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Interventions to promote improved access to higher education

Exploratory paper

Peter Rudd   March 2011

Institute for **Effective Education**
Empowering educators with evidence

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Introduction

The aim of widening participation in higher education (HE) in the UK has never been more important than it is now. Even though the numbers of students in HE have increased considerably in recent years, there is strong evidence that socially disadvantaged groups remain seriously under-represented in HE. For example, private school students are 55 times more likely to win a place at Oxbridge and 22 times more likely to go to a top-ranked university than students at state schools who qualify for free school meals (FSM).[1]

To address this and related issues, the Bridge Group, an independent policy advisory group aimed at promoting social mobility through HE, was launched in November 2010. Alan Milburn, who was appointed to the role of social mobility 'tsar', working with the new coalition government, in August, 2010, attended the launch to act as an advocate to the group.

With rising tuition fees, pressure on universities to improve access to socially disadvantaged groups (including financial pressures) and the continuing general (and cross-party) concern about social mobility, the group has generated a great deal of interest and support, and has attracted a grant from the Google Foundation to support its aims. The group is represented on Alan Milburn's advisory group and its policies are feeding into the Cabinet Office strategy group that advises the Deputy Prime Minister. The group includes, as Chair, Tessa Stone, Chief Executive of BrightsideUNIAID, and Nik Miller, who has responsibility for widening participation, University of York.

This paper briefly explores the current landscape of interventions to promote fairer / improved access to higher education. It focuses primarily on recent or current multi-university interventions which have had some kind of evaluation. Particular attention is given to: (1) the characteristics / activities of such interventions which research shows to work well; and (2) indications of the best / most effective research methods to employ in this area. Another area of interest is value for money (VfM) – which interventions are the most cost effective? This paper will provide background for a subsequent paper which explore the methods and metrics for 'measuring' social mobility into HE in more detail.

Relevant interventions and associated research activities

1. The **Aimhigher** programme has been run by HEFCE, with support from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). The national programme began in August 2004 and built upon a pilot programme and another programme entitled Excellence Challenge. Although Aimhigher was "about making everyone aware of the benefits higher education can

bring, whatever their background"[2] it has had a focus on raising the aspirations and motivations to enter HE among young people from under-represented groups. The programme operates across 44 area partnerships throughout England (but will end in July 2011).

Aimhigher encompassed a wide range of activities to engage and motivate learners who had the potential to enter HE but may have been under-achieving, undecided or lacking in confidence. The programme particularly focused on young people from lower socio-economic groups (National Statistics Socio-economic Classification groups 4-8) and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who lived in areas of relative deprivation where participation in HE was low. The following activities represented the core programme offering and took place in all areas of the country:

- Campus visits
- Mentoring
- Master classes, including subject enrichment or revision sessions
- Student ambassadors
- Information, advice and guidance (IAG)
- Summer schools and HE-related residential experiences
- School or college based interventions

The Aimhigher website gives access to a repository of Aimhigher research, evaluation and evidence of good practice reports under themed headings: there are also a number of best practice case studies. The national evaluation of Aimhigher was carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).[3] This evaluation did not produce any detailed substantive findings but focused upon data collection and establishing an analytical framework. In the first stage, NFER worked with six Aimhigher partnerships that were identified as having a strong understanding of practical data collection at the local level. NFER examined these local datasets and advised that, while the extent and quality of data had greatly improved, data collection and collation was not consistent enough to enable national comparative data analysis of the Aimhigher programme at that stage. A previous longitudinal evaluation, of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, however, had found some statistically significant links between activities and outcomes. This found:

> *overall gains in GCSE performance and in performance in mathematics at Key Stage 3 associated with young people being designated as members of the widening participation cohort and/or the gifted and talented cohort (longer membership of either cohort was also associated with better GCSE results)* [4]

2. Find Your Way. The Excellence Hub for Yorkshire and Humber is a partnership between the Universities of Hull, Leeds, Sheffield and York. This regional partnership works in collaboration with local authorities across the region to develop opportunities for secondary pupils identified as Gifted and Talented. Find Your Way (FYW) is a four-year programme of enhanced activities within the Hub, which aims to address the needs of a cohort of 2007/8 Year 9 students who have high potential and who are from a disadvantaged background.

FYW is being evaluated by a team independent of the Excellence Hub, at the Institute for Effective Education, University of York, using a mixed methods approach, combining quantified outcomes in an impact evaluation with qualitative outcomes in a process evaluation.[5] The impact evaluation is based on a case-control design with multiple comparison groups and the process evaluation includes focus groups with students and interviews with teachers. The sample consists of approximately 280 pupils: 130-140 FYW and 130-140 control students in 14 schools in North Yorkshire, York, NE Lincolnshire, Hull, Rotherham, Bradford, Kirklees and Leeds. The evaluation will examine the impact of FYW on a number of outcomes, including GCSE, A/S and A level results and, particularly, post-18 participation in Higher Education. The evaluation commenced in April 2009 and will be completed in 2012 when the FYW cohort leaves school.

