



Invited representatives from new and old universities met at Gomersal Park Hotel to discuss and exchange practical knowledge on the issues relating to widening participation in higher education. The aims and outcomes of the meeting were as follows:

Aims:

- to exchange experience within the issue of Widening Participation
- to gather data regarding how different universities/colleges are responding to Widening Participation
- to compare current practice within universities/colleges
- to devise strategies for raising awareness of issues surrounding Widening Participation

Outcomes:

- a better understanding of the current position across the board by participants
- the harvesting of what works and what does not
- a guide for developing methods and policies
- an outline plan for the role of LTSN in supporting departments in their Widening Participation
- a report of the Discussion Forum

The delegates came with a range of experience and a variety of ideas on how to tackle issues relating to widening participation. Individual speakers presented on selected topics and the material covered can be accessed by clicking on the appropriate links. Time was made available for group discussions and the results from these are outlined in the Widening Access Issues and The Bioscience issues of Widening Participation.

Thursday 12 September

Welcome and introduction

Ian gave a brief welcome followed by a summary of the data he had collated relating to widening participation in different institutions

“To what extent is Widening Participation taking place in your institution and what are you doing about this?” (Group exercise A)

The national agenda, aims and outcomes of the Discussion Forum

Delegate presentations:

Widening Participation Funding Issues

Christine Davies, Action on Access,

Christine talked on the role of Action on Access. Action on Access was established by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (DHFETE) with a remit to provide national support and co-ordination for the funding bodies' widening participation strategy. Elements of that strategy include mainstream formula funding, special initiatives, specific national development and pilot projects.

Ethnicity Issues

Nigel Lindsey, Department of Biomedical Sciences, University of Bradford

Over the last 5 years Bradford has seen a significant increase in the number of students from ethnic minorities. Whilst this is from a wide range of groups, the largest number of students classify themselves as Pakistani Asian (33% for 2001). A significant reason underlying this is the increasing number of students attending Universities close to their home and many of these students will be from the first generation of their family to attend University. Many of the issues raised by this change in our ethnic profile relate more to the increase in the total percentage of the population that attends University. In order for our students to feel welcome at University we have had to develop flexible systems to allow for their different cultural and religious needs and beliefs. The support mechanisms that we provide need to be sensitive to the different cultural backgrounds of these students. Inclusion in the focus of the teaching programme, for example measuring the frequency of blood group antigens to show that these reflect those published for different ethnic groups can also help to enable students to identify with their course.

Student Support

Mike Mortimer, Department of Biological Sciences, University of Huddersfield

As a consequence of widening participation the University of Huddersfield has a substantial intake of students with a mix of weak academic backgrounds, poor motivation and low self esteem. These students are taught along with some very well qualified students. To rise to this challenge the University of Huddersfield has adopted an approach which relies on committed, sympathetic staff who spend a lot of time with the students (based around self-study modules managed by a personal tutor). A foundation year is available for those students whose academic background is very weak. Another feature of the approach is that there is an emphasis on skills in the first year. This is to give students sufficient confidence so they can tackle the more rigorous second and third years.

Friday 13 September

Delegate presentations:

Widening Participation: The 'North London Experience'

Chris Branford-White, Director of the Institute of Health Action Research (formerly University of North London) London Metropolitan University.

Chris discussed the experience of the former University of North London and the success they have achieved using their foundation course. The course has outgrown its initial function to encourage mature students into science and is now responsible for 'recruiting' 530 students, mostly from the local area. The curricula of subsequent degree schemes were redesigned to allow students to focus more on laboratory, problem solving and C&IT skills.

Extended Science

Les Jervis, School of Biological and Applied Sciences, University of Plymouth

This is a scheme which is aimed primarily at mature students. Some attempts have been made to widen participation from disadvantaged social backgrounds. Despite a steady fall in average 'A' level results, the progression rate has been maintained by improved student support and implementing a learning and teaching strategy.

View Extended Science Overheads

Early Exit Students

Mick Brennan, Queen Mary, University of London

Mick reviewed the Queen Mary widening participation strategy mentioning target groups and pre-entry course while highlighting the importance of intermediate awards. Undergraduate certificates or diplomas would allow students to experience higher education and come out with a qualification even if they do not complete a 3-year degree.

Next steps for the Discussion Forum

LTSN Bioscience intends to build on the findings from the Forum by

- adding to the examples of good practice
- launching a Special Interest Group on Widening Participation in early 2003
- highlighting widening participation issues at events

If any readers would like to submit examples of what their unit is doing or have other information worth sharing then please contact us at heabioscience@leeds.ac.uk