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Title The impact of teachers' practice and attitudes on widening access

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Introduction:

Certain schools and colleges, despite having large numbers of disadvantaged learners, have a higher level of participation in higher education (HE) than expected based on their GCSE attainment. HEFCE were keen to try and gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind this and commissioned a research project to investigate the phenomenon further. Funding was provided through the Networks for Collaborative Outreach project (NNCO) initiative.

This project aimed to investigate the institutional culture among 9 identified schools and colleges in order to establish the elements of the schools' culture which contributed to their success. This included gaining a deeper understanding about the variety of approaches taken and investigating attitudes and engagement levels across the school structure (head teachers, teachers and pupils). The data covered many aspects of school engagement in widening access. This paper focuses on the impact of head teacher and teacher attitudes and highlights some of the findings which may be having a negative impact on the long-term goals of pupils with regards to their desire to continue onto HE.

As suggested by Moore, Sanders and Higham (2013) it is important to identify and then target young people's key influencers. These include parents, carers, family and friends, but one particularly important group is teachers.

Teachers (both consciously and unconsciously) are a key source of IAG for young people. Fuller, McCrum and Macfayden (2014) point out that the disbanding of a national careers service, combined with national policies that argue schools are best placed to give careers advice, mean that there is an increasing need for teachers to be involved in the delivery and, as a result, need to improve their knowledge about the careers landscape. Many studies have cited teachers as having the second biggest influence over young people in terms of their educational ambitions however Moogan (2011) argues that teachers are even more important than parents for young people from lower socio-economic groups.

Method:

The project worked with three NNCO partnerships (Leicestershire, Greater Manchester and Kent and Medway). Participating schools were identified using data on the ward breakdown of English school cohorts in order to identify schools that had a significant proportion of pupils from low participation neighbourhoods (POLAR3) and had a higher than expected progression rate to HE than would be expected due to their GCSE results. Each participating NNCO was asked to identify three organisations who were prepared to take part in the research and this was to include both 11-16 schools, 11-18 schools and FE colleges.

Three separate questionnaires investigating parallel themes were developed; one for students, one for the teachers, and one for head teachers. Questionnaires were scored using a five point likert scale.

The first questionnaire investigated the pupils' awareness of higher education and their attitudes towards HE. Of particular interest to this research were differences between young people from different socio-economic backgrounds. To explore this, the research uses two measures based on the participants' self-reported postcode. The first one is the measure of the higher education participation rate in their local neighbourhood (HEFCE's POLAR3 measure) and the indices of multiple deprivation (IMD 2010).

Head teacher and teacher questionnaires were direct parallels of each other, therefore allowing for an easy comparison of responses between the management and the teaching staff. They investigated attitude towards HE, engagement and the level of IAG advice.

Results

Teacher Practice:

Both heads and teachers had a positive perception about the extent to which their schools engage with higher education. Teachers felt that senior management teams (SMTs) emphasised the importance of delivering HE activities to pupils (94%) and that they were aware of the opportunities available to their students in HE.

81% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they made active efforts to relate their lessons to progression to HE. In contrast only 27% of pupils felt that teachers talked about HE during the lessons. In year 9 the percentage of pupil agreeing or strongly agreeing was 18%. This increased to 44% of pupils in Year 12.

When it came to IAG only 40% of year 9 pupils felt they were provided with information about the opportunities that were available at university by their school or college. This did increase to 80% in year 12. Figures for careers advice (including HE) revealed a similar pattern in year 9, however was notably lower in year 12 (69%).

Teacher attitudes to HE

Teachers and SMTs had less positive attitudes towards increasing the numbers of students studying in HE. 39% of teachers thought there were too many graduates in the UK job market and 44% believed the current number was at the correct level. Only 18% of teachers surveyed felt there were too few graduates. 33% of teachers and 31% of head teachers believed that more opportunities to progress to HE were needed.

CPD opportunities

Staff were asked about CPD opportunities to improve their own level of knowledge around HE. 29% of teachers and 22% of SMTs agreed that there were regular opportunities to update their knowledge about HE.

Conclusion

Teachers' and pupils' perceptions of their role in widening participation appear to differ. Despite the fact both SMT's and teachers felt lessons were related to HE pupils, particularly those in year 9, were not able to recognise these relationships. IAG around careers (including HE) again followed a similar pattern in year 9. The disparity in year 12 (only 69%) suggests that pupils are not encouraged to link up IAG about careers with HE and see them as something potentially separate.

Universities have been encouraged to work with pupils from a young age to encourage them to consider HE yet it appears this practice is not replicated in schools until pupils progress to sixth form studies. This is particularly concerning given the implications of option choices (made in year 9) on the ability to gain entry to certain HE courses at a later date.

The research raises questions about the attitudes of schools towards HE. Many of those surveyed felt there were too many graduates already with others supporting the status quo in terms of graduates entering the job market. With the support of policy makers HEIs need to work with schools to reiterate the importance of widening access, not just for the benefit of the pupils they serve, but for the future economic prosperity of the country.

Finally teachers (and SMTs) see themselves as a crucial vehicle for IAG in schools. However, opportunities for CPD around HE are limited. The HE landscape is in a constant state of flux and, therefore, it is vital that teachers are given the opportunity to improve their own knowledge and expertise.

The study reveals a mismatch between government policy and practice in schools. If we are to continue to widen access to HE policymakers need to consider strategic drivers for schools around HE participation and consider how to ensure schools share the desire of HE to increase the number of young people who progress.

References

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