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Widening participation in higher education: from elitism to inclusion

Given by Diana Warwick, CVCP Chief Executive
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I am delighted to have the opportunity to be here today, on the closing day of this important gathering. I can see from the range of eminent speakers in your programme over the past three days that you will have enjoyed a stimulating range of discussions which have covered many of the key issues which are important not only to you but to the wider university community.

Your assembly has certainly focused on the topics which are central to CVCP's current campaigning agenda: innovation, technology transfer, the role of the universities in the regions, work placements, and, inevitably, the standards debate.

The final issue we have been discussing this morning, is also central to CVCP's policy work, namely widening participation.

Widening participation has been described as the final frontier for higher education, it is THE major challenge we all face, to broaden the range of people who take up opportunities in higher education. Today I hope to give you something of the 'bigger picture' on this issue to complement earlier speakers who have given you specific elements of this debate.

First, I will set the context for the current widening access debate, looking at how the Higher Education sector has already expanded, where this expansion has happened and where we need to go next and why.

I think our perspective is summed up neatly in the secondary title I've given my presentation today, namely "From Elitism to Inclusion" which is also the title of a major CVCP report which I will discuss later.

Second, I will outline the government's position on widening access, as described by leading politicians and as evidenced by the latest moves within government departments and HE agencies.

Having described the context and government position, I will go on to describe what universities and CVCP in particular are doing to tackle these issues.

Finally I will face up to the argument "more means worse" which is unfortunately how, so often, certain sections of society and particularly the media, continue to address the issue of widening participation.

It is important that we can all face up to that argument, clearly and honestly, so that we can all work together to create a truly inclusive higher education sector.

Let us begin then on a note of celebration. I believe we really should be celebrating the transformation that higher education has undergone in recent years.

The sector has gone from the highly selective system that left thousands - even millions - of individuals with their potential untapped, to a system that has given an education to a much bigger proportion of the population - to the benefit of those individuals, UK economic prosperity, and society in general.

Let's look at the figures (slide 1).

Undergraduate student numbers in universities have more than doubled to almost two million during the past decade. We have also seen a huge growth in women students, mature learners and part-time participants in higher education.

We have also seen growth in postgraduate education (see slide below) as more and more people take up continuing professional development opportunities at university. I know this is also a growth area in the engineering field.

However, while we now have something close to a system of mass higher education, we do not yet have an inclusive one. While 16 out of 20 young people from higher income groups go into higher education - 17 out of 20 from lower income groups do not make it.

Extra slide

This is not to say that no progress has been made: the socio-economic range of learners who have entered higher education in recent years has seen an impressive shift. Between 1991/2 and 1997/8 the percentage of young people from social class five entering HE rose from 6% to 14%.

But we clearly have a long way to go. Just look at some of our inner cities where participation rates are still appallingly low:

For example, Sheffield Brightside only 3.7%, or Birmingham Hodge Hill with only 2.8% participation. These figures show how many people are still missing the opportunity to benefit from the experience of higher education.

If we agree, and I hope we do, that talent and ability are distributed equally throughout the population, and NOT in proportion to income, background, age-group or gender - then universities really need to work much harder to attract people from a wider range of society than we do at present.

Moving on now to the government's thinking on widening participation, there have been both words and actions on this subject since New Labour took office, and the voices are getting louder.

"Everyone with the capability for higher education should have the opportunity to benefit from it" said David Blunkett in December when announcing the HEFCE funding for the coming year.

"Are you missing promising, perhaps even potentially brilliant, candidates by not being imaginative enough in the way you select people" said Baroness Blackstone to the CVCP Main Committee residential meeting last September. (Somewhat provocatively!)

"Education, Education, Education", said Tony Blair during the election campaign, and it appears that he is beginning to focus his attention particularly on universities.

The latest news from Downing Street, at least according to the Guardian, is that the prime minister himself is looking for ways to increase opportunities for the under 30s to study at university, at least on a part-time basis.

And the government has met these words with action, supporting initiatives which target additional funding to universities and colleges that have a commitment to widening participation and improving access.

In his letter to HEFCE last December David Blunkett spelled this out clearly:

"The Secretary of State expects the Council, in allocating the additional places made available, to give priority to institutions which provide evidence of activity to widen access, and which have mechanisms for monitoring the implementation and effects of those strategies."

HEFCE has just announced a package of funding measures to increase the recruitment and retention of students from under-represented groups, specifically: disabled students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. It's worth 150 million pounds.