3. The Sutton Trust – Into University. This programme commenced in 2002 and was partly aimed at younger children in that it covered ages 8-18. The 1500 children featured were in schools in a specific area of London. IU was the subject of a qualitative evaluation by the NFER: the evaluation findings were very positive and the main strengths of the intervention were identified as: (1) a multi-stranded approach (primary-secondary; academic-pastoral); (2) mentoring; (3) the development of independent and self-regulated learning; and (4) the positive attitudes of the staff involved. The authors of the evaluation report noted that: "We observed that IntoUniversity encourages children and young people to aspire and progress to university (or another chosen educational ambition) [and] In particular we observed that the idea of university is introduced at a young age via explicit and implicit means".[6]

4. Recent work on school contexts, aptitude tests and university degrees. An important factor in determining how many students from poorer backgrounds go to university is the fact that so few of them get the grades they need: something that many top universities point out. In this context, it is interesting to note that a recent study found that comprehensive pupils, *once they had obtained a place in HE*, outperformed independent and grammar pupils in their university degree outcomes! This was a key finding in the final report of a five-year research study, co-funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), the NFER, the Sutton Trust and the College Board, examining the validity of an aptitude test (the SAT) for use in HE admissions.[7] It found that students from comprehensive schools are likely to achieve higher class degrees at university than independent and grammar school students with similar A-levels and GCSE results. The study tracked 8000 A-level students to investigate whether the US based SAT could be used in university admissions in the UK.

A comprehensive school student with A-level grades BBB, for example, is likely to perform as well in their degree as an independent or grammar school student with A-level grades ABB or AAB – i.e. one to two grades higher. The report concludes that the SAT results are a poorer predictor of degree results than A-levels or GCSEs, and that the test does not identify academic potential among disadvantaged pupils that might be missed by A-levels. Sir Peter Lampl, Chairman of the Sutton Trust, said: "These findings provide further evidence that universities are right to take into account the educational context of students when deciding whom to admit – alongside other information on their achievements and potential."[8]

5. Realising Opportunities (RO) is an ongoing programme to enable targeted students to have increased access to 12 of the UK's leading research intensive universities. These are the universities of Birmingham, Bristol, Essex, Exeter, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Warwick, York and King's College, London. Students undertake a range of activities and the scheme aims to build on the lessons learned from the last ten years of widening participation activity in schools, colleges and universities. Students participating in the programme attend events at the partner universities, complete an online study skills module, and complete an academic assignment. They do this with the support of an e-mentor, following a set curriculum. The e-mentoring is provided via a website run by BrightsideUNIAID and is largely designed to boost students' confidence and to give them practical support.[9]

An evaluation of the Realising Opportunities programme, by the NFER's Northern Office, based in York, has recently commenced. The evaluation aims to assess RO students' attitudes and aspirations in terms of applying for university. Using baseline and follow-up questionnaires, as well as focus groups with students, researchers will look at the impact of the programme over time. By using a comparison group of students, changes in outcomes can be compared with those for students who have not had access to the opportunities available through the RO programme.

6. Future First was launched by The Sutton Trust in 2008. It is a social enterprise which aims to build networks of former students to advise and inform state school students about future career and education opportunities. Future First started by working with William Ellis School, an all-boys inner-city London comprehensive with over 20 percent of students eligible for free school meals, and has successfully built an alumni network of former students to provide students in years 10 to 13 with a series of events to motivate, inspire and guide their future choices.[10] An important element of the scheme, which by 2011 featured six schools, has been to support face-to-face alumni contact with the development of individual interactive websites for each school. The programme also offers a range of work placements through the network, including over 50 days of work-shadowing opportunities with leading barristers.

7. Teach First's mission is to address educational disadvantage by transforming exceptional graduates into effective, inspirational teachers and leaders in all fields.[11] Studies show, argue TeachFirst, that in the UK, socio-economic status still determines whether young minds fulfil their potential. Just 16 per cent of pupils who are eligible for free school meals progress to university, in comparison to 96 per cent of young people educated in independent schools. Teach First believes that effective teachers have the power to address this issue. It works to enable its participants and ambassadors to raise pupil achievement, aspiration and access to opportunities, while at the same time developing a network of future leaders who can strive to bring an end to educational disadvantage.

8. The Sutton Trust STAR Programme – The Sutton Trust Academic Routes (STAR) programme is, delivered in partnership with Leeds and Exeter Universities, and is targeted at

the top ten percent of bright but disadvantaged students in low progression schools in the vicinity of the two universities.[12] It supports these students over three years through a programme of advice sessions, taster days, study skills and residential events - underpinned by the aim that many of them will be admitted to research-led universities. It draws on some of the best and most transferable ideas from overseas access programmes.

