

Impact and Effectiveness of Widening Access to HE in Wales

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*Targeting ‘Communities First’ areas in Wales to widening access to higher education:
how appropriate are the methods? Ceryn Evans*



Foreword

The Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD) is currently evaluating the impact and effectiveness of Widening Access to higher education (HE) in Wales. This project is funded through the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Secondary Data Analysis Initiative (ES/K004247/1); and by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). It will be completed by December 2014.

Access to higher education has become an extremely controversial area of policy, as successive UK administrations have sought to balance increasing student fees with ensuring that HE is open to individuals from as wide a range of social backgrounds as possible. Moreover, relatively distinctive approaches have been adopted in the different devolved administrations of the UK. For example, currently, the Welsh Government has undertaken to pay the increased costs to students arising from the abolition of the fees cap. However, the evidence-base for evaluating different approaches to widening access is relatively weak. Accordingly, WISERD, the HEFCW and the Welsh Government (WG) are collaborating on this innovative research study.

The research analyses how individuals who are resident in Wales progress through secondary school, into sixth forms and further education colleges for post-16 education and on to HE. It also explores what are the key factors here in determining whether individuals progress through the education system to HE or not. What are the relative impacts of the social characteristics of individuals, their previous educational attainment and their progression through the education system? What does this imply for the effects of barriers at the point of entry to HE, such as fees levels, entry processes and so forth? Answers to these questions are known for England, but not for other parts of the UK.

The analysis is based on the innovative use of three linked sources of information, the data for each of which are collected initially for administrative purposes. These are: the National Pupil Database (NPD) for Wales; the Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR); and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data. By linking these together, it is possible to trace individual trajectories through the education system to entry to HE. It is also possible to compare systematically the trajectories of those who

do participate in HE with those who do not. Moreover, using sophisticated statistical techniques, it is possible to determine which are the most influential factors in shaping patterns of HE participation. Results here will be compared with those that have been produced by similar analyses in England.

A second part of the proposed study (funded by additional resources made available by the HEFCW) investigates the development of distinctive approaches to widening access to HE by successive Welsh administrations since devolution in 1999. Of key significance here is to establish the rationales that underpin the approaches adopted in Wales; and to compare these with those that have informed policy approaches in the other countries of the UK and England, in particular. In addition, the study examines the ways in which national policies have been implemented by the Welsh universities, paying special attention to the assumptions about the determinants of HE participation that are in play here. This part of the study is based on fieldwork, comprising the analysis of official and semi-official documents and interviews with politicians and senior officials responsible for widening access policies; and with the professionals inside the universities responsible for implementing these policies.

The results of the research will be fed directly into the deliberations of the WG and the HEFCW on the future development of policies on widening access to HE, which will be especially intensive over the next few years. Moreover, they will also provide the basis for working with the professionals in the universities with responsibility for implementing widening access policies, to integrate the use of analyses of administrative data more firmly into their day-to-day practices.

Targeting 'Communities First' areas in Wales to widening access to higher education: how appropriate are the methods?

Introduction

In recent years, widening participation in higher education in Wales has been a key policy drive of the Welsh Government. Central to meeting its widening access agenda has been the adoption of area based strategies to widening access to higher education (HE) in Wales. This has been manifest in the targeting of residents of Communities First (CF) designated areas of Wales. Communities First was introduced in 2001 as the Welsh Government's community based programme for tackling poverty (Welsh Government, 2014). Areas designated as Communities First are those which fall within the top 10% most deprived according to measures on the Welsh Index of Multiple deprivation¹. In previous years the higher education funding council for Wales (HEFCW) had emphasised improving rates of participation amongst individuals with other characteristics such as those with disabilities and from particular ethnic background. However, in recent years the Welsh Government has moved to an exclusive targeting of CF areas (HEFCW, 2010), signalling its commitment to an area based approach to widening participation. In recent years the HEFCW's key target in terms of widening access has been to create a:

10% rise in the proportion of all Welsh domiciled students studying higher education courses...who are domiciled in Welsh Communities First areas (HEFCW 2010/11 to 2012/13).

Evidently, Communities First has become so deeply ingrained in widening participation policy in Wales and used somewhat uncritically as a proxy measure for disadvantage and of social class (HEFCW, 2010; 2013/14). However, this exclusive focus on Communities First (HEFCW, 2010) within Welsh Government widening access policy, (and indeed other aggregate measures of disadvantage used in widening participation policy elsewhere in the UK such as Low Participation Neighbourhoods, defined by

¹ In 2012, the Welsh Government reorganised the structure of Communities First moving to Communities First Cluster areas. There are now 52 CF cluster areas in Wales, these clusters include all of the geographic areas which were eligible for inclusion in CF.

