FEEDBACK FROM TEACHERS ON A WIDENING PARTICIPATION INTERVENTION: TARGETING, CONTEXT AND NETWORKING

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Abstract

Research has shown that progression to university varies substantially at school level (even for students with equivalent prior attainment), and also indicates that the behaviour of teachers can influence students' choices. This paper presents findings from interviews conducted as part of a broader evaluation of a widening participation programme aimed at teachers. We investigate the facilitators and barriers to implementing change in schools and colleges following participation in the programme. We find that successful change is largely dependent on the level of influence that programme participants have in their setting, and that conflicting priorities for management hinder change. The interviews also highlighted the importance of networking and school context. We discuss the implications for widening participation practitioners in universities.

Introduction

Teachers play a key role in their students' progression to higher education; their words and behaviour can open up new possibilities for students, or in some cases close down their options[2]. Ensuring that teachers have access to the right support and information can contribute to closing the HE participation gap between state and independent schools. This paper presents findings from interviews conducted as part of the evaluation of a teacher-focussed widening participation (WP) programme. The teacher intervention in question is a 1-3 day residential programme, aimed at KS5 teachers and advisors from state schools and colleges with lower than average progression to HE. The programme is free to attend, and some travel expenses and cover costs (for a substitute teacher) are also provided. The programme was delivered by eight leading universities across the UK and while there are some differences in delivery between institutions, the broad format and aims remain consistent. The interviews focussed on whether programme participants had been able to make changes successfully in their school or college following the programme, and if not, what the barriers were to this. The findings will be of interest to any WP practitioners looking to work with teachers.

Background

Literature review
While the HE participation gap has closed somewhat in recent years, there are still substantial differences in participation rates for students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly at the most competitive institutions[3]. These differences are not explained by attainment alone: UCAS[4] found that in 2015 applicants from the 'most disadvantaged' areas (POLAR3 quintile 1) or claiming free school meals were less likely to receive an offer from higher tariff providers than the average applicant with equivalent grades (especially for the October deadline, i.e. Oxbridge or medicine and veterinary courses). Furthermore, Boliver[5] found that applicants from state schools needed to be better qualified than their independent school counterparts to have the same chance of

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receiving an offer from a Russell Group university. Research from the Sutton Trust[6] showed that higher education destinations varied substantially by school, even where schools had equivalent average A level points scores.

Previous research has recognised the importance of teachers in influencing students' HE outcomes. Heaslip et al[7] found that the influence of others (including family members and teachers) was important in deciding whether to attend university; in their study, around two thirds of the WP participants surveyed said that teachers had encouraged them to attend university. Donnelly[8] discusses the importance of the way that teachers 'frame' students' options, guiding students to particular routes by limiting their discourse (e.g. 'which university' rather than 'university or something else'). Dunne et al[9] noted among other findings that teaches in state schools tended to present a 'neutral' picture about the merits of different universities – they identified an "implicit denial of any HE hierarchy"[10] leaving their students unaware of the potential benefits of attending a more competitive institution. This neutrality was also observed by Oliver and Kettley[11] in their study focussing on applications to 'elite' universities. The programme evaluated in these interviews aims to tackle the "differences in informal cultures of advice"[12] that can disadvantage state school students (especially relating to the most competitive universities).

The programme

The interviews were conducted as part of a wider evaluation of a residential programme offered to teachers and advisors. In 2015 the programme was delivered by eight institutions, including three London-based institutions working in partnership on a single event. One institution ran four separate events. All of the institutions are research-intensive and have highly competitive entry requirements. The events were residential in all but one of the institutions, with participants staying one or two nights.

The programme is mainly targeted at teachers from UK state-maintained schools (although occasionally advisors and local authority representatives also attend). Schools with lower than average progression to HE and lower than average A level (or equivalent) attainment are targeted. The overarching aim of the programme is to increase the number of young people from lower income households, particularly from the least-advantaged schools and communities, studying at selective universities. The programme has several objectives; the most relevant in relation to the data explored here are: breaking down misconceptions about leading universities, giving teachers information and resources to offer guidance to their students, and supporting teachers to provide subject-specific enrichment.

In three of the six institutions a specific support package from an external provider was offered to attendees for use in their school in the year following the programme. This package included a range of options to support schools with preparing high-quality UCAS applications. It could be taken up by individual departments, teachers or across a whole sixth form/college. Some of the most useful findings in this report relate to questions about the uptake of this package.

Methods

As part of a larger programme evaluation, event attendees were sent two post-event surveys. A link to an online 'exit survey' was sent by email as soon as possible after each event. A follow-up survey was sent to all participants on the distribution list for the exit survey, regardless of whether they had responded to that survey.

