

The Effects of Widening Access on the Progression and Outcomes of Higher Education Students – Mobility, Low Participation Neighbourhoods and the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (0103)

The continued expansion and changing funding regime of Higher Education (HE) in the UK has coincided with increasing attention by policy-makers on widening participation (WP). However, there has been much less consideration given to the progression and outcomes of students within the HE system. Even less attention has been given to the progress and achievements of students who are seen to directly benefit from the policies of WP.

Administrative powers over HE were devolved to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the (then) Welsh Office many years ago. But more recently in 2004 responsibility for student finance and the funding of HE was given to the now devolved Welsh Assembly Government (now the Welsh Government (WG)). With that increased responsibility and more local democratic control for HE the WG has pursued HE policies that are increasingly distinct from the policies for HE elsewhere in the UK (Rees and Taylor 2006). Although the WG is also committed to WP they can be seen to have developed priorities and methods for this that can be seen as distinct from the rest of the UK, reflecting the particular social and economic context of Wales.

Three particular strategies for WP in Wales that best illustrate this approach are: regionalisation, participation of young people from Communities First (CF) areas, and the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ). The first of these has sought a regional dimension to the delivery of HE in Wales, to meet local needs (HEFCW 2010) and to provide more points of access locally (WAG 2009). The second example is to specifically increase the proportion of Wales-domiciled students from CF neighbourhoods in Wales studying HE courses from 15.6% in 2008/09 to 17.2% in 2012/13 (HEFCW 2010). CF areas are a particular policy vehicle for reducing socio-economic inequalities in Wales in all areas of life, including education. They tend to have the lowest levels of HE participation in Wales, and, importantly in the context of English WP targets they are not necessarily congruent with POLAR2 low participation neighbourhoods (used by the funding council for England to measure widening participation). The third example considered here is the introduction of a new qualification in Wales, the WBQ. Amongst its aims is to help prepare students for HE by offering a new and innovative form of content and delivery, designed to suit the different needs of young people.

Taken together these three examples illustrate the more nuanced and innovative ways in which the WG is aiming to widen access to HE for Wales-domiciled students. Whilst there has been considerable attention paid to patterns and processes of participation into HE, in Wales and in the rest of the UK, there has been very little attempt to monitor and measure the relationship between these approaches with the progression and outcomes of students once they are in the HE sector. This would seem critical in a proper analysis of the general principle of WP and the specific strategies chosen to deliver wider access. Indeed, increasing attention is being paid not just to participation of non-traditional HE students but also their rates of completion in universities (HEFCW 2010).

Therefore the main aim of this paper is to attempt to examine and compare the possible consequences of the three examples of WP strategies in Wales outlined above in terms of progress and outcomes amongst students in one particular British university.

The analysis in the paper draws on nearly 47,000 students taken from five cohorts of entrants to a wide range of undergraduate degree programmes. For these students we examine a wide range of measures that reflect not only their outcomes (completion, degree classifications) but also their progress (resits, yearly average marks) whilst at university. From such a large dataset we are able to identify highly significant relationships between these different measures and the particular characteristics of the students. We are then able to identify with confidence the probability that someone who is attending their local university, from a CF area, and/or who has the WBQ, will be relatively successful or otherwise in this particular institution.

We find that, similar to previous studies on student achievement, prior attainment is the most important predictor of progression and outcomes at university. We also find that gender, age, type of school last attended and ethnicity can also affect their outcomes. However, we are also keen to separate out the influence of these factors on those that accompany the Welsh Government WP strategies outlined above. So, taking into account prior attainment and known characteristics we find that Wales-domiciled students are generally less likely to do as well as students from elsewhere. We go on to suggest that this is a possible influence of staying 'local' at University – an increasing feature of the widening participation of HE and the regionalisation agenda of the Welsh Government. Secondly, we find no evidence that coming from a Communities First area (or any other low participation neighbourhood) effects student achievement. However, we note that students from such areas generally do have lower prior attainment and are, therefore, less likely to do well as other students for this reason. Finally we find compelling evidence that the WBQ may not necessarily provide any additional benefits to students when they are in university. Indeed, it would appear that the opportunity cost of completing the WBQ instead of, say, another A Level may be detrimental to student success. However, due to the fact that the WBQ is not graded we suggest it is very difficult to distinguish between its contribution on prior attainment from its influence on HE outcomes.

The paper concludes by, first, highlighting the need to further pursue some of these findings, either with more detailed qualitative research or with further statistical analysis using data from the wider HE sector. And then secondly, it discusses the policy implications of these findings, particularly in relation to contextualised admissions and the WP agenda, both in the UK and in Wales.

References

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