POLAR² (Participation of Local AREas) in England) has been critiqued in recent years. Research has questioned the extent to which area based measures accurately define disadvantage thus calling to question to extent to which resources are being targeted at those most ‘needy’ of them (Taylor et al, 2013; Harrison and McCaig 2014; Croxford et al 2014). Taylor et al (2013) and Harrison and McCaig (2014) reveal that those living in LPNs are not necessarily the most disadvantaged in society, demonstrating that high levels of disadvantage often exist outside these areas. Since LPNs are not postcode defined and often encompass large swathes of major cities, this compromises their precision in identifying areas characterised by historically low rates of participation in HE (Harrison and McCaig 2014). Others have similarly acknowledged the ‘ecological fallacy’ (a term coined by Robinson, (1950)) within widening participation policy. The ‘ecological fallacy’ describes the way in which group level attributes (in this case, attributes associated with the local area) are erroneously attributed to the individual (Croxford et al, 2014; Harrison and Hatt, 2010). Croxford et al (2014) argue that the use of the Scottish Index of Multiple deprivation to define areas in receipt of WP resources is problematic because it does not accurately define disadvantaged *individuals*. They assert that the over reliance on the SIMD will mean that some people who experience high levels of disadvantage but live outside areas defined as deprived by the SIMD will miss out on support. Harrison and Hatt (2010) echo this concern by arguing that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are not always concentrated in one geographical area but are located across a range of neighbourhoods.

Notwithstanding the concern that resources may be incorrectly targeted where reliance on CF is exclusive within widening access policy, as suggested by research (Taylor et al, 2013), it remains the case that CF areas in Wales are associated with significantly lower rates of participation in HE than non-CF areas (Wright, 2014, forthcoming). Even when gender, ethnicity, SES and attainment at GCSE and A-level are taken into account, differences remain in the participation rates of CF and non-CF residents, albeit a substantially reduced difference. These differential rates of participation between individuals living in CF and non-CF areas in Wales presumably constitute the rationale underpinning the commitment to CF in widening access policy.

² POLAR is a classification of small areas across the UK based on historic rates of participation in HE amongst 18 or 19 year olds. It classifies areas at a range of geographic scales including regional and local government electoral wards (Harrison and McCaig, 2014).

Given the wholesale commitment to CF within Welsh Government policy, there are therefore important questions about how, exactly, institutions and reaching wider partnerships (RWP) in Wales target individuals from CF areas through their widening access strategies. This question of how CF areas are being targeted is particularly pertinent given that the difference in participation rates between CF and non-CF areas are significantly reduced once GCSE attainment gender, ethnicity and social class (measured by NS-SEC) is accounted for (Wright, 2014). Evidently, inequalities in attainment explain much of the variance in rates of participation in HE between CF and non-CF areas. This might suggest that investing resources in improving rates of attainment in these areas is a valuable means of widening access to HE opportunities. In particular the paper considers *how* CF areas are being targeted through institutional and Reaching Wider strategies through exploring the methods used which invariably aim to raise aspirations, attainment or provide financial support to particular targeted groups. It is only in exploring how CF areas are targeted that we are able to address questions relating to the appropriateness of the strategies used by HEIs Reaching Wider Partnerships (RWP) in Wales to widening access.

The paper is based on the analysis of institutional widening access strategies and Fee Plans. Given the importance of the Reaching Wider programme in meeting the Welsh Government's widening access strategy (discussed in paper X), the paper also considers the Reaching Wider Strategies of all three RWPs in Wales. Before exploring *how* HEIs and RWPs are delivering their widening access strategies (i.e the methods used), it is important to identify who the targets groups are to discern the extent to which CF is a central target group. Thus, with respect to the analysis of all RWP and Institutional documents, the paper asks, *who are the key target groups and how are they targeted?*

Questions

What approaches do HEIs and RWPs apply to target CF areas in Wales, and to what extent are these methods appropriate?

Research questions

Who are the target groups of institutional widening access and Reaching Wider strategies?

How are these groups targeted (i.e. through outreach work or financial support)?

