



## **NEON Innovation Series - Improving Access for white students from lower socio-economic backgrounds**

### **1. Background**

In February NEON published “*Working Class Heroes, Understanding access to higher education for white students from lower socio-economic backgrounds*”.<sup>1</sup> The report showed that over 50% of higher education institutions (HEIs) were admitting less than 5% of students from low participation neighbourhoods. It attracted significant attention from national policymakers and featured on the BBC Politics Show, Guardian, Independent, Daily Mail and the Times Higher. NEON now wants to build on the important conclusions of the report and work with partners to make a real difference in addressing inequalities in access to HE for this group of learners via a national collaborative project that brings together work from across the sector in this area.

### **2. The NEON Improving Access project**

The Working Class Heroes report included a survey of over 60 organisations and analysed HE progression data covering over 200 HE providers. It identified a range of projects that were aiming to address inequalities in HE for this group, and a number of providers who were admitting very small numbers of students from the group. The projects described were interesting examples of innovative work at various stages of delivery. This is an inevitable characteristic of the widening access national landscape made up of many relatively small but similar projects.

The aim of the NEON Improving Access Project is to bring a range of different projects together and enhance their impact as distinct pieces of work, whilst also making a tangible impact on the national agenda in this area.

### **3. How will the project work?**

NEON is looking to up to 12 partners who are delivering projects aimed at addressing inequalities in access to HE for white students from lower socio-economic groups (SEG) over the 2019-2020. Such projects may be focused just on this group or not, and may use different definitions of lower SEG. They may be at different stages of development/delivery but will need to be delivered in the academic year 19-20. NEON will then:

- Convene and service a national forum which meets 4 times to bring together representatives from the partners. The group will provide a space for the exchange of knowledge about the different projects and identify where there are similarities and synergy.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Working-Class-Heroes-Understanding-access-to-higher-education-for-white-students-from-lower-socio-economic-backgrounds.pdf>

- Support linkages between the projects and co-ordinate a programme of peer learning and review where matched project pairs work together to better understand how to work effectively with this group.
- Support partners to bring their learners together for joint activities where this is feasible.
- Support where necessary appropriate evaluation of the different projects from the NEON evaluation team also exploring if common approaches can be identified, and if appropriate deployed.
- Produce a report for release in mid-2020 which brings together evaluation from the projects in a publication released nationally to policymakers by NEON at a one day conference for national stakeholders.

### **Working with the Department of Education**

This project is been acknowledged by the Department of Education as important to the Secretary of State's higher education agenda. The Secretary of State said in 2018 that *'white British disadvantaged boys are the least likely of any large ethnic group to go to university. We need to ask ourselves why that is and challenge government, universities and the wider system to change that.'*

The Department they would like to participate in the project group as observers and use findings to inform their policies in this area.

### **4. Benefits of the project**

The NEON Improving Access Project will:

- Improve impact of individual projects via shared learning
- Enhance skills/knowledge of partner staff via peer review
- Bring unique added value to learners through working with young people outside their own area
- Improve evaluation and national knowledge base
- Extend project impact from local to national level and directly inform national policy
- Support partners to meet a key objective of the OfS: *'the OfS expects providers to consider the way in which these characteristics combine to increase underrepresentation. For example, white British men and women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are among the most underrepresented groups in higher education.'*

### **5. How to participate in the project**

The investment needed to participate in the project will be £2000 per partner. This will cover the convening of national forum, co-ordination of peer review, supporting joint learner activity, evaluation and production of final report. This represents a relatively small per partner investment which will significantly increase the impact of their outreach work, improve the knowledge base regarding what works in this area and ensure they address the targets set by the Office for Students.

If you wish to participate in the project please contact Martin Webster ([neonconsultant@londonhigher.ac.uk](mailto:neonconsultant@londonhigher.ac.uk)) to discuss the project in more detail.