Table 1: Timeline and response rates/sample size for research activities

Activity	Timing	Response rates / sample
Exit survey	Immediately after programme: June – August 2015; October 2015	Overall 82% (n=216/265)

[6] The Sutton Trust, *Degrees of Success – University Chances by Individual School*, 2011, http://www.suttontrust.com/researcharchive/degree-success-university-chances-individual-school/.

[7] Vanessa Heaslip et al., "What Factors Influence Fair Access Students to Consider University and What Do They Look For?" *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* 17, no. 4 (2015): 67–88. doi:10.5456/WPLL.17.4.67.

[8] Michael Donnelly, "Progressing to University: Hidden Messages at Two State Schools," *British Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 1 (2015): 85–101. doi:10.1002/berj.3136.

[9] Máiréad Dunne, Russell King, and Jill Ahrens, "Applying to Higher Education: Comparisons of Independent and State Schools," *Studies in Higher Education* 39, no. 9 (2014): 1649–67. doi:10.1080/03075079.2013.801433.

[10] Ibid., 1662.

[11] Oliver and Kettley, *"Gatekeepers or Facilitators"*.

[12] Ibid., 738.

UCAS applications: September 2015 – January 2016		
Follow-up survey	February 2016	Overall 43% (n=114/265)
Follow-up interviews	April 2016	6 interviewees representing participants at 5 institutions

Participants were asked in the exit survey whether they were willing to take part in follow-up interviews; 73 respondents agreed to this. When selecting participants for interview, those who hadn't responded to the second survey or who had only completed closed-response questions in the surveys were excluded. This was to ensure that there was enough information available to assess their suitability for interview. Respondents were also excluded where their school had high levels of progression to HE, as they are not the target audience for the programme.

From the remaining responses, participants were selected for interview on the basis of their survey responses. Those who had implemented a range of changes, especially at department- or school-level, and those who had wanted to implement changes but had identified barriers were invited to be interviewed. Ten teachers were sent invitations by email; six of these responded and interviews were conducted between 13th April and 4th May 2016.

The interviews were planned around the following themes:

1) Did the teachers make any changes after the intervention? What kind of difficulties they faced when trying to make changes?

2) Did the programme meet their expectations? What did they get out of it?

3) How does the teacher's role in school relate to university admissions or other themes covered during the teacher intervention?

The interview schedule had some fixed questions, and some where the initial question wording varied depending on previous survey responses (e.g. "You said that [items from survey response] changed more broadly across the department or school – can you say a bit more about how that change took place?"). The interviews were recorded and responses were transcribed in full. The transcripts were coded using NVivo 10[13] software. The initial coding was reviewed and refined, then the coding was reviewed by a second researcher. Following discussion, the coding was reviewed and refined further to arrive at the agreed themes.

Results

Disseminating information, empowerment

The impact of attending the programme was to a large extent dependent on how empowered interviewees were to make changes in their school or college. Some interviewees described failings in communication that had hindered their ability to make use of what was offered. Where there were examples of information being disseminated successfully, these tended to be on a smaller scale.

Effective communication and dissemination

There were some examples of positive dissemination. One interviewee had successfully passed on important information about A level subject choice to the careers advisor at school as they believed that senior management would be less likely to act on the advice. Another interviewee was confident that their line manager was disseminating their feedback from the programme:

My line manager … he talks to me about my [WP] role – he feeds back to those other cross-college bodies and he is in charge of the whole UCAS team.

Another interviewee, when asked whether there had been any problems passing the information on, responded, "It wasn't with the few close colleagues I had who were working on this", exemplifying the differences in the scale of dissemination: examples of success related to smaller teams or one-to-one interactions with the person in school empowered to make the appropriate change.

Dysfunctional communication and lack of empowerment

One teacher described being unable to use the external provider's system because they were not an approved supplier – but the system was free of charge so this approval should not have been needed: the example illustrates a failure in the layers of communication in the school. Another interviewee wanted to take advantage of the whole-school training on offer, but was not in a position to make the decisions to take this forward:

I got an open invitation for him to come down and do some training and I put that to the person now responsible for the sixth form and was told to give him some dates. But I can't make dates up, because I'm just not involved in the management at all. […] That's just way past my pay grade.

Dysfunctional communication and other priorities
One interviewee repeatedly said that they had passed information on to more senior staff but "haven't seen it disseminated" – they were able to use the advice with their own tutor group, but were not confident that others were using it. There was superficial support for the programme from senior management, but the interviewee did not perceive this as genuine engagement:

Oh, yeah. I've had to laugh. They sent round an email going: "Ooh, there's this wonderful course running this year" – i.e. the equivalent of what I went on last year – "It would be fantastic if somebody went..." And I'm like "But I went there last year. Didn't anyone sort of realise?"

