

Widening Participation at UoE: The staff perspective

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The research

A series of studies exploring progression and degree outcomes of young WP indicated students at UoE:

- 2013: statistical analysis of the entry, progression and degree outcomes of young students with A-level, Higher and AH qual.s
- 2014: qualitative research with 48 members of staff from eight Schools
- 2015: qualitative research with 63 young students from five Schools

Presentation discusses findings from staff and student studies

Research focus

- Focus on young students – research does not include mature students (nb invisibility)
- WP students in the studies meet one or more of the following criteria:
 - attendance at a school with relatively low progression to HE or below average exam performance
 - spent significant time in care
 - parents/guardians not attended university
 - participation in recognised access programmes such as LEAPs or Pathways to the Professions
 - experienced significant disruption to their formal education
 - live in a deprived area (as per SIMD)

The staff study

Interview programme (48):

- cross section of staff across 8 areas: Architecture; Biological Sciences; Business; Chemistry; English Literature; History; Law; Medicine
- specialist staff

Focus of interviews varied but broadly covered:

- Awareness of WP and WP students (re administration, teaching and support)
- Subject specific aspects eg requirements of subject area; teaching, learning and assessment approaches and student support
- Issues for students (all and WP) and relevant factors

Support for WP but lack of awareness

- Support for university commitment to WP but awareness and knowledge about WP very varied and often limited:
 - seen as about activities at pre-entry and admission stages not as an on-going process
 - associated with specific programmes eg LEAPS
 - mature students (somewhat) higher profile than young WP students
- Most didn't know what sort of proportion of their students had a WP background – v interested in data I had

Issues identified by staff

- *Interplay of student and institutional factors and the everyday teaching and learning experience of students.*
- Feeling out of place: belonging and integrating
- Impact of being first in family- understanding expectations, discuss experiences, get advice and practical support
- Living at home: time; integration and peer networks; identity
- Preparedness for uni study/self-directed learning – Higher vs AH/A level, school

Issues identified by staff (2)

- Confidence – internalise difficulties; confidence underpins *becoming* successful student (can be developed)
- Critical time points: 1st year but also move into 3rd year – but transition into 3rd year much less attention in practice
- Part-time work – esp long hours in term time and if to support self and/or family
- Do WP students face more/different issue?
 - Not all WP have problems
 - Non WP students can have problems
 - WP students may experience more problems/on more sustained basis and fewer resources to draw on

Institutional context

- Importance of the everyday teaching and learning experience :

'...if someone isn't good at writing essays at the beginning, if they get good teaching, if the tutor takes the time and the student responds to feedback then [they] can improve enormously...' lecturer

- Lack of status given to teaching vs research
 - Yet importance of good teaching for all students incl helping weaker students to develop
 - Workloads and impact on relationships with students and consequences of this
 - Substantial use of hourly paid staff in 5/8 Schools esp in 1st & 2nd year + their conditions of employment

'1st year tutorials are the life blood of an institution... that's where the articulation faults are, that's where you can help the most find their feet' Teaching Fellow

Student support

- Large investment in student support and Personal Tutor system
- PT potential role re WP students – extra guidance if first in family, greater encouragement to take up study support, join clubs etc

BUT

- Lack of engagement of (some) students with PT
- Workload so PTs focus on students with problems/risk of failing vs those 'getting by' but not achieving potential
- Issues of student diversity incl WP and the implications for their role, not covered in PT training
- May not know WP status of their tutees

Personal tutor system

- Allocation of WP students to PTs - 3 of 8 Schools took WP status into account (tho PT may not be aware of this)
- Should PTs know students' WP status? – strong opinions!
'they are students, not the widening participation students' Sr tutor
- Labelling a key concern but with no information on WP status, staff making assumptions eg re accent, appearance
- Notable some change of opinion after discussion
- Training necessary and restricted access to such information

Monitoring student transitions

- Little systematic, regular monitoring of students' progression and outcomes re WP status or other characteristics.
- But where this had been done, it had changed opinion and practice
- Such monitoring is critical to supporting all students - not only WP
- Study identified issues about the accessibility and quality of data available to do so – sounds boring –but without the ability to monitor students' transitions, can't identify and develop the most appropriate support
- Data has a role to play in successful student transitions



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Widening participation at the University of Edinburgh: the student perspective

Sarah Minty, ESRC PhD researcher



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The student perspective



- Focus group discussions and paired interviews with 63 students all of whom were under 21 at time of entry
- Studied in five Schools: Biological Sciences; Business; History; Law and Medicine.
- 1st year and 3rd year students
- Two focus groups were held with students in each year group – one of WP-indicated students and one of traditional entry students.
- The research aimed to:
 - investigate students' perspectives on factors which can help or hinder successful progression from school to 1st and from 2nd year to 3rd year Honours, and the extent to which students felt able to make the most of their time at university both academically and socially;
 - consider whether both WP-indicated and NWP-indicated students are affected by the same issues or whether some issues affect WP students more than others; and
 - identify the factors that contribute to successful outcomes for WP students and provide the basis for the development of strategies to address the issue.