Methods:

In answering the questions outlined above the target groups of institutional widening access strategies and reaching wider strategies were identified. Content analysis was carried out on the 2013/14 Fee Plans and the most recent Widening Access strategies produced by the 8 HEIs in Wales which existed in 2014. The latest three-year strategies (2011-2014) issued by each of the three RWPs in Wales were also analysed. There are currently three RWPs in Wales; the South East RWP (First Campus), the South West RWP, and the Mid and North Wales RWP. Each one produced a three-year Reaching Wider strategy in which they typically state their target groups, the aims and objectives of their strategies and the intended measurable 'outcomes' of their interventions.

These strategies, along with institutional Fee Plans and Widening Access strategies were analysed with a view to identify the key *target* groups at the centre of the strategies. In terms of the institutional Fee Plans and widening access strategies, these *target* groups are those which are identified as targets for institutional recruitment or were identified as the recipients of widening access resources (such as outreach support or financial support). Given that RWPs do not aim to promote recruitment to any one HEI but rather encourage participation in HE more generally, RWPs strategies were analysed with a view of identifying their target groups and the sorts of approaches taken to targeting these groups. The below discussion is based on the analysis of these Reaching Wider strategies as well as the latest Fee Plans and widening access strategies produced by 8 universities in Wales (excluding the OU) which existed at the time of the research. These are: *Cardiff University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Aberystwyth University, Bangor University, Swansea University, University of South Wales, University of Wales, University of Wales Trinity St David and Glyndwr University*. While Bangor University and Aberystwyth University produced a joint strategy, within this strategy were separate references for each university. In order to address the question regarding the appropriateness of institutional and reaching wider approaches to

widening access to CF residents it was necessary that I consider how exactly HEIs in Wales and RWPs are delivering their widening access strategies. This required a close look at the approaches and methods used by institutional widening access and Reaching Wider strategies to explore the varied different ways in which widening access strategies are delivered.

Target group for institutional widening access and Reaching Wider Partnership

A strong theme to emerge from the analysis of the widening access strategies produced by HEIs was an emphasis on recruitment from ‘under-represented’ or ‘low participation’ groups. This category was identified in the Fee Plans and WA strategies of *all* HEIs and tended not to be defined but operated as an overarching category which encompassed a number of sub-categories. These sub-categories invariably included care leavers, people from Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPNs), Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) groups, those with disabilities and individuals living in Communities First areas.

The sub-category Communities First (CF) was by far the most dominant target group identified within Fee Plans and WA strategies; all eight HEIs identified Communities First as a category targeted in their widening access strategies, especially in terms of the recruitment of students from CF areas entering the university. Communities First was also the key target group of Reaching Wider Partnership strategies with all three RWPs targeting residents of Communities First areas within their strategies. This almost exclusive focus on improving HE participation in CF areas (albeit operating as an umbrella target under which other categories such as BME, those with disabilities, and care leavers sat) reflected the way in which RWPs funding is attached to Communities First in the latest funding period. For HEIs CF was such a prominent target category for recruitment that it was often the case that other categories fell under this, for example, some HEIs made reference to increasing recruitment of BME groups living in CF areas. It was striking, however, that one HEI in Wales CF did not aim to *increase* recruitment of students from CF areas. Rather its 2013/14 Fee Plan stated that it aimed to maintain levels of recruitment from CF backgrounds, perhaps reflecting the currently relatively high rate of recruitment from these backgrounds into this university.

The second most common target category to be identified in the Fee Plans and WA strategies was Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPNs). This was typically defined in terms of POLAR2. Five out of eight HEIs' widening access documents stated that they aimed to increase recruitment of students from LPNs by a specified target percentage. A further four HEIs made more general references to widening access to individuals from LPNs but didn't provide a specific target percentage in this respect. In these cases it was common for the category LPN to be referred to throughout documents, as a target category for widening access in much more general terms without giving specific proportional increases in terms of recruitment of students from LPNs. Largely, widening access strategies and Fee Plans referred to low participation neighbourhoods and CF as distinct categories, as illustrated by the below strategy;

X University's Widening Access Strategy focuses upon the well-defined target group of young people and adults in Communities First areas and Low Participation Neighborhoods (X HEI, WA strategy)

While LPN (or POLAR) was a prominent target group in terms of institutional recruitment it did not feature nearly as frequently in institutional widening access documents as the target category Communities First. Moreover, when LPN was identified as a target group within the widening access strategies it was often not clear how LPNs were being defined by each HEI, other than in general terms through reference to POLAR 2 areas. All but one of the universities which had targets in terms of the recruitment of individuals from LPNs relied on POLAR 2 to define their target. Where LPN was not clearly defined this begs the question, how is the institution able to measure their success/progress against a target which has not been defined.

