

Transcript of Emma Hardy MP keynote speech

NEON Summit, Thursday 30th April

Covid 19 raises extreme challenges to wider participation, both now and in the future.

In the light of the current pandemic this is going to be a very different discussion in many ways to the one we would have been having before the crisis overtook us. The unfolding of events have thrown everything into turmoil and in the context of widening participation they are going to have profound repercussions for those who are at university presently, and for those who we are hoping to encourage and support through wider participation. What I have to say then is a view on where we are now and how I see it affecting widening participation in the future.

Finances and effect on widening participation

The financial situation for universities is grim. I am extremely alarmed by the report commissioned by the UCU from one of Europe's leading specialist economics consultants, London Economics, which forecasts a loss of £2.5bn to universities through the widely predicted fall in student numbers in September. It confirms what I have been hearing from representative bodies and individual Vice-Chancellors.

I don't believe it is scaremongering. It doesn't take account of other income losses like accommodation or conferencing, and is based on a relatively optimistic view of the economic recovery. It is also backed up by last week's analysis by the Office for Budget Responsibility which identified higher education as the sector most likely to take the hardest hit from the crisis.

It's vital that no higher education institution should be allowed to fail. The disappearance of individual institutions will have a disproportionate effect on those we would be seeking to encourage and support to enter higher education through widening participation. It risks creating higher education "cold spots" in the country – regions where there is no local access to a higher education institute. This impacts widening participation in two main ways.

First, most higher education institutes engage in outreach activities into their local schools and communities delivering a wide range of activities both on campus and in schools and colleges and for all age groups. This is vital in raising awareness of higher education and to cultivate the self-belief in individuals, so often a barrier that this is something they can actually do. Without these interventions university will remain distant not just literally, but mentally and emotionally too.

Second, we know that commuter students – students who do not live on campus but remain in their homes, either with their parents or in those they were living in before attending – are predominantly composed of those from most disadvantaged groups in society. They are the part-time students, students from low-income backgrounds, BAME, parents, carers, mature students. The vast majority of them would simply not be in higher education without it being locally available.

I have seen the University UK proposals for a comprehensive package of support from Government that will ensure the long term security of the sector and I completely support them. I am having regular online meetings with Michelle Donelan and she has intimated that the Government won't let any university go to the wall. However, it looks like the Government want to avoid any sector wide

deal and treat things on a case-by-case basis. They also seem to see mergers and acquisitions as the way to keep all institutions afloat. The OfS, when I spoke with them, seemed very aware of the role some universities play as anchor institutions in their communities and the damage that would be caused should any of them fail, which I found somewhat reassuring.

Student's own finances are an area that is going to hit the most disadvantaged because it also affects access and opportunities, not just the nitty-gritty of meeting daily living expenses.

Students from low-income backgrounds will have been supporting their studies with work – as well as, obviously, most part-time students. These jobs are most likely to have been zero-hours or casual contracts that will not give access to the Furlough Scheme. Nor can full-time students claim UC as they are not actively seeking work. The Government is not interested in relaxing UC rules around this. Nor are they interested in using the SLC to get extra funds out. I was told they simply don't have the capacity.

A particular issue for final year students in Conservatoires for drama and music, which will disproportionately affect disadvantaged students, was brought to my attention this week. The end of year performances, as well as being the only way to really assess the students, act as auditions for future employment. Agents attend to watch, it's a chance for the students to network and so on. These will have to be undertaken in the next term and are providing challenges for the institutions – which are small and not well resourced financially. These are mostly in London so students lacking financial support are really going to struggle. It's an area where students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are poorly represented as it is, so this is a real kicker for those that have made it this far.

There is plenty of concern that the dropout rate amongst those students who don't have recourse to extra funding – the bank of Mum and dad or whatever – is going to increase. It's tragic that a lot of these are likely to be the ones that have been brought in through widening participation.

There has been a lot of support for the establishment of a Student Hardship Fund which would provide universities with funding to allocate to students in need – probably on the basis of eligibility for a maintenance loan. The Government's only comment so far has been to suggest that students approach their own universities for assistance. In an answer to a Written Question, Michelle Donelan said "Many universities have hardship funds". This contains an acknowledgement that some do not so it is not a comprehensive solution in any way. We are going to keep pushing on this.

Mental health and disabilities

I said the drop-out rate would be increased by the extra financial struggles brought on by the crisis but of course the upheaval, stress and uncertainty will have put an intolerable burden on those students who had existing mental health problems or conditions like autism. I have raised this issue with MD personally, and she seemed to view it as a serious problem, not just for the students with pre-existing conditions but as a wider mental health issue for all students. Having said that, in a reply to a Written Question this Monday she made no suggestion that the Government intended to show any leadership on this issue, saying only "it is vital that students can still access the mental health support that they need" but leaving it up to individual institutions to deal with saying: "Many providers are bolstering their existing mental health services and adapting the delivery of these services to means other than face-to-face. These services are likely to be an important source of

support to students during this period of isolation.” There is a consistent line emerging that whatever the issue, the ball is in the universities’ court.

Digital access

As higher education has very quickly moved to provision of online content, it has shone a very bright light on the issue of digital poverty, while at the same time increasing the disadvantage for all those on the wrong side of it. I think there is an assumption that all young people (which are the only type of people to attend university of course) are plugged into the internet 24/7 and have all the latest devices. This is very far from the case. A smartphone with a data cap is not a laptop or PC with an unlimited data allowance. Many will have had access through free wifi in their accommodation. Now they are at home. It is likely that the homes of those widening participation is trying to reach will not be afforded the same facilities and ease of working that others have.