The interviewee believed that university access was not a high priority for the school and felt that senior management had not engaged with the argument she put forward for taking up the services that were offered.

The influence of 'direct evidence'
For some interviewees, receiving guidance directly from the university helped them to influence change in their setting. One teacher talked about challenging the misconceptions of other staff; having information direct from the university enabled them to make a more forceful argument for changing practice in the college.

Another interviewee made a similar point, adding that the research-based nature of the programme content helped to make a convincing argument to colleagues, and that while the interviewee was already "vaguely" aware of this particular advice, attending the programme had strengthened their understanding of its importance.

Networking
The usefulness of 'direct evidence' was linked to the broader theme of networking. One interviewee described how her "working class" students perceived one particular university as only being attended by highly affluent students; while the interviewee didn't believe this to be true, their interactions with student ambassadors and staff on the programme gave increased personal reassurance that they then felt able to pass on to pupils.

Links with the university
A tangible benefit of the programme for some interviewees was the advice and support they had subsequently received for specific students. One interviewee described how they had been able to contact the staff that delivered the programme for advice about admissions to their institution for particular students:

What it has given me though, is brilliant contacts… I've actually had a person to email and have got an individual response back… and it has made an enormous impact on those students.

Another interviewee had received "very specific advice" on personal statements and UCAS references for two students from the external provider before the applications were submitted to UCAS, which they felt "sure" had helped.

Some interviewees perceived their contact with the institution as a "two-way" conversation, with institutions learning from attendees as well as vice-versa. Examples included the university asking teachers for their input on how they should treat a new qualification[14], and a long conversation with an admissions tutor for the subject taught by the interviewee.

Links with fellow attendees
Interviewees found the opportunity to network with other teachers very valuable. They were reassured when their beliefs and practices were consistent with those of other attendees.

One interviewee said they "learn[ed] as much from meeting up with the other teachers at different places and seeing what they do" as they did from the staff on the programme. Interviewees also talked about the motivation and inspiration that they got from meeting other teachers, saying that the "level of debate around the table" was very useful.

However, when asked about whether they had been able to sustain this contact, only one interviewee was able to give examples of continuing discussions with other attendees. Often interviewees said that they had hoped to sustain contact, but hadn't had time to prioritise this. When asked whether an online group or message board would have helped to facilitate contact, they said no, with one describing themselves as "technophobic" and

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[14] The Extended Project Qualification

another expressing concerns about being too busy. One interviewee suggested that half-termly meetings would be a good way to "keep [the enthusiasm] going".

Context; structural problems
The reality of the students in disadvantaged areas – which were specifically targeted for this intervention – was raised up by all the interviewees. They talked about the context of their school and their pupils. The issues raised were large-scale, structural issues, concerning school funding and the pressure that this put on resources (staffing and time as well as financial); schools 'competing' with other local schools for the most able or advantaged pupils; quality of teaching and learning, including prior attainment; the quality of school management and the impact of staffing changes; and conflicting priorities (sometimes driven by Ofsted). There was acknowledgement that these problems were not in the remit of universities to solve.

School-level disadvantage
Four of the six interviewees talked about the levels of disadvantage in their school cohort to some extent. One referred to official statistical measures for the deprivation of their cohort, and another described their school as "surrounded by areas of social deprivation".

One interviewee discussed at length about the problems their school faced in retaining the brightest and more affluent pupils, losing out at entry and at progression to sixth form to 'competition' from better-performing local schools. This became a self-perpetuating cycle, as reducing numbers led to reducing funding and the school was less able to provide a range of A level subjects to retain pupils.

Students' attainment
Four interviewees mentioned students' attainment. When asked whether the more of their students could be attending competitive universities, an interviewee responded that "the main drawback is getting the grades". Another interviewee said:

Although we are a large college we have a very few of the 'high end' students.

One interviewee identified particular issues with students' prior attainment; they believed that by the time students arrived at the college it was "too late" to get their "fundamental" knowledge and skills to the standard required for entry to the most competitive universities. They felt that students perceived their ability as higher than it actually was, and as a result were aiming for universities they were unlikely to be able to attend, but

… had they had a different education for the past five years then this would be realistic.

This mismatch between students' ability and their perceptions of what they were likely to achieve was also highlighted by another interviewee, who said that students did not realise that having the highest attainment in the context of the school was not equivalent to the highest attainment in general.

Student disadvantage; what success looks like
Interviewees discussed the backgrounds of individual students or groups of students. One interviewee estimated that 75% of their students were "first generation [to enter to the higher education] – so there is very little knowledge in the parent body about university". Some interviewees mentioned that their students would find it difficult to travel – for one interviewee, travelling to college in a nearby town was too challenging for some of their students. Given this context, more than one interviewee felt that their students could achieve positive outcomes without necessarily going straight from school to a leading university:

It's not access to the highest level of higher education that's our biggest issue, it's actually access to higher education at the lowest level that is as important to us as it is at the top end.