Communities First and LPN were, therefore, the two most dominant target groups identified in institutional widening access strategies in terms of institutional recruitment (i.e. HEIs overwhelmingly stated how they intended to improve the recruitment of students from LPN and CF areas in order to meet their widening access strategies). A further significant category identified within institutional widening access documents was looked after children (LAC) or care leavers, which, like CF was referred to frequently through the widening access documents of all eight HEIs. It is striking, however, that no HEI had specific target percentages in terms of recruitment of

individuals from care backgrounds, perhaps reflecting the very small numbers of young people from care backgrounds progressing to higher education in the UK (Martin and Jackson, 2002). Care Leavers were, however, a prominent sub-category target group within the broader category ‘under-represented groups.’ Care leavers were identified as target recipients of both outreach activity and financial support in the widening access strategies of all HEIs. Once again, the lack of a defined target percentage in terms of recruitment of care leavers begs the question, how are HEIs able to document improvement in terms of recruitment of care leavers?

In addition to the three most common target groups identified in institutional widening access strategies (CF, LPN and care leavers) were a number of additional sub-category target groups. Three HEIs identified NS-SEC 4-7³ as a key target group for institutional recruitment and identified specific benchmarks in terms of this. The relatively minor targeting of socio-economically disadvantaged groups (NS-SEC groups 4-7) perhaps suggests that the category CF (which is the most prominent target group) is presumed to be an accurate indicator of disadvantage. Directing widening access resources to individuals living in CF areas evidently assumes to capture people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (an assumption that is not necessarily well founded, as research has indicated (Taylor et al, 2013)).

In addition to these main target groups, HEIs also made reference to supporting BME students, those with a disability, (often defined in very general terms), mature applicants from LPNs and applicants from state schools. This reference to BME is perhaps superfluous given research shows that minority ethnic groups are over-represented in HE relative to white students (Gorard, 2005). Nonetheless, BME along with the other target groups such as individuals with disabilities were identified as target groups by the minority of HEIs and were identified in very general terms rather than in terms of specific recruitment targets. For example, one HEI states:

‘We will also support people with disabilities and special needs’ (Widening access strategy, X University)

³ NS-SEC (national statistics socio-economic classification system) is an occupationally based classification system constructed to measure employment relations and conditions of occupation (Goldthorpe, 2007). The NS-SEC has eight classes, each of which is defined by a unique occupational position in the labour market. NS-SEC 4-7 refers to categories 4-7 which range from categories defined by employers in small organisations or ‘own account’ workers (category 4) to those defined by routine occupations (category 7).

It was also striking that three HEIs stated that mature learners from LPNs with no previous experience of HE were targeted in terms of institutional recruitment. Again, the targeting of mature learners was in very general rather than specific terms for two out of the three HEIs who referenced mature learners in their widening access strategies. Only one HEI stated specific targets in terms of increasing the numbers of mature full-time under-graduates. The targeting of mature learners from LPNs would appear to reflect an assumption that disadvantage operates on multiple levels and that mature applicants living in LPNs are particularly disadvantaged in terms of participation in HE. It was striking that only one HEI identified state school pupils as a target group. However, this HEI noted that this group was already being met in terms of HESA benchmarks.

What methods are used to target CF areas?

Evidently, HEIs and RWPs overwhelmingly adopt area-based widening access strategies. They overwhelmingly target individuals resident in areas characterised by high levels of socio-economic disadvantage or low rates of participation in HE (defined by CF or LPN/POLAR). It was however, Communities First which emerged as the most common target category in terms of widening access and institutional recruitment. All HEIs' in Wales stated in their widening access documentation how they intend to deliver 'widening access' strategies, through varied approaches, which aim to improve or maintain recruitment of students from CF areas. In many cases, however, institutional widening access strategies described the programmes or activities that they intended to deliver without making it clear exactly who the beneficiaries of these resources were. Given the overwhelming emphasis on Communities First throughout widening access documentation it could often be presumed that activities, programmes or events were aimed overwhelmingly at CF areas unless otherwise stated. This is not to say that CF was the exclusive group that were targeted. As discussed above there were other groups targeted, with particular, but somewhat vague reference to those from LPNs and under-represented or disadvantaged groups. Given the prominence of CF within widening access documentation further exploration is needed to reveal *how* individuals living in CF areas are targeted.