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Issues for widening participation students



- Readiness for university
- Balancing academic work with social life – a problem of confidence?
- Clubs and societies
- Financial resources and part-time work
- The pressures of 3rd year
- A sense of belonging and social mixing



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Readiness for university



The big things are well explained and they're for everyone. It's the wee nuances... One of my best mates from home goes to [Ancient] Uni and both his parents went to university and their parents before them. And I was talking to him about looking up these websites and stuff. And he turned to me and he was like, 'do you not know how to do that?' And I was like, 'no I don't, do you'. And he was like, 'yeah my dad showed me before I went to uni'. So there's that slight difference. But it's the tiny wee things, they do make the difference between people getting a First or a 2:1 at times, yeah.

(Male, 3rd year WP, State School, Scotland-domiciled)



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Balancing academic work with social life



I've enjoyed my course, I think that I've sacrificed my social life at the same time though. And I'm not really as bothered about that. I know some people are, but 'cos I live at home as well, it's an effort to go home after 6 hours at uni and then come back again. Yeah I've tried my best to have a work life/ social life balance at university. [...] So I made sure, obviously I got my priorities right and I thought I need to do my work as best I can before I think about socialising or anything.

(Male, 1st year WP, State School, Scotland-domiciled)



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WP students limited in joining clubs and societies



I always found it quite hard to keep it up throughout the semester. I'll go for the first, maybe, six weeks, and then I'm like I just can't fit it in, 'cos course work piles up, and you can't really justify taking a couple of hours out to go and dance, or whatever. It's probably better for you. It probably makes you study more if you take a couple of hours out, but it's just hard to justify it in your head.

(Female, 3rd year WP, State School, Scotland-domiciled)



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Financial resources and part-time work



Well this week I'm working 30 hours. Through the summer I was getting over 40. So it's not something that I'm not used to. But if I'm really desperate to do work then I do it on my break because I'd rather have the money and then spend the night doing homework than find myself not being able to afford the rent or whatever because it's expensive to live here.

(Male, 1st year WP, State School, Scotland-domiciled)



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The pressures of 3rd year



I think it's [partly to do with the] different work load, I think also the sense of realisation that if you screw up now you won't go very far. For me it's more like I have to do 1st and 2nd year okay, but 3rd year I have to do well no matter what. So I think that's why you get more stressful because if you don't get work done, you're like 'man I won't get my good grades that I'm trying to achieve'.

(Female, 3rd year WP, State School, Scotland-domiciled)



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The institutional context



Institutional factors which helped or hindered transition were related to:

- Variable nature of teaching, feedback, assessment and support
- Staff assumptions about students' readiness and knowledge levels
- everyday teaching and learning experiences
- levels of formal support offered to all students in 3rd year



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Experiences of tutorials and assumptions about knowledge



Sometimes they know what they need to know, but they don't know necessarily how to teach.

(Female, 1st year Non-WP, independent school, RUK-domiciled)

To begin with, [the tutor] thought that we had more knowledge than we did going in. Most of us don't know anything about [this area of the course]. Somebody asked a question and she's just like 'don't any of you know this?' And we're like 'no'. And she's like 'oh right, I just thought...' And obviously it was a bit of a misunderstanding, but I feel to an extent that I don't necessarily want to ask a question in case it's something that I should know.

(Female, 3rd year Non-WP, Independent school, RUK-domiciled)



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Teaching and learning strategies



Students suggested staff should:

- Introduce themselves and try to learn students' names
- Use icebreakers to help students get to know each other
- Allow time for group discussion before feeding back to the class
- Consider how they use language, phrase questions and whether they have assumed a particular level of knowledge for the class
- Prepare handouts in advance to allow students time to prepare



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Personal Tutors



And I think if we could have personal tutor meetings more than once a semester to see how we're getting on, because most of the time you could be feeling like you're drowning a little bit but you're not confident or you don't feel like you're in control enough to have a meeting with your personal tutor. So I'd prefer to have met with mine more than I have 'cos I've only met her twice and now she's going away for maternity leave. And I would say definitely for 1st years that it has to be, it would be helpful because it's a bigger jump than you think it is. You prepare yourself all summer and in your head you've got it in control, but you don't actually.

(Male, 1st year WP, State School, Scotland-domiciled)



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Potential benefits of sharing students' WP status



I would say it would be beneficial for them to know that you came through LEAPS 'cos I feel like a lot of people at this university were privately educated. [...] So even maybe just if they know that we are from an underprivileged sort of area or whatever, they can point us to resources as soon as we start university. And yeah give us guidance. Whereas I walked into the library and I've never been into a library before.

(Female, 3rd year WP, State School, Scotland-domiciled)



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Other forms of academic support



- Lack of awareness and lack of uptake (students and staff)
- Need for greater promotion of services
- WP students less likely to use other support services – to do with lack of awareness or confidence?



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Conclusions



- Striking similarity between many of the findings in the two studies
- Interplay between individual and institutional factors
- Need for an institutional response

Staff:

- How would you relate these research findings to your own contact with students?

Students:

- how should the university and staff respond to these findings?