

HEE's approach to WP

Health Education England's (HEE) Widening Participation programme promotes equality and diversity in relation to the development of the current and future healthcare workforce.

This is with the intention of ensuring an approach where the NHS workforce is more representative of the communities it seeks to serve and where development and progression is based upon a person's merit, ability and motivation and not their social background or the privilege, extent and effectiveness of their social networks.

To support these aims, HEE has commissioned four pieces of research,

‘Widening Participation into Pre-registration - A review of Widening Participation Interventions and Student Experience in Three Case Study Areas’

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Objectives and Funding

- Capture the experiences, including support and barriers faced, of participants from different equality target groups, when undertaking, accessing, progressing on NHS funded healthcare programmes and moving into healthcare employment.
- Investigate the specific strategies used by education providers involved in the delivery of NHS funded programmes in supporting the recruitment, selection, progression and transition to employment of participants from underrepresented groups, including those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.
- What does 'Widening Participation' mean to you?

Commissioned by Health Education England and completed between April 2015 and March 2016.

Methodology

- Rapid literature review
- Semi-structured telephone interviews with key stakeholders
- Facilitated groups with staff in the health and care system
- Facilitated groups with undergraduates from Widening Participation backgrounds on Adult Nursing and Radiography (Therapeutic and Diagnostic) degree programmes
- Gathering data on undergraduate cohorts from participating universities.

Sample

- Three HE/health economies; NW, SE, NW London
- At least one trust and one HEI in each area who worked together (eg placements)
- 6 HEIs, 5 NHS Trusts, 2 Further Education College/Sixth Form Colleges. Focus groups (n=72) and interviews (n=27)

Target groups

‘Advocates’

- University admissions tutors, lecturers, senior administrators
- Health employers including learning and development leads
- Small number of FE/sixth form teachers

‘Aspirants’

- Currently employed staff hoping to go to university (eg Health Care Assistants)
- Students on a degree course leading to a health profession (specifically nursing and radiography/radiotherapy)

Findings

WP activity

- A lot of WP activity taking place in health both by universities and employers (sometimes together)
 - limited evidence of systematic collection of impact data
 - no evidence of data being gathered to demonstrate impact beyond individual institutions, for examples across local economies
- Tensions between the need to raise the academic standards of the (nursing) profession and the desire to develop existing members of staff into professional roles

From the literature review

- There is limited directly relevant published research
- It suggests:
 - Start interventions early (for example, primary school outreach)
 - Engage parents/carers as well as young people
 - Combine a number of interventions that are coherent and contain the same basic message rather than count on a single approach
- This tended to match the understanding and desires of advocates who are closely involved with WP, but rarely the practice.

Experience of WP aspirants

- *When they are selecting students they are looking at the high achievers anyway and then you feel “I've not been selected because I haven't got X amount of A-levels” that's taken into consideration and you think I am just going to be wasting time. So it knocks your confidence, even to step out and try.*
- *[I learned about nursing degrees because] my girlfriend was working in the health care system... I didn't really think it was an option when I was at school because careers advisors never said anything about nursing or anything. It's not really seen as a male job, nursing... it always seems like a woman's job but I didn't think it was an option to me until my partner said it... no one's ever said it about it before.*

Experience of WP aspirants

Employed aspirants face multiple barriers:

- receiving clear information and guidance
- getting support from line managers
- finding ways to afford study given existing financial commitments
- coping with unavoidable time pressures (for example family commitments)
- developing fundamental skills
- developing higher skills

There is no standard career path that leads towards higher level study for support workers.

Working aspirants aiming for HE

- Aspirants reported that information about access to university is often hard to come by, incomplete or inaccurate.
- Advocates from health employers are not always able to give clear advice about, for example, university admission criteria because it varies between institutions and over time.
- Entry expectations for universities vary. We found this reflected in the anxieties of some university advocates that some vocational routes do not adequately prepare candidates for degree-level study.
- Many who have followed a non-traditional route feel they have accrued valuable skills which give them certain advantages over those who have taken direct routes. This is especially the case for hands-on care, but also for some of the important skills around communication, team working and negotiation.

Working aspirants aiming for HE

We're working on a secondment programme with the local trust, and encouraging the staff to come to us, even if they think they're not qualified at the moment. We will support them and advise them on how they could get qualified, where the gaps are, and how they might address those. The Trust is saying to their staff, "Tell us what the University said. Tell us what the gaps are and we will have a look". They will see if they can address some of those within their organisation as well.

Definitions of WP

Universities and employers have shared theoretical understandings of widening participation, but their focus and goals appear to be different:

- Employers tend to consider their employees as the ideal beneficiaries of widening access interventions
- Universities take a broad societal view of under-represented groups.

Employers and universities have shared hopes and goals around widening access for those currently in school or college but found few examples of higher education institutions and employers working together to widen participation amongst young learners.

Our research suggests that WP is not widely understood or used beyond WP advocates, especially in healthcare. This may be an additional difficulty in promoting widening participation.

Definitions of WP

Deficit model?

- *For me, it's about giving opportunities and information for students from backgrounds who wouldn't ordinarily have considered higher education. It could be for a number of reasons: disability, actually where they live, their postcode area... It's about giving those students the information and opportunities to access higher education*

Or positive qualities of the widening participation student:

- *I think it's not putting all our eggs in one basket, let's look further afield, let's look at the skills we have out there. People have different strengths.*
- *What we do find we put under the banner of widening participation is they have probably got a bit more emotional intelligence and resistance than perhaps the young 18 year olds with the A levels.*

Recommendations (sample)

- Promote WP partnerships that will help universities and employers work closely together to ensure that clear progression expectations are available to university aspirants from non-traditional backgrounds
- Employers and universities should agree jointly and locally how much weight to give to prior practical skills and other soft skills in the selection process so that the right kind of student enters and leaves the degree
- HEE should work with partners to promote the value of vocational learning. Work to improve the understanding of vocational routes across sectors
- HEE should consider developing a longitudinal research programme that follows the student life cycle to better understand the impact of widening participation interventions.



The Institute of Vocational Learning and
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