Outreach activity- raising aspirations

Widening access ‘outreach’ work was identified as one of the most common ways in which institutions deliver their widening access strategies. Individuals living in Communities First areas were the most common recipients of widening access outreach activities; all eight HEIs directed their outreach activities towards people (usually children and young people) living in CF areas. Outreach programmes aimed at raising educational aspirations (typically amongst young people) were one of the most common types of outreach activity delivered by HEIs and RWPs. These sorts of ‘raising aspirations’ programmes included events such as ‘summer universities’ or university ‘taster’ days where young people are invited on to a university campus to experience university life. Outreach programmes also include workshops where academic staff provide advice or guidance, alter ‘common misconceptions’ about university life or provide information and advice about the financing of university. Raising levels of aspirations amongst young people from CF areas was a particularly common aim of both RWPs as well as institutional widening access strategies and occurred in all eight institutions’ strategies, as demonstrated in the aims and objectives of these institutional fee plans. They aim to:

Deliver a minimum of 16 aspiration raising events in CF catchment schools and min 2 transitional events (with First Campus).

Develop provision to raise aspirations for higher level learning and to create learning cultures in Communities First locations. (Widening access strategy, X University).

Despite this emphasis on ‘raising aspirations’ of individuals (with the foresight of encouraging their progression on to HE), both Widening Access practitioners and RWP managers were, however, aware that a multitude of factors inform a young person’s propensity to progress on to HE, including prior attainment levels, financial considerations, parental or school encouragement and that individual aspiration as just one factor amongst many. This RWP manager reflects on why an individual might not make the progression to HE study:

There’s just so many reasons and to be honest running the summer school at the moment you can just see it now, I mean just so much of it is, I mean it

really is, I always boil it down to two very simple things which are aspirations and attainment and then you've got all the other things like family things that go on, that's three things! (Widening Access practitioner)

Recognising that a multitude of influences bear upon an individual's likelihood of progressing on to HE led some widening access practitioners and RWP managers to critique the heavy reliance on CF as a target group within the Welsh Government's widening access policy. They were aware of the problems associated with aggregate measures of disadvantage, raising concerns that the exclusive targeting of CF areas meant that other schools, groups and individuals not designated as CF become excluded despite being characterised by high levels of disadvantage. This practitioner's reflection exemplifies these concerns and suggests that other, perhaps more accurate measures of disadvantage are being side-lined because of the heavy focus on CF:

We've got one school which has got high FSMs but low Communities First so technically we can't work with that school so that's quite frustrating because the need is there and just looking at GCSE outcomes of that school compared to another school so that's how we prioritise our school engagement (widening access practitioner)

Despite these concerns regarding the extent to which CF is an indicator of disadvantage, widening access practitioners placed heavy emphasis on raising the aspirations of people living in areas characterised by disadvantage or historically low rates of participation in HE. This emphasis on raising levels of aspiration amongst individuals living in CF areas reflects an assumption that non-participation in HE is explained by the low aspirations of individuals living in these 'communities'. Indeed, practitioners frequently alluded to the notion that the local community and neighbourhood are important in informing young people's expectations and aspirations for higher education:

Yeah, I do think some people get drawn in to what's normal in their community as well. And so you've got people who, 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, X University)

Consequently, practitioners frequently viewed their role as altering young people's perceptions of HE and raising their educational aspirations for HE through outreach activity.

How appropriate are 'raising aspiration' programmes delivered in CF area?

This emphasis on 'raising aspirations' through programmes such as university 'taster' sessions or residential visits illustrates a laudable attempt to alter traditions of non-participation within communities characterised by low levels of participation in HE. However, it rests on a somewhat problematic assumption that particular communities are characterised by low levels of educational aspiration. A number of researchers have lamented the 'raising aspirations' agenda within policy discourse by illustrating the high aspirations (for both higher education and professional forms of employment) held by young people living in disadvantaged areas (Bright, 2011; Allen and Hollingworth, 2013; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011; Reay 2013). Research by the Joseph Roundtree Foundation (St Clair et al, 2011) has demonstrated the 'high' levels of aspiration for both university and professional and managerial forms of employment amongst young people living in disadvantaged areas. Evans (2014) similarly documented the strong aspirations for HE held by young people living in economically disadvantaged areas of Wales.

Given that there is no evidence that working-class localities are characterised by lower aspirations than anywhere else, the emphasis on raising aspiration amongst individuals living in CF areas seems misguided. This is not to say that programmes which provide young people with advice and information about HE are not worthwhile. Young people living in neighbourhoods and communities in which few people make the progression on to HE are likely to have access to fewer resources of information and knowledge of HE (Ball et al, 2002; Reay et al, 2001). These young people may therefore benefit from programmes that provide information and advice about HE or provide financial advice and support with making applications to HE study. Yet the notion that young people living in these areas are aspirational 'deficit' is unfounded and as such it seems superfluous to direct resources towards raising their levels of aspiration. As Wright (2014) has illustrated, when all other factors are controlled (such as prior attainment and social class), there is no difference in HE participation rates between residents living in

CF areas compared to non-CF areas. This would suggest that investing in programmes designed to ‘raise aspirations’ of young people in CF areas is unwarranted and that investing resources into improving levels of educational attainment amongst particular social groups might be a more appropriate strategy of widening access.

