

# THE WIDENING PARTICIPATION AGENDA

## *Widening Participation In Higher Education For The Biosciences: A Report on the Strategies and Experiences of Three University Departments: London Metropolitan, Plymouth and Oxford*

### INTRODUCTION: THE NATIONAL AND LOCAL CONTEXT

Chapters five and six of the recent White Paper 'The future of higher education' (January 2003) sets out Government plans for expanding Higher Education (HE) to ensure that suitable and accessible HE provision is available to all who could benefit from it.<sup>1</sup> The key risk, as identified in the HEFCE Strategic Plan 2003–08 (March 2003), is that there will be insufficient additional demand for HE places from 18–30 year-olds to meet the participation target (50 per cent by 2010) through aspirations not being sufficiently raised and also that there will be an insufficient increase in representation from the under-represented socio-economic groups.<sup>2</sup>

Current government policy, therefore, is directed at increasing the number of people entering higher education, and particularly at raising participation rates in higher education institutes (HEIs) of students from non-traditional backgrounds. Given the difficulties many HEIs have experienced in attracting students to the biosciences in recent years, it is important that institutions are able to target, recruit and retain students from a broader entry base, including the ethnic minorities and lower socio-economic sectors of society.

### THE THREE INSTITUTIONS

The three universities used in this study have very different issues with regard to widening participation. Plymouth currently

recruits predominantly white applicants from both urban and rural locations and has the potential to attract more students from areas of marked social deprivation, for example from within the cities and rural areas of Devon and Cornwall. (Cornwall is one of two EU Objective 1 areas in the UK). London Metropolitan successfully targets ethnic minorities and those from the lower socio-economic groups in North, East and South London. Oxford University is evolving its own widening participation scheme using outreach officers, teachers' fora and summer schools, but its agenda is of necessity different to that of Plymouth or London Metropolitan, because of its requirement to encompass a nationwide catchment area.

This report gathers together the collected experiences of these three institutions, operating, as they do, in widely different catchment areas. It is intended to be of value to other institutions also wishing to raise participation of non-traditional students in the biosciences and aims to enable the transfer of good practice by making available the collected expertise.

Recruitment is, of course, only the beginning of the student experience. Retaining and supporting students from non-traditional backgrounds is an altogether wider and possibly more thorny issue. The report includes an analysis of strategy and procedures from the three institutions for both recruitment and retention. It will then consider key issues needing to be addressed and a checklist for good

practice will be generated for use in other institutions.

All three universities have well developed Widening Participation (WP) Strategies, which are available through their websites and within which departmental activities obviously have to take place. All identify their particular target groups and the strategies employed to reach and retain potential students from these groups. Widening participation actions aim to impact on disadvantage by increasing the participation of target groups in HE, ensuring appropriate support during their HE experience, and optimising their chances of 'success' both in HE and on graduation. These activities include:

- » attracting under-represented socio-economic groups
- » increasing the proportion of mature students
- » encouraging students with disabilities/dyslexia and including mental health problems
- » redressing the gender balance for those subjects where necessary
- » ensuring ownership at faculty level, working in partnership with local schools and colleges
- » raising awareness of HE and motivating a desire to consider study at HE level in school-age pupils.

The report includes examples of successful synergy between two institutions and how programme design and careful curriculum planning has increased both

recruitment and retention of non-traditional students. It also provides a model for ensuring successful progression and completion of foundation degrees as a further means of recruiting non-standard entry students.

A further section gives detailed examples of activities and interventions successfully undertaken by academic and technical staff to bring the Biosciences to the attention of a wide range of audiences ranging from school visits to working with local ethnic communities. These exemplars are transferable and should provide a rich source of ideas for other institutions. Barriers to success and a list of 'dos' and 'don'ts' form the final section of the report.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> DES, The Future of Higher Education (London: DES, January 2003)

<sup>2</sup> HEFCE, HEFCE Strategic Plan, 2003–08, March 2003, p17.