You will know that HEFCE is introducing a funding supplement of 5% for young undergraduate entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds, to recognise the extra costs of recruiting and supporting them. These students will be defined by one of 40 'neighbourhood types' from the most deprived to the most affluent.

(These postcode definitions may prove to be controversial, but HEFCE claims that use of such neighbourhood types is the most reliable way to define students' backgrounds).

In addition HEFCE intends to allocate premium funding for disabled students and mature students throughout their studies (currently only available for their first year).

CVCP welcomes these initiatives, as well as Baroness Blackstone's recent announcement that low-income part-time higher education students will from next year be entitled to loans of at least £500 to help with the costs of their courses, and the new grants for aspiring students who are leaving care.

CVCP has also welcomed the Government's announcement of an extra 36,000 students in higher education by 1999/2000, and 61,000 in 2001/2. However, it is also fair to say that David Blunkett expects a large proportion of student expansion to take place in FE at sub-degree level.

While some would argue that the demand for this level of expansion is unproven, we should perhaps acknowledge that for many people, FE is the starting point for a return to learning, and universities should be working closely with colleges to ensure such students are encouraged to progress onto higher education at a later stage.

Indeed this was the focus of one of CVCP's successful strategies last year when we published Learning Partnerships to a packed reception of Labour MPs and Peers at the government's annual conference in Blackpool.

Learning Partnerships was a celebration of the compacts between FE and HE which are working well throughout the UK. It was clear that very often these partnerships are the route through which students from the widest range of background can succeed to the highest levels.

I would now like to move on to describe CVCP's policy and areas of campaigning in the area of widening participation more generally.

CVCP wants to encourage all universities to see the benefits of becoming genuinely and fully inclusive institutions. Our commitment to this issue was clear back in our submission to Dearing in 1996, and was carried through in our response to the Learning Age Green Paper.

I want to focus first on the major research project we completed (jointly with others, i.e. CIHE, the Funding Councils, CoSHEP and SCOP), entitled 'From Elitism to Inclusion'.

We commissioned this from the European Access Network based at the University of Westminster. The project specifically focused on access to higher education by young people from lower socio-economic households.

The report also shows particular universities as examples of proven good practice in attracting young students from lower socio-economic groups. They provide exemplary evidence of the determination of Higher Education to widen the social range of their intake.

Importantly the report also shows that access strategies have been developed by universities of all kinds, old and new, and those with both vocational and discipline-based approaches.

And all the case study universities worked with partners, most commonly schools and LEAs, sometimes with FE colleges, and on more than one occasion with other HEIs.

From Elitism to Inclusion was launched at major conference in November last years, and we were able to share these examples of good practice with over 200 delegates from throughout the UK.

CVCP has also organised a series of well-attended regional seminars based on the report and its findings, to encourage action by universities. The interest stimulated by the report has been overwhelming and CVCP will commission a follow-up study in due course to help assess progress with these initiatives and those started as a result of the report.

We have been encouraging universities to develop strategies that cover: community outreach, continuing education, local partnerships, and closer links between the further and higher education sectors.

We have also formed a new action group with other organisations, to ensure that the lessons are spread. Chaired by Leslie Wagner, Vice-Chancellor of Leeds Metropolitan University, the group will consider how to take the access agenda further.

Another area of our campaigning work which impacts upon widening participation is in relation to student funding. We are keen to ensure that the new funding arrangements of maintenance loans and tuition fees should not become a major disincentive to study.

Let me say immediately that CVCP supported the introduction of the new student funding package. We believe that those who benefit from higher education should make a contribution, where appropriate.

Of course the new tuition fee is not paid by one third of students in full-time undergraduate study - so those from poorer households who are being specifically targeted as part of the inclusion agenda, are not going to be paying fees.

It is rather on the issue of student maintenance loans where is some evidence emerging that older students from lower income groups may be discouraged. Latest figures from UCAS showed an 18% drop in applications from mature students (over 25s).

We are clearly concerned about these figures. What we don't yet know is whether there is a clear connection between the new student funding arrangements and the falling applications. CVCP is already working with other agencies including UCAS and DfEE to study the figures and investigate the situation more fully.

And other agencies are becoming actively engaged in promoting widening access to university education. For example, the Quality Assurance Agency recently launched a recognition scheme for Access to HE courses. This route to university is growing in popularity; latest figures from UCAS say around 14,000 students enter HE via such programmes.