Outreach work- Raising attainment: how appropriate is this method of widening access?

Indeed, in addition to this emphasis on raising levels of aspiration was a further subcategory of ‘outreach’ work delivered by HEIs and RWPs defined by an emphasis on raising levels of academic attainment. However, only four HEIs explicitly stated that they delivered programmes which are aimed at raising young people’s levels of attainment (typically at GCSE level) with the foresight of supporting their progression on to HE. The emphasis on raising levels of attainment was particularly strong amongst two out of the three RWPs who place an emphasis on working with children and young people. Where university’s and RWPs delivered programmes aimed at raising levels of attainment, this was typically through the provision of GCSE revision workshops, aimed at young people at the end of their compulsory education in key curriculum areas such as maths and English.

This emphasis on raising attainment levels reflects an understanding that GCSE attainment is strongly associated with social class background (Gorard, 2005) and that young people from the least socially advantaged backgrounds are less likely to obtain the highest levels of GCSE (Gorard, 2005). Since GCSE levels are the most important predictors of HE participation, outreach programmes such as GCSE revision sessions might beneficially improve rates of participation in HE where they are historically low. Given the documented differences in the attainment levels of residents from CF and non-CF areas (Wright, 2014), the emphasis on raising levels of attainment amongst young people living in these areas would seem appropriate. If widening access policies are to have a substantial influence on rates of participation, perhaps a greater emphasis should be placed on improving levels of attainment, rather than raising aspiration levels of young people living in disadvantaged areas. Of course, given that educational trajectories are formed longitudinally over the course of a young person’s educational career (Gorard and Smith, 2007), then the extent to which revision sessions which aim

to improve a person's GCSE or A-level results at the end of their compulsory (or post-compulsory) education have an impact on their likelihood of progressing on to HE might be questionable.

In addition to this somewhat marginal focus on improving levels of attainment at GCSE, there were other ways in which widening access strategies recognised the importance of prior academic attainment levels in determining participation in HE. All HEIs' delivered programmes which are designed to improve the skills and qualifications of potential students prior to their entry to HE. Access courses, foundation degrees, or accredited bite size learning opportunities were a major way in which this was done. These sorts of programmes are often delivered through Lifelong Learning Centres or Widening Participation centres either in community locations or on university campuses with the specific aim of supporting progression on to degree level study. These are designed to equip people, typically mature learners who have been out of education for a while and who do not possess traditional qualifications such as A-levels, with the skills and qualifications needed to access HE study.

This approach to widening access is especially beneficial in supporting individuals from non-traditional backgrounds to make the progression on to degree level study. Wright (2014) has demonstrated that even when factors such as prior attainment at GCSE, ethnicity, gender and NS-SEC are accounted for, the odds of pursuing a degree at higher education are lower amongst residents living in CF areas compared to those living in non-CF areas. Programmes such as Access courses which are specifically designed to support progression on to degree level study may therefore make a positive contribution to improving study a degree level for residents from CF areas. Arguably, these sorts of programmes should form a central pillar of institutional widening access strategies, particularly within high ranking HEIs where participation rates of residents from CF areas have found to be lower than non-CF residents, even after controlling for a number of characteristics including gender, ethnicity, social class and GCSE attainment (Wright, 2014). Where high ranking universities deliver programmes aimed at supporting non-traditional students to make the progression on to degree level study this might have a positive impact on widening access to individuals from Communities First areas who are less likely to take up degree level study even when GCSE attainment is controlled.

Financial support

In addition to the large emphasis on outreach work designed to raise levels of aspiration (and to a lesser extent attainment) within institutional and Reaching Wider strategies, institutional widening access strategies also deliver financial support packages in order to support access and retention of students from particular target groups. Indeed, providing financial support for particular target groups was an important means of delivering widening access strategies for all HEIs. Financial support packages included bursaries, scholarships, funds or grants such as care leavers' bursaries, mobility funds, hardship bursaries, priority subject bursaries and retention bursaries, to name just a few. While it was often unclear which specific target groups were the recipients of these sorts of financial support packages, where specific target groups were identified the most common recipients were students from local authority care background and from socio-economically disadvantaged homes. All 8 HEIs directed financial support towards care leavers, and these were very often the recipients of retention bursaries. This emphasis on care leavers as recipients of retention bursaries reflects an assumption that care leavers are at greater risk of withdrawing from their studies for financial reasons. It is striking therefore that whilst no HEI identified care leavers as a target group in terms of institutional recruitment, this group was a common recipient of financial support, as well as retention support in the form of mentoring, pastoral support and bursaries to support their retention.