I am also excited by a campaign for “data plan whitelists”. A letter proposing this idea and signed by representatives of Jisc, AoC, UUK and UCISCA was sent to Gavin Williamson this week. Downloads generated by visiting designated educational websites, accessing online libraries for research papers, Virtual Learning Environments, video lectures and so on, would be counted as free data on any student’s data plan. It’s a great idea and one that I believe should be maintained indefinitely as a way of supporting widening participation in the future.

The sudden move to online learning has also raised concerns on how well certain disabilities are being catered for – e.g. subtitles on all material for the deaf.

Effects on next year’s cohort

But what about the efforts to widen opportunities for next year? There are real worries from some quarters that we are in danger of overlooking an entire cohort. Sixth forms and colleges are closed. I know they are doing their very best to support their students, but it is exactly the students we are concerned with in this discussion who will suffer most from missing the support and encouragement that comes from the personal relationships they have with peers and teachers, and the confidence gained from being a part of a group all headed in the same direction. Applying is a complicated and daunting prospect for many 18 year olds. If they are from a home where they would be the first in the family to go to university it puts them at an obvious disadvantage to those whose parents have been through the process themselves and will have an expectation that their child will make the same transition.

As there will be no exams this year, students are relying on an assessment process to provide the grades on which their access to higher education depends. I understand this will take in more than predicted grades, but there still remains the concern, to me at least, that because predicted grades have been shown in the past to discriminate against disadvantaged and BME students this will result in fewer getting into higher education this year. I would suggest it would make it less likely that they would be able to take advantage of Adjustment this year. I know this process is used by Cambridge University to attract disadvantaged students who have done better than they (and their teachers) expected.

Commuter students

I mentioned commuter students earlier and I'd like to return to them as we consider the future. The economy is retracting, unemployment will rise and as we attempt to find the "new normal" universities are going to have a central role to play in both training a new generation and reskilling older ones. We are likely to see an increase in commuter student numbers. As it is, they make up to 50% of the intake at some universities. This wouldn't be a cause for concern if it weren't for the fact that they have poorer academic outcomes than their on-campus peers. If we are going to see an increase in their numbers – and in all likelihood we are – then we really need to address this difference in outcomes. From what research there is it seems there is not a clear answer. The issues seem to be not simply those arising from these students being more likely to be from economically disadvantaged and BME groups. In fact commuter students are not a homogeneous group – they come from a variety of circumstances and backgrounds and consequently very few universities collect data on them or necessarily recognise them as a group. The existing evidence seems to suggest that the amount of engagement in activities beyond the lecture theatre has an effect and that while the universities do not always appreciate the barriers to engagement and proactively encourage involvement, the students themselves do not always recognise the value in them. This is certainly an area I believe needs further attention, not least from the Government who at the time of the Augar report's commissioning were keen to increase commuter student numbers.

How do universities monitor widening participation and how is it reported?

If you flick through any university's prospectus and you will find a section detailing their commitment to widening participation and statements on how much they value diversity and education as a force for social good. They all have WP teams, organised events, outreach activities and so on.

But who decides what WP actually is, how is success going to be judged and what are the consequences for perceived failure? Different answers to these questions will have a profound effect on which students get access to university. As I understand it, the Office For Fair Access (OFFA) oversaw WP and had a stated strategic objective that 'All students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education.' OFFA seemed to take a whole-sector view of the issue with an expectation that individual universities did the same by asking them to think about how their evaluation, approaches and outcomes in their own institutions could contribute to the sector as a whole. A collegiate approach in other words – encouraging them not to become fixated with their own metrics.

This responsibility has now passed to the OfS, which has taken over – or "absorbed" OFFA. OfS have asked universities to create "access and participation plans" of up to a maximum of five years duration. OfS see it as their job to ensure "that the providers honour the commitments they make to students in these plans, and take action if they do not." I honestly don't know what kind of "action" will be taken, but it does potentially sound like the carrot and the stick, without the carrot. So how should the plans be drawn up and under what criteria will they be judged? As an echo of the OFFA approach OfS asks that in their submitted plan an institution should "consider their role in the national context using sector-wide evidence and data" but, significantly I think, adds "including the OfS key performance measures". It also asks that they "reference the sources of data used in the assessment of performance which includes the OfS access and participation dataset" This sounds like they will be taking a central role not just in judging a higher education establishment's performance in widening participation – fair enough, someone has to – but in setting the criteria by which that performance is judged. And failure to meet those criteria will have consequences. I think it is

important therefore that those success criteria are flexible enough to allow for the particular circumstances of individual institutions and for a plurality of approaches to solving the challenges of widening participation. I hope a genuinely open and meaningful dialogue is maintained between OfS and the higher education community on this matter because ultimately it is the life chances of real people that are being affected and it is one I shall be paying attention to.

The Covid 19 crisis has highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities for current students. It is looking extremely likely that it will alter the future higher education landscape in profound ways and this will pose some fundamental questions and challenges to widening opportunities. We must be ready to protect current provision and to take the opportunities that will present themselves to argue for the importance of improving access to higher education for all.