

NEON Postgraduate Diversity strategy blueprint launch

The NEON postgraduate diversity symposium took place on 13 July 2022 and launched the NEON postgraduate diversity strategy blueprint for the sector. Staff and students, with responsibility for postgraduate education, from higher education institutions and organisations from across the sector attended this event. In addition, to the launch of the blueprint delegates heard from experts on lived experience, good practice and research.

Below is the speech from Louise Banahene, Chair of NEON widening participation in postgraduate study working group and Director of Educational Engagement at the University of Leeds

Firstly, I want to thank our first two speakers, as well as our student panel, for their insightful and thought-provoking speeches. I acknowledge that this isn't a space where you as an audience need to be persuaded why and you will be receptive to the important points and evidence that our student panel, Gavin and Jason shared.

I wanted to build on that to outline the impetus for this event and why we're delighted to see the enthusiasm and commitment for the work of the NEON group and for our strategy blueprint which we launched last week.

Through the course of today you will hear from many speakers on the why question. Why the gaps exist? Why they may be bigger for some groups? Why it's so important to enhance the student experience and employability outcomes? Why collaboration not competition is vital.

And if we are going to address this, widen access, open up the doors to professions including academia we have to understand how we can accelerate our learning of what it's under the surface of under-representation, what works in changing that, what doesn't. I don't believe we can do this without taking our existing collaborations, our work and taking that up a level. It's collaboration between organisations but also within institutions, across the sector, across the student lifecycle bringing together colleagues and students from a range of disciplines and professions that is so crucial.

It's positive to see there is an increasing focus on widening access to, and success in, postgraduate study. And that there is a recognition that our systems, our processes and our policies continue to act as a barrier. Also, that we can't think about widening access at undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate level in silos with no connectivity or acknowledgement of barriers at each stage for many minoritised groups.

There are commitments in strategies, ground-breaking research, sector organisations focused on related agendas, projects going on across the sector and we are fortunate enough to have many examples showcased today. They will all be important pieces of the jigsaw, but they aren't enough in isolation. We need to draw on the expertise of an even wider group. We need to reach those practitioners, leaders, colleagues who don't yet know that this needs to be a priority for them. We need to amplify the voices of those already doing great work. Find multiple ways to share what works and crucially what doesn't. We must identify and share good practice from the UK and beyond. We need to learn from another and to work towards a common set of principles. In a framework relevant to us all. It's this common purpose that will guide us along the same path with the flexibility to draw on the range of expertise and lived experience from across the sector.

I feel very fortunate to chair this group. It brings together colleagues and students from a very wide range of backgrounds from across the sector from universities to student loan company, regulators, third sector organisations and many more. Ordinarily, it is a group who probably wouldn't otherwise

work with one another and yet the combined knowledge and common purpose is so impactful. And whilst there are many members who are focused on postgraduate recruitment or experience, our strength is the range of colleagues who work on undergraduate widening access, admissions, teaching and scholarship, research, and many more areas. We bring together a group of colleagues interested in progression to both postgraduate taught and research. It's also a group that's intentionally intended to collapse hierarchies. We can't bring about change if we only work in silos in terms of roles, types of institution or organisation or indeed points in a career journey. It's important to have spaces for all of these groups but we also need a space to bring them together. We have benefited from the expertise of colleagues who have a focus on widening participation at undergraduate level, from careers staff who are often advising students on next steps, from researchers exploring all aspects of barrier to, and within, postgraduate study. All bring different lenses, new perspectives and importantly fresh solutions. A great example of this has been work on student success which has brought expertise from across institutions but also areas from postgraduate research, taught student outcomes and curriculum design together. Led by Rachel Van Krimpen, from the University of Nottingham, who will be presenting later it demonstrates the value in bringing groups together to consider what success looks like in a postgraduate setting.

Over the last 18 months, we have had a series of workstreams, and you will be hearing from many of them today but I wanted to highlight one here in order to introduce the strategy blueprint. As a group, we have focused on grounding change or good practice on evidence of what works and research. Whilst we have been fortunate to hear from many working on research in this area, we also wanted to capture an overview of the research both nationally and internationally.

We were fortunate enough to be able to commission a literature review undertaken by Penny Sucharitkul, a medical student at the University of Leeds. Supervised by Luke WIndsor, our Dean of the Doctoral College, Penny produced a comprehensive overview of what is out there, international good practice and areas for the sector to explore further. She was also able to take data from the University of Leeds as an exemplar.

This stands in its own right as a very useful overview for the sector, and I would encourage you to review if you haven't yet seen it. I am incredibly grateful for Penny's work on it, and it has really served as the driver for the strategy blueprint.