The second largest category to receive financial support was students from 'socio-economically disadvantaged' or 'low income' backgrounds. This group was likely to receive financial support packages aimed at aiding their recruitment, retention and successful degree outcomes. Very often, Fee Plans stated that financial support packages will be targeted at those from low income or 'disadvantaged' backgrounds, or those living in hardship but they did not specify how this category was defined. This emphasis reflects an assumption that socio-economic disadvantage is a significant barrier to participation. Indeed, one HEI emphasised that the purpose of financial support packages for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is:

'To ensure that families from low income families are not deterred from reaching their full potential in higher education' (Fee Plan, X university)

Whilst socio-economically disadvantaged groups were key target recipients of financial support (seven out of eight HEIs directed financial support packages to these groups) it was striking that less than half of the HEIs explicitly stated that financial support would be directed towards individuals from CF areas. However, Fee Plans frequently stated that financial support packages such as bursaries for students from low income families will help the university to meet its targets in terms of recruitment from Communities first areas and LPNs. Thus, where HEIs made reference to providing financial support for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds there was often an implicit reference to the way this would help deliver the university's widening access strategies in relation to the CF target. Where CF students were the direct recipients of financial support packages, these packages tended to be for accommodation or travel costs to support their recruitment or retention. Moreover, where CF students were the recipients of financial support it tended to be low incomes students living in CF areas who were identified as key recipients of financial support. For example, one HEI Fee Plan state that it will:

'Use bursaries, scholarships, fee waivers, and targeted financial support for students' living costs to promote and safeguard fair access to HE and to identify individuals with the greatest potential from disadvantaged backgrounds with particular emphasis on students from Community First Areas, care leavers and looked after children'

Another stated:

'The Communities First Award provides either a £1,000 residences fee discount or a £500 travel bursary to Communities First students with a family income below K£42.6 in the first year only'

Given the aforementioned problems with the use of CF as proxy measure for disadvantage, the emphasis on supporting students from CF areas through financial support may be problematic. Targeting financial support packages towards those from CF areas is likely to exclude many students who experience disadvantage and may benefit from financial support during their studies. However, the emphasis on issuing financial support to those from disadvantaged backgrounds formerly and Communities First and Care Leavers latterly implies that HEIs recognise that CF is not an

unproblematic measure of disadvantage; it recognises the importance of identifying students from disadvantaged backgrounds who reside in CF areas because residence in CF areas alone might not signal disadvantage. This might explain why LPN was a significant target group in terms of recruitment but not in terms of recipients of financial support; only three HEIs explicitly stated that students from LPNs are recipients of financial support packages. This would suggest that HEIs recognise that LPN, as with CF, is not an unproblematic measure of disadvantage and as such, financial support packages should be directed toward individuals defined by their family income.

Conclusion

In recent years a growing critique has emerged regarding the use of area-based approaches to widening participation policies in England and Wales (Harrison and McCaig 2014; Taylor et al, 2013). This critique has rightly raised concern that the policy aims of widening participation may not be fulfilled if aggregate measures of disadvantage such as POLAR and CF continue to be relied upon exclusively (Harrison, 2009; Taylor et al, 2013). Such measures often fail to accurately ‘capture’ the disadvantaged individuals who are most in need of support to access HE opportunities. Despite these concerns, the Welsh Government has maintained a steadfast commitment to aggregate measures of disadvantage within its widening access policy, as defined by the targeting of Communities First. Given this focus, this paper has attempted to address the question of how, exactly, HEIs and RWPs in Wales target CF areas through their widening access strategies. With this aim, the paper has attempted to assess the appropriateness of these approaches.