And from another interviewee:

So, the [programme] is even more relevant to… For many of the children I am working with university is not on their radar at all. And even if they are not ready by the time they leave high school I think there is much work to be done in broadening their horizons before they do leave.

Personal motivation
Alongside these findings about context, it is notable that all interviewees expressed a personal commitment to widening participation. Some of the impact that they were able to achieve was down to their persistence in the face of discouragement. One interviewee intended to continue trying to persuade the school to trial a new system,

despite having "hit a brick wall" with this on more than one occasion. Another was determined to make sure someone from the school attended the programme the following year.

One interviewee had changed roles since attending the TSS, and said that the new school being "heavily involved with [social mobility]" was "one of the attractions" of the new role. Half of the interviewees did not receive any formal recognition for their role in supporting university applications – either they advised students informally as part of their regular teaching, or they had taken on a role outside of their regular teaching (e.g. lunchtime extension classes or advice sessions on particular subjects/careers) but did not receive additional credit for this.

Discussion

Recommendations for practitioners

Interviewees often reported difficulties in persuading senior management to take up the advice and services offered, particularly in relation to services from the external provider. The interviewee who had had most success was older, more experienced and had previously had a senior leadership role at the college – i.e. they had the most authority to make decisions and was able to take up some of the offer without 'getting permission' from senior management.

On the other hand, there were many benefits for programme attendees, including establishing relationships with university staff and receiving information directly from the university. Teachers were often able to apply information in their own practice or meaningfully influence a small team around them.

For practitioners, it is important to think carefully about the theory of change underpinning a teacher-focussed intervention before setting attendance criteria. If the aim is for schools to adopt a new process or make changes to practice across a department, attendees should have a role in school that enables them to make these changes. In order to do this, they should invite senior managers, but for them a half-day session is likely to be more appropriate than a residential. However if the aim is to establish relationships (with the university and between attendees), give subject-specific information and enrichment, and encourage positive perceptions of an institution then a longer programme targeted at subject teachers seems to be beneficial. Publishing a detailed description of the programme content and any follow-up offering could help schools decide which staff member(s) would be most appropriate to attend.

The issues around context and structural problems raise a conundrum that will be familiar to many WP practitioners. The schools with the least challenging contexts tended to be those where interviewees were more successful in applying what they had taken from the programme. They also tended to be those with a higher proportion of highly able pupils. Practitioners (particularly in the most competitive universities) will need to make decisions about balancing resources when targeting their outreach activities. Is it 'better' to invest large amounts of time (and money) targeting schools in the most challenging circumstances, where there may be very few candidates each year with the level of attainment required to attend a competitive university; or work with schools where there are likely to be more academically able pupils, but also more support in place from other sources for those pupils? It may be appropriate to broaden the definition of 'success' beyond attendance at the institution delivering the intervention. Innovations in tracking student outcomes, such as HEAT[15], will help practitioners to provide evidence of broader impact on progression to HE.

Conducting interviews as part of a wider evaluation has added depth and context to our understanding of the programme's impact that could not have been gained through other methods. WP practitioners considering conducting interviews as part of their own programme evaluation could note the following points: the transcription, coding and analysis of interview data is very time-consuming (and thus can be an expensive evaluation method); someone independent (even someone in the WP team not involved with the particular intervention) may be able to interview and analyse more objectively than the team that delivered the intervention; our interviewees valued the opportunity to give feedback and be 'listened to'.

Future research developments

It would be useful to repeat these interviews in the coming months to investigate whether further changes had taken place in the second UCAS cycle since the programme. We also intend to re-evaluate this data alongside interview data collected from the evaluation of another programme with similar aims but a different method of delivery, to further investigate the facilitators and barriers to successful change in widening participation. As qualitative data is increasingly stored in the UK Data Archive[16], this may offer further opportunities for secondary data analysis to investigate the issues around progression to higher education in UK schools.

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[15] "What Is HEAT & Who Are Our Members?" HEAT, 2016, accessed July 31, 2016, http://heat.ac.uk/what-is-heat/.

[16] "UK Data Archive - HOME," UK Data Archive, 2016, http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/.

Conclusions

We conducted interviews with programme participants as part of a wider programme evaluation, and in doing so identified a number of factors that are relevant to teacher-focussed WP interventions across the sector. Most importantly, if an intervention is designed to introduce change across a department or school, the attendees must be in a position to take decisions on such changes. Teachers valued the networking opportunity that the programme offered. Links with universities were sustained but interviewees had mostly been unable to sustain contact with other attendees. Institutions will need to monitor the outcome of their own activities to make difficult decisions about the balance of resource and desired outcomes.

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