

# 8th Annual National Admissions to Higher Education Conference, 19 October 2010

## Widening Participation in an Over-Subscribed System, Professor Steve West

1. Thank you for inviting me to speak today. As Vice-Chancellor of the University of the West of England, Bristol, I can say that widening participation, inclusivity and opportunity really go to the heart of our organisation, our ethos and our values. We therefore take very seriously our role in reaching out to people from under-represented backgrounds, families, groups and communities, and positively enabling them to succeed.
- I am very proud to be able to say that with conviction, as UWE was recognised as the Xcel Best Institute of Widening Participation in the 2009 awards. I am also very proud to be Vice-Chancellor of such a socially inclusive and civic orientated University.

Widening participation in an over-subscribed system is a topic that also really reaches the core of what sort of higher education system we want in the UK. Whether it is a system characterised by opportunity for all, by social justice, and by the desire to transform people and society through higher education; or whether we abandon these ideals at a time of financial constraint and limited growth in the number of places at University. The decisions that come out of the Browne Review will clearly set