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Excellence through Inclusion: Telling the story with data. (0358)

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Across the globe, higher education institutions are increasingly required to evidence the excellence of the educational experience that they provide. A combination of marketisation, changing financial structures and evolving regulatory frameworks in recent decades has driven an increased requirement for universities to demonstrate accountability to multiple stakeholders, including fee paying students. Value for money is one of the four primary regulatory objectives of the recently formed Office for Students in the UK. (Regulatory Framework, Office for Students)

Consequently, universities are assessed for excellence against various metrics, such as research and teaching, which are then used to rank institutions in league tables designed to help prospective students make informed choices about where to study. As Blackmore (2016) points out, 'Universities must show that they know how to teach and that they have taught effectively'. However, the standard metrics can produce genuine challenges for universities with a widening participation mission. League tables use UCAS entry tariffs as a standard measure which can have a negative impact on the final league table score. Widening participation institutions by definition will recruit students with non-traditional entry qualifications and/or lower UCAS points. Similarly, TEF relies significantly on graduate outcomes measured through employment destinations and graduate salaries which are often lower on graduation for widening participation institutions. Whilst institutions are benchmarked against those with a similar demographic, this can still create a disadvantage for widening participation institutions.

The outcome however is far from pre-determined. The provider submission in particular in TEF creates opportunities for institutions to demonstrate how they achieve excellent educational outcomes for the students that they recruit. Indeed, in institutional level TEF, some institutions that successfully made a claim for gold did so by directly linking to, and being proud of, their universities widening participation mission (HEPI 2017). The inclusion of Learning Gain has been a further development with the introduction of subject level TEF (Kandiko-Howson 2017). Defining and measuring learning gain has been much debated in recent years with the 2018 evaluation of the Legacy project (Kandiko-Howson 2018) one example of the increasing body of work in this area. The lack of a sector wide definition for learning gain is the opportunity for all institutions, and specifically widening participation institutions, to define and demonstrate learning gain in a manner that is appropriate for the students that they work with.

This paper will present the results of a data analysis conducted by the University of Bedfordshire Business School (UBBS) in response to demonstrating the impact of the educational experience that it provides. UBBS is the first business school in the UK to apply for evaluation with the European Federation for Management Development (EFMD) under the Business School Impact System (BSIS) (EFMD Global Network). This is designed to determine the impact that a Business School has on its local environment, identifying both the tangible and intangible benefits of its work. BSIS state that 'at a time when all organisations, public or private, are being held accountable for their activities, there is a need to demonstrate the impact that they are having on their immediate environment. This is

particularly the case when they are financed or supported by local stakeholders.' Educational Impact is one of the seven assessment threads within the BSIS framework; this seeks to assess the impact that a Business School has on its local environment through the fulfilment of its basic educational mission.

UBBS is based in Luton with delivery across several partner locations in London and internationally. It is a widening participation institution with a mission to 'develop creative mind-sets that practice intelligently and lead imaginative futures for our campuses, communities and cities.' Employability metrics at an institutional level reported in TEF placed the institution behind the competitor benchmark group resulting in an initial bronze rating. The institutional TEF provider submission resulted in an uplift from Bronze to Silver; in part this was due to a coherent presentation of how the metrics were linked with geographic location and the demographic nature of our students. BME women in particular, who are restricted in their ability to travel outside of the local area for work, were a significant contributing factor to the employability metrics (University of Bedfordshire Provider Submission 2017).

As part of the BSIS analysis, UBBS built on this TEF narrative, supplementing university and standard reporting data with data on the local environment readily available through the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Internal modelling of league tables indicated the significant weight that our deliberately low entry tariffs due to our widening participation strategy had on our league table position. The analysis demonstrated real value added, providing a more relevant narrative that differentiated the university in alignment with its core objectives. Local business intelligence data was used to demonstrate the restrictions on workforce opportunities in the local community. Triangulating student record data, including ethnicity and postcode, with DLHE results and Office for National Statistics Deprivation data, resulted in a compelling story emerging of the educational impact that UBBS has on its local community. Over 50% of the students in UBBS come from the lowest 3 deciles of multiple deprivation, with 51% of undergraduate students demonstrating an upwards trajectory in their social mobility as a result of their degree education. This underlines the importance of the University being an open access institution and emphasises its mission to add value to its student community by improving their life chances through education.

In conclusion, strong narratives of excellence can be demonstrated for universities with a widening participation recruitment strategy. The educational excellence demonstrated by UBBS is achieved as a result of, not in spite of, it being a widening participation institution. In this respect, excellence is achieved through inclusion. Whilst the stories may not be immediately evident in standard reporting metrics, they can be drawn out by triangulating standard data with readily available supplementary data sets. To achieve this, an institution needs to know, and be proud of, the story that it wants to tell.

988 words

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