The formal accreditation of such courses is one way in which we can face up to the critics who continue to say that widening access must mean lowering standards - particularly where institutions open their doors to applicants with qualifications other than the traditional A level.

This takes me onto the final section of my presentation - the "dumbing down" debate, or at least one aspect of it. There is the assumption that is regularly trotted out by the media in particular which states that "more means worse" - that to enable working class youngsters or older students to enter university we will have to lower entry standards and slacken university examination procedures.

There will be some inside universities who agree with this argument too. Some would say that it's the job of the schools to improve children's educational attainment so that they can achieve the grades to make it into university and that it's the job of their parents to increase their aspirations. They would say that it not our job to increase participation levels among those who have failed to succeed against difficult odds.

And it is clear from reports like "Elitism to Inclusion" that you do indeed have to start as early as possible to raise attainment and aspiration - but universities have a crucial role to play in the schools.

Several of the examples in the report cite stories of universities (students and lecturers) going out to meet youngsters in school and bringing them onto campus to enable them to experience university at an early age and begin to believe that it could be an option for them too.

At Manchester University (which these youngsters are visiting) they have a very active programme of such visits.

But we also need a much more flexible approach, to attract those who miss out on making the grade at A level, and I believe many institutions are moving successfully in that direction.

And to those who say, these students will not make it - look at a couple of recent surveys. John Field, Professor of Lifelong Learning at Warwick University, looked at students there who had entered via access courses and found they performed as well, if not better sometimes, than traditional A level entry students.

At the University of East London a survey found that 7.6% of graduates in 1997 who started with no formal qualifications left with first class degrees, when only 4.8% of those who started off with A levels did so well.

And as far as standards of assessment inside universities, I would simply make the point that the UK has actually one of the most intensively scrutinised and standardised approach to quality assessment in the world.

Most of you will have first hand experience of the rigours of the TQA, never mind the specific professional associations which check and accredit many university degree programmes on a routine and regular basis. And despite the critics, just look at how well universities are shaping up to these quality regimes.

Just last year out of 294 assessments only 1% were judged unsatisfactory, most were very good.

Brian Ramsden of HESA "...we seem to be unable to come to terms with our own general level of excellence".

Widening access and offering new educational opportunities to new groups of students, is a challenge and one where initially the support required in the learning environment may be greater - this has been recognised by the funding councils in their provision of additional sums to universities who are targeting such students.

But the rewards are there too, and in areas like engineering where recruitment targets are always difficult, you know more than most that you have to ensure that you do not miss out on a single "potentially brilliant" student as Baroness Blackstone puts it.

So to sum up.

I hope I have given you a glimpse of our activities and an idea of what the government is doing in the field of widening participation. I also hope I've demonstrated and demonstrated how crucial it is that we all keep this issue at the centre of our agenda.

It is vital that we keep the gates of our universities open and actively continue to create circumstances in which all talent, wherever it may lie in the population, may be allowed to flourish.

In making these efforts we are doing only what is good for society and good for our universities, and to close I will cite an example from the University of California reported last week in the media.

It has recently publicised its scheme of guaranteeing places to the top graded students in the state's public (state funded) schools. The university's chancellor, Albert Carnesale, said that

"outreach is not just a buzzword. It is the only realistic approach to a problem we have worried about for some time. We do not seek diversity for diversity's sake. Students learn not only from their professors, but from each other and they benefit most when their classmates reflect many different backgrounds, experiences and cultures."

I'll second that.

These funds will be distributed on a formula basis: they will be available as premiums for part-time students and full-time mature students (£63million in Access funds and fee remission for part-time students and the allocation of additional student numbers to widen participation).

The government is also pushing for performance indicators that help target funds on universities that achieve broader participation.

The examples included had to demonstrate not just that they were making the right noises but that these schemes got results, including

- more applications & entrants from these groups,
- satisfactory performance from students once at university and,
- good retention rates.

The report also shows that, with the right support, the people on the programmes, once they are at university, have performance and retention rates that compares favourably with the student body as a whole.

CVCP is also calling for a more flexible approach to hardship and access funds for students who are facing financial difficulties - no one wants to see students having to give up their studies for financial reasons - it is important that universities are able to use such funds flexibly and effectively to help students when they need it.

CVCP is on the DfEE Steering Group updating the Student Expenditure Survey, and is taking a very active role in working with the Department on their programme to monitor the impact of the funding scheme on access.