The literature review starts with a set of key points in the summary, and I want to read out the first two:

- UK institutions have much more to give to widening access at postgraduate level
- Sector-wide collaboration is needed to establish a gold standard for widening access in student admissions, retention, and professional development

There's great work out there, there's important research but if we are to accelerate change, we must address those first two points raised in the literature review head on. We need to collaborate, we need to up our work on this to identify and trial new solutions, we need to acknowledge the very real link between postgraduate taught and research. We need a common set of recommendations to work to.

It's a framework for us to consider our existing activity against, it's a model that will allow us to have conversations with senior leaders about why new strategies and investment in this area is necessary, it's a set of recommendations which will allow us to share the progress we are making in specific areas. And all of this is so important. Otherwise, we end up with a chicken and egg situation with of us waiting to understand what we need to do before we take any action. We can share that risk, or perceived risk, by working together and by learning together.

I don't have time to share every recommendation today, but you will all have a link to it alongside your agenda and you can see printed versions on poster boards. We will also be covering many points relevant to the recommendations through the sessions today. I did however want to highlight four recommendations.

Recommendation one - Establish a more granular understanding of the barriers to progression to postgraduate taught and research study and the inter-section of under-representation.

We need to avoid a homogenised approach to addressing diversity in postgraduate education.

Individuals can identify with a number of different groups that experience minoritisation or under-representation. The barriers may be different, and they also may be compounded.

We need to improve our admissions systems, the quality of the data that we collect so that we can see what representation looks like not just at the point of admission but at application, at the offer making stage and overlay that with who is able to access funding/scholarships.

It's an issue that requires regulatory bodies to value the approach, the data and the consistency of that data. It also requires institutions to have buy-in across multiple areas including senior leadership, IT and recruitment teams, it needs governance structures that recognise this as a strategic priority. And this is crucial, because you would expect the outcomes of changes such as this should lead to changes to admissions process which again needs whole institution buy-in. Later today, Jenn Coates, from the University of Leeds, will be sharing the work of one of our sub-groups who have been exploring the implementation of additional criteria in the Masters and the PhD admissions process. This valuable work would not have been possible at this scale had each institution attempted to do this in isolation. It's a testament to the power of collaboration.

I also wanted to highlight recommendation three: Involve students in any decisions which affect a particular protected group and sufficiently compensate for this involvement. I don't think there is anyone in this room who would disagree with the importance of involving students in bringing about change, of focusing on addressing systemic issues as well as interventions – whilst avoiding a deficit model. However, engagement can sometimes feel challenging especially if there is a danger that those who are minoritised feel they are repeatedly being asked to do the heavy lifting. Or other parts of organisations are not cognisant to the importance of the nuances behind setting expectations on student involvement. We must also consider how we reach those minoritised students who don't make it to postgraduate study.

This recommendation is a reminder of the importance of working together to ensure we understand how to involve students without creating an additional burden and reinforcing how vital it is that we don't expect that this is done for free. I'm delighted that this will feature in the upcoming sessions today including Yemisi from the University of Essex.

Recommendation 5 is a good example of the importance of student voice: Consider establishing remote learning and increased flexibility within higher education courses which may benefit students from diverse communities. In addition, establish meaningful links with industry to make postgraduate study more attractive to minoritised students. I know from the work I have been involved in with postgraduate research students just how important flexibility of options is. There is still often a default to a three-and-a-half-year full-time programme requiring geographic mobility. And yet there are many future candidates from diverse groups who have caring responsibilities, want to combine a PhD with their current role. Not all are interested in research areas that necessitate face-to-face full-time supervision.

How might we build on examples from the UK and internationally to build a system where part-time study is truly flexible, where there are more opportunities for virtual PhDs and there are funding options that support this? And what might this look like at postgraduate taught entry.

Lastly recommendation 7 points us to a holistic approach to addressing postgraduate diversity: Address barriers to recruiting a more postgraduate community as a priority. This includes (but is not limited to) changes to the admissions process, financial opportunities and transition into study. We need to learn what works and what doesn't work. We need to collaborate to share a breadth of different approaches, we need to invest in both staff, infrastructure and importantly funding. We need to do this and be informed by our students and future students.

It's more than just financial support but this is crucial, it's more than just gaining access to postgraduate study but that is important. It's using the data, the student voice, our collective work across the sector to drive change. We need a space for all irrespective of where you, or your organisation, is on the journey.

I am so pleased that you are able to join us today in this launch of the strategy blueprint and want to thank all involved in the development. Whilst I'm standing here today, representing this work it's truly a collaborative effort and I want to thank all involved. A particular thank you to Stephanie Lee, Jenn Coates, Felicity Long.

So, what next, we want you to leave this conference with new ideas, contacts and for you to sign up to our strategy blueprint. It's more than a document or a webpage. It represents a groundswell of colleagues from across the sector who want to work towards a common purpose. My rallying cry to leave you with is: Sign up to the strategy blueprint, help us in this collaboration and join our regular NEON working group where you can continue the conversation, the work and the learning. Let's commit to change so that in five years' time we are talking about what has been achieved and the next frontier.

Thank you.