



National Education Opportunities Network

The NEON Summer Symposium 2017 – Widening Access – Are we there yet?

Leeds Beckett University, 8th and 9th of June



On the 8th of June 220 widening access professionals gathered in the Rose Bowl at Leeds Beckett University for two days to discuss widening access and the progress made so far. During the Symposium delegates heard from policy makers, researchers and practitioners, members elected a new executive committee, who will serve for the next two years, and we were all left in varying amounts of shock at the results of the General Election. NEON's Martin Webster reflects on the two-day event and some of the answers that the Symposium arrived at.



Leeds Beckett's vice chancellor, Professor Peter Slee opened proceedings welcoming the delegates to Leeds and wishing us all a productive couple of days. Peter's welcome included his own reflections upon the conference theme stating that "higher education should not entrench existing privilege" and stressing the need to ensure that students are not just supported to access higher education, but throughout the whole student lifecycle. He also highlighted the 50% drop in the number of mature learners and the need to encourage people of all ages to consider HE.



Chris Hale, Director of Policy at Universities UK then took to the podium and asked the Symposium to consider the disparity in access, particularly in entry to higher tariff HEIs. He reiterated the objectives of widening access but also reminded the audience of the need to move beyond young people and traditional modes of delivery. Mature students need to be part of the answer!

After lunch delegates moved into their first NEON laboratory sessions. These sessions covered a variety of topics including targeting, working with estranged young people, learners with disabilities, working with parents and BAME learners.



Despite having chaired all the NEON Symposium's Graeme Atherton has never had the opportunity to deliver a keynote address. A last minute dropout by one of our keynote speakers due to ill health meant that this year Graeme was able to put this right asking delegates what's next for widening access? He also encouraged people to consider the conference theme asking if we are nearly there, where is there? He suggested that the likely result of the election would mean a continuing Conservative government and, therefore, business as usual for the time being. He outlined many of the challenges again mentioning the fall in mature applications as well as the drop in A-level applicants in particular subject areas. The morning might have caused him to rethink some of his address but it was warmly received and provoked some important questions for the audience to take away.



Then we were into the first round of presentations and paper sessions. Over the two days 32 presentations and papers were delivered covering a range of widening access topics. These are a key part of the Symposium and allow delegates to share both research and practice that is going on throughout the sector.

The final keynote of the day was delivered by REFORM's Head of Education, Louis Coiffait, and Emilie Sundorph, a researcher with REFORM. They gave us an interesting insight into some of the forthcoming widening access research that is taking place. They raised 'five common challenges', prior attainment, cooperation with schools, aspirations and perceptions of HE, measuring success and the commitment of institutions.



For the majority of delegates, it was time to retreat to the accommodation and prepare themselves for the conference dinner. Meanwhile we still had the important business of NEON's Annual General Meeting to get on with. As members came in the 2017 voting papers were issued to elect a new Chair and executive committee for the next two years. After receiving papers from the Director, Operations Manager and current Chair it was time for the results to be announced. Steve Kendall, both the outgoing and the newly elected Chair, welcomed the new committee and with that the meeting was drawn to a close.



The conference dinner is always one of the highlights of the NEON Symposium and 2017 lived up to, if not surpassed, any expectations we all might have had. Leeds Beckett proved to be excellent hosts and thanks must go to all the catering and bar staff whose good humour and service made it a very special meal. However it was to be our after dinner

speakers who would steal the show. The speeches are always a time to reflect on the most important reason for our work, the students.



Hinnah Rafiq received a round of applause as she told everyone that she had just heard she had received a first-class honours degree. She went onto describe her own journey to higher education and the personal challenges she had had to overcome. She also spoke about her work as a student ambassador and how, not only had she been able to help other young people, but how it had improved her overall confidence.

Next up was Beth Taswell. Beth won our NEON Award earlier this year and listening to her



speak the reasons why soon became clear. Coming from a care background Beth had had various barriers to overcome, not just in accessing higher education, but in completing her studies. Beth spoke with humour and emotion and her story touched every person in the room. Wanting to share her experience she is now a Care Leaver Support Officer at City University in London.

After the speeches there was a standing ovation for two very remarkable young people who reminded us all of the importance of our work and why it is so essential to keep on ensuring people can access higher education. In these two cases there was no doubt that the university experience had been truly transformational.





For many delegates the night did not end with the conference dinner. Many followed the General Election as the results started to come in. Nevertheless, day two of the Symposium arrived and most delegates were up for 9am to hear from the first of our key note speakers, Caroline Rowley, Yorkshire and Humber's Regional Director for the Association of Colleges.

She gave the college perspective on the current widening access landscape welcoming collective partnerships with HEIs and acknowledging the importance, and opportunities, of the NCOPs. Caroline also explored apprenticeships and their developing importance in the current widening access landscape. Caroline went on to ask the audience to think about our roles in ensuring the relevance of higher education for all sections of the population and challenged us to ensure that widening access did not merely become a soft marketing tool. Summing up she suggested that in answer to the question, are there yet?, we were only half way.



Next were the second round of laboratory sessions including discussions on outward mobility, learners with mental health difficulties, student finance, mentoring and evaluation. Another great round of workshops which received excellent delegate feedback.

Day two's presentation and paper sessions followed before delegates received a well earned break prior to the final session of 2017, the panel discussion.



Panellists had been asked to reflect on 'Where to now for widening access? 2020 and beyond'. Our first speaker, Diana Beach, Director of Policy and Advocacy from the Higher Education Policy Institute, highlighted the developing political context in which we find ourselves. Upskilling the British workforce, focussing on life-long learning and the importance of part-time and

adult learners should remain in the forefront of our minds at this time. Katherine Griffiths, Director of HE Development and Learning at University Campus Oldham, gave a view from her own institution highlighting some of the issues facing HE in FE over the coming years. Finally Nicola Turner, Policy Executive at UCAS, gave us some statistical data highlighting the current progress so far.



After a lively audience debate Graeme offered his own personal reflections on the Symposium and the continuing importance of the NEON community before handing over to the NEON Chair, Steve Kendall, to officially close our 2017 event.

Once again the Symposium gave the widening access community a great opportunity to come together and reflect on how we take our work forward over the coming years. At the outset we asked the question, 'Widening Access – Are we there yet?'. It became clear throughout the two days that there is still progress we need to make but we need to consider innovative ways in which to take our work forward. NCOPs have resulted in many new staff joining our community and, with new staff, there is a breadth of new ideas and approaches. We need to harness this new talent and learn from colleagues who, having worked outside the HE sector, bring with them experiences and approaches that can help us further improve widening access in the UK.

We look forward to working with you all throughout the year and welcoming everyone back together in 2018 to share our successes and further develop the work we all do.

