

# ‘Widening access’ to higher education in Wales

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# Background

- Persistent inequalities in HE participation.
- Emphasis on improving rates of participation amongst 'under-represented groups.'



# Questions

- 1) What methods are used by HEIs in Wales to implement 'widening access' strategies?
- 2) What form of HE do 'widening access' strategies aim towards?
- 3) What can we (speculatively) say about the implications of these methods?



# Methods

- Interviews with widening access staff.
- Interviews with admissions tutors.
- Content analysis of Fees Plans and Widening Access strategies.

# Approaches to widening access

- **Pre-entry** (outreach work aimed at raising aspiration or attainment)
- **Entry** (admissions procedures)
- **Curriculum** (design and delivery)

# Pre-entry

## Raising aspirations

- Advice, guidance and information
- University 'taster' events
- Mentoring
- Fostering enthusiasm for learning



# Pre-entry

## Raising aspirations

*I do think some people get drawn in to what's normal in their community as well. And so you've got people who say 'it's not normal to go to university because nobody in my community does or my mum and dad didn't so I'm just going to follow the family tradition'.  
(Widening access practitioner)*

# Pre-entry

**Qualification top ups.**

Access courses.

Certificate of higher education.



# Pre-entry

**Raising attainment levels.**

GCSE revision workshops.

Study skills sessions.



# Pre-entry outreach

- Potential to support access to high ranking HEIs.
- No change in institutional structure.
- Will it bring about sustained changes to patterns of participation?



# Entry

## Contextualised admissions

- Rationale: prior attainment is not a good demonstrator of 'talent' or 'potential' to succeed.
- Prior attainment is considered in wider social, economic and cultural contexts.



# Excellence or equity?

*We know we are under two prevailing sets of expectations, one is widening access, the other is getting the highest grade point average...the message that comes out clearest is about the grade points...(Admissions tutor)*

# Contextualised admissions

- Potential to support access to high ranking HEIs.
- Requires institutions to change
- Pressure to meet 'excellence' agendas might undermine 'widening access' agendas.

**LEAGUE TABLE**

# Curriculum

**Accessible HE** (part-time, flexible learning.)

Rationale: Barriers to HE are structural and practical including work and family commitments.

# Curriculum

***Curriculum design*** (vocational HE qualifications such as Foundation Degrees and HNDs).

*‘I think that it can be summed up in that our curriculum is created to widen access, in universities they widen access by offering to disadvantaged people, ours is about curriculum’. (HE curriculum designer, FE college)*

# Curriculum delivery and design

- Flexible delivery has potential to support access to high ranking forms of HE.
- Onus on the institution to change.
- Vocational forms of HE may not support access to lucrative employment opportunities.

# Conclusion

- HEIs in Wales adopt varied approaches to widening access.
- Different approaches reflect culture, status, admissions arrangements of different universities.
- At *whom* and to *what* should widening access strategies aim?

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