Importantly – and in contrast to other schemes the Trust has funded – STAR begins in year 11 so that it can influence students' A-level choices, which have often been found to be a stumbling block for non-privileged youngsters accessing research-led universities. Another innovative element to STAR is the idea of a 'guaranteed pathway', so that students can see clearly from the beginning of the programme how they can gain a place at a top university and the individual steps they need to take to get there.

One of the most significant aspects of the STAR scheme is the way in which its impact is being assessed over a three-year period by Durham University's Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring. This makes the programme the first of its kind in the UK to be evaluated using a randomised control trial (RCT). This is an approach which aims to remove as many of the extraneous factors, which obscure the true impact of the programme, as possible.

9. Institute for Effective Education review on post-16 participation of minority ethnic groups. This systematic review was based on the premise that, given that some minority ethnic groups have higher rates of participation in the UK at both age 16 and 18 than both the majority white cohort and some other minorities,[13] identifying potential determinants could lead to the identification of methods of increasing participation for all. There were 23 studies included for in-depth analysis.[14] These studies either elicited students' views and/or aspirations about education or investigated the clear relationship between aspirations and educational variables. A conceptual framework informed the synthesis through a particular focus on themes relating to post-16 factors ('promoters' and 'non-promoters') grounded in the data, in the following categories: government policy, institutional practices (universities and schools), external agencies, work, religion, family, individual aspirations and other factors. The studies reviewed examined relationships and/or statistical analyses with regard to the factors that could be instrumental in determining young people's views about post-16 participation by considering a variety of variables. Two factors – the influence of family and individual aspirations – stood out as being the major determinants.

Overview of research methods used in this area

Very few of these studies have provided definitive answers about 'what works'. It is noticeable, however, that mentoring / role models / ambassadors feature, in some way, in every intervention. There is no 'typical' methodology, but a common format, where time and funding allows, is for the evaluators to use a control and comparison group of students to obtain statistical data, and focus groups to obtain qualitative data. The research is primarily quantitative in nature, though qualitative approaches have often been used in order to highlight people's experiences (the 'why' of not going or going on to HE, the importance of individual inspiration / aspiration).

The statistics used can be secondary (collected from existing sources, such as well established longitudinal databases) or primary (collected specifically for a particular evaluation, perhaps using young people themselves as information sources, or the National Pupil Database). Sometimes a control group is used so that researchers can attempt to identify the effects of a particular intervention. One study is using a randomised control trial (RCT). Only one study has been found, to date, which identified a statistically significant link between an intervention of this sort and attainment. Value for money is rarely, if ever, mentioned. Some descriptions of these schemes, however, mention what is described as a 'win-win scenario', with benefits for universities as institutions, university students and younger people in schools.

Issues for research / interventions in this area

There are a number of difficulties facing evaluators who are seeking to 'measure' the impact of schemes such as those outlined above. These reportedly include the following:

- difficulties in identifying and breaking down the 'barriers' to social mobility and/or FE/HE including:
  - ➢ low attainment of particular groups of pupils in schools
  - ➢ economic costs, e.g. withdrawal of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), higher tuition fees
  - ➢ parental / generational attitudes
  - ➢ young people's low self-esteem
  - ➢ geographical context, including region, locality or neighbourhood
  - ➢ inadequacies in Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) from schools and colleges
  - ➢ age at which aspirations are encouraged
  - ➢ university staff attitudes, entrance procedures and tests; universities not taking sufficient account of applicants' educational context
- inconsistencies in data collection and the lack of comparative data (as encountered in the national Aimhigher evaluation)
- defining social mobility: parents' occupation? National Statistics Socio-economic Classification? Postcode? FSM eligibility? IDACI (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index) Index? An agreed cross-party definition would be useful, but is unlikely to be established?
- identifying 'push' and 'pull' factors. E.g. if a young person from a deprived background makes it to university, is this due to the school/college (push) or the university (pull)? These two sectors have a tendency to blame each other for the lack of mobility. This is an example of the difficulties brought about by the presence and involvement of a

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mixture of education sectors, work sectors/professions and government departments in social mobility schemes.

A subsequent paper will examine how these difficulties might be addressed and will offer proposals for the best means (or 'metrics') of evaluating the impact, and therefore the success, of fairer access to HE programmes.

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[2] Aimhigher website: http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/DG_073697 [Accessed 10 March 2011].

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[10] Sutton Trust website, Future First: http://www.suttontrust.com/projects/schools/future-first/ [Accessed 10 March 2011].

[11] TeachFirst website: http://www.teachfirst.org.uk/AboutUs/about.aspx [Accessed 10 March 2011].

[12] The Sutton Trust website, the STAR programme: http://www.suttontrust.com/projects/university/star-programme/ [Accessed 10 March 2011].

[13] One example of HE participation that is often given is that of London Metropolitan University having a higher number of African-Caribbean students than the entire Russell Group of (20) universities put together, though this statistic dates from 2006: see Bhattacharyyia, G. (2006). 'University Colours'. *The Guardian,* online: http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2006/jan/13/highereducation.race [Accessed 10 March 2011].

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