The paper revealed that a great deal of outreach work, aimed at CF areas, is in the form of programmes aimed at raising levels of aspiration. Given the vagueness of the term ‘raising aspirations’ within institutional widening access strategies it is difficult to fully assess the appropriateness of this type of approach. However, the prominence of ‘raising aspirations’ outreach work nonetheless raises questions about its appropriateness given that there is no evidence that those living in CF areas possess ‘lower’ aspirations for HE than non-CF residents. That said, young people living in areas characterised by historically low rates of participation in HE are likely to have fewer resources of experience and knowledge of HE to draw upon. In these

circumstances, programmes aimed at providing advice, information and guidance are perhaps appropriate. Indeed, research has shown that programmes which aim to improve young people's levels of confidence and aspiration for HE in order to encourage their application to HE have a beneficial impact on their likelihood of applying to university (Lasselle et al, 2009). These findings suggest that programmes which directly aim to alter the confidence levels of young people through providing information, advice and guidance regarding HE may well be beneficial. These may be more appropriate than broadly defined and vague 'raising aspirations' programmes.

In addition to the plethora of programmes delivered by HEIs and RWPs aimed at 'raising aspirations' were a further set of outreach activities aimed at boosting levels of attainment. Given that CF areas are associated with lower GCSE attainment levels than non-CF areas (Wright, 2014) and GCSE attainment appears to account for much of the variance in participation in HE between residents from CF and non-CF areas, this would suggest that programmes designed to raise levels of GCSE attainment in CF areas should, in principle, make an important contribution to widening access. In many ways, the statistical evidence (Wright, 2014) supports the continued use of outreach programmes aimed at boosting levels of GCSE attainment in CF areas. Of course, the extent to which there is a linear relationship between attainment and progression to HE is open to dispute. Young people who lack confidence in their ability to access HE, have little in the way of family experience and resources of knowledge to draw upon may consequently become less motivated to strive for high levels of attainment which would support their progression to HE than their more confident peers. The direction of relationship between aspirations and attainment and progression to HE may not, therefore, be straightforward.

In addition to these sorts of outreach programmes which aim to boost GCSE attainment amongst young people are programmes such as Access or Foundation degrees which support individuals, without traditional qualifications, to access degree level study. Given that Wright (2014) has revealed that those living in CF areas are less likely to study for a degree than those living outside CF areas, even after GCSE attainment has been controlled, this suggests that these sorts of programmes make an important contribution to widening access to degree schemes for students from CF backgrounds. This commitment to widening access to degree schemes (as opposed to other forms of

higher education study) should be a particular concern of high ranking HEIs. Given that individuals from CF areas are less likely than residents in non-CF areas to participate in Russell group HEIs or ‘high status’ HEIs even when attainment (and gender, ethnicity and SES) has been taken into account (Wright, 2014), this suggests that high ranking HEIs should invest most heavily in programmes designed to support degree level study. Access courses, which aim to support non-traditional learners to make the progression on to degree level study, particularly highly competitive degree schemes such as medicine, dentistry and law, may be a valuable element of institutional widening access strategies.

In order to improve the capacity of widening access programmes like Access courses to bring about improvements in rates of participation amongst non-traditional learners, this sort of provision needs to be mainstreamed within universities so that they become a significant part of university provision. Improvements will not come about unless a greater level of esteem is attached to Access courses so that they are recognised across the sector on an equal standing to traditional qualifications like A-levels. However, programmes aimed at raising GCSE attainment levels or ‘topping-up’ levels of qualifications through Access courses will only make a positive contribution to widening access if high ranking HEIs make steps to erode their exclusive appeal. According to Reay et al (2001), young people from families with little in the way of family history of experience of participation in HE often exclude themselves from places which they view as socially, culturally and ethnically dissimilar from themselves. Thus, outreach work which boosts attainment levels will have limited impact if institutions do nothing to address their elitist or exclusive image. Altering patterns of participation requires not only challenging entrenched social class inequalities in relation to attainment, but also requires institutions to take responsibility to alter structures which may unwittingly serve to reinforce inequalities in access. Greater onus should be placed on high ranking HEIs to make themselves more inclusive and appealing to social groups traditionally under-represented in HE.

Notwithstanding the issues raised here, the targeting of CF within widening access policy also raises a further set of questions about the impact of the Welsh Government’s overwhelming focus on CF areas on cross-border flows of students. The dominance of the CF category within institutional Fee Plans and Widening Access strategies reflects

the Welsh Government's emphasis on recruitment of Welsh domiciled students rather than UK domiciled students into Welsh HEIs. This emphasis may potentially impact on the geographical mobility of Welsh domiciled students; namely increasing their propensity to study in Wales. Such widening access policies appear to place little emphasis on widening access to students from 'widening access' backgrounds from outside of Wales. As such, the extent to which the higher education sector in Wales will play a part in addressing inequalities in access to HE across the UK may be questionable.

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