances their lives culturally as well as economically. But participation in higher education encompasses a vast range of experiences for the diverse student body now attending English universities.

Professor Crozier is the leader of one of seven projects within the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), which together constitute the first major study of widening participation in higher education.

Another project – led by Professor Anna Vignoles of the Institute of Education – uses large databases covering every school-leaver in England in order to address the core question of who goes to university. She finds that universities are right to claim that they do not discriminate against students from poor backgrounds: if they can pass the exams, they get in.

The problem is that they typically attend low-achieving schools. This implies that resources need to be spent on better education for younger children, not on measures such as financial support intended to persuade sixth-formers to go to university.

A project by Dr Geoff Hayward and colleagues at the University of Oxford looks at vocational qualifications for university entry. Universities tend not to understand these qualifications, and rightly fear that people who hold them are more likely to drop out.

Vocational qualifications are often acquired by exactly those students who are targeted by widening participation initiatives, and who tend to end up at the least prestigious universities. Indeed, adding an A-level to vocational qualifications is the best thing any student can do to raise their chances of getting into university.

Many such students spend at least part of their academic career in further education, and this too turns out to be a low-prestige area of higher education. Gareth Parry of the University of Sheffield finds that over 300 colleges offer at least some higher education, while 40 universities deliver some further education. With better planning, these 'mixed-economy' colleges could contribute to new avenues for student progression.

Professor Crozier's project examines student diversity, in particular the experience of working-class students. She finds that the older and more prestigious the institution, the more personal the service its students get. Students in these universities are taught in small groups, have direct access to their teachers and organise their social as well as their academic lives around college.

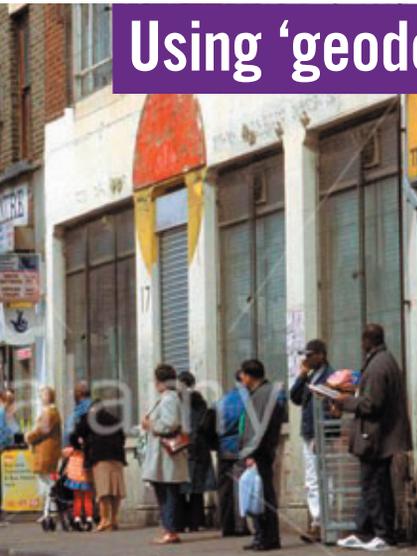
Students at newer universities use them in a very different way. Many have commitments to jobs and families. They go to the university for a purpose – for example when there is a lecture to attend – and do not wait around when it is over. They make little use of the social life the university might offer. And the teachers are more likely to be accessible online than in person.

This suggests that we need new ways of teaching new types of student. Dr Chris Hockings and colleagues at the University of Wolverhampton explore teaching and learning with a more diverse student body. They find that thinking in terms of

AT A GLANCE

Ever-widening university participation brings an increasingly diversified university experience.

Using 'geodemographics' in public service delivery



GEODEMOGRAPHICS ARE SMALL area measures of neighbourhood conditions that provide market intelligence about customers to organisations. Research by Professor Paul Longley and colleagues at University College London have explored how such indicators might be used to gauge local needs for public services, such as health, education and policing.

An issue with many conventional classifications is that individuals and households are assigned to classes such as 'the deprived' with no recourse to appeal. An outcome of this research has been the creation of a range of classifications for use in profiling local needs. These classifications have been devised with a spirit of humility rather than conviction, using methods that are open, transparent and open to scientific scrutiny.

One example is the classification of local engagement with new information and communications technology. Following BBC News Online coverage of the classification, feedback from the British public was used to identify local and other systematic shortcomings with the classification and suggest ways in which it might be improved.

This work was subsequently used to investigate the levels of local association between material deprivation and lack of engagement with technology, a form of 'digital deprivation'. The website is the first systematic attempt to gauge the accuracy of a geodemographic classification. ■

www.spatial-literacy.org/esocietyprofiler

MANAGING TO IMPROVE PUBLIC SERVICES

FEW WOULD QUESTION the desirability of making poor public services good and good services better to enhance our quality of life and create conditions for future prosperity.

But what is the ideal contribution of managers – those often derided people who are responsible for running public service organisations but who are uniquely placed to respond to government-driven reforms and to stimulate community initiatives?

A book edited by Professor Jean Hartley and colleagues in the Advanced Institute of Management Research (AIM) concludes that there is no best way to manage public service improvement but many ways of managing it better – depending on one's values. A priority is to deepen our understanding of how, in a world of diverse values, managers can harness their increasingly ambiguous relationships with frontline service providers, partners, citizens and policymakers towards the public good.

The AIM researchers show how public service governance is becoming more complex. Greater emphasis on partnerships is generating special-purpose governance arrangements where the state, civil society and business interact in shaping public policy and practice. A wider range of stakeholders makes accountability more complex. So managing improvement now entails successfully negotiating the ambiguity of more diverse governance arrangements and multiple accountabilities.

Advances in measuring public service performance have generated stronger tools for evaluating provision and can help managers to employ more transparent frameworks for managing scarce resources. They can also reduce ambiguity about priorities by making clear the tough choices needed to cope with rising public aspirations.

Managing improvement efforts implies change, hence the imperative for innovation to improve services and their management. Yet time for innovation is time taken from existing service provision. And change increases ambiguity. Managers face a learning curve: how to implement a new practice (outcomes of which can only become fully clear after implementation) while maintaining normal service. ■

Managing to Improve Public Services, Cambridge University Press (November 2008).

<http://www.aimresearch.org>



traditional and non-traditional students does nobody any favours. Learners from all backgrounds like teaching that recognises their identities as learners and individuals.

Working with a range of students in subjects as diverse as history and computing, Hockings finds that people lose interest when teaching and the curriculum seem not to be directed to their needs and interests. This means that university teachers need to be more aware of the social as well as the academic context of their work.

According to Professor Julian Williams of the University of Manchester, this lesson also applies at school and in further education, especially for courses in mathematics. The perceived difficulty of maths is a barrier to participation in science and technology courses at university. Many students regard it as something they have to go through to get to the next stage of their education.

At the same time, colleges are often reluctant to keep students in maths courses, fearing they will fail and drag down the college's success rate. Courses and teachers that avoid 'teaching to the test' can reduce this problem, as can courses that make use of maths to solve genuine problems.

The TLRP's work on widening participation even studies people who are not participating, in a unique piece of research on individuals who have qualifications that would allow them to enter university but who choose not to go.

This project – directed by Professors Alison Fuller and Sue Heath of the University of Southampton – shows that people who opt not to go to university do not do so out of idleness or lack of motivation. They tend to be people with stable lives and jobs, and think they have little to gain from the cost and trouble of going to university. Many have discussed the idea with their friends and family, who are often graduates.

The key lesson here is that if government wants these people to get involved in higher education, it will have to persuade employers to become more serious about the possibility of combining work and study. Only if higher education is accessible – and is seen to lead to pay rises and promotion – will this important group take an interest. ■

<http://www.tlrp.org>

The goal of widening participation in further education requires employers to be more flexible about the possibilities of combining work with study.

AT A GLANCE

Public service governance is getting more complex. There is no best way to manage public service improvement but there are many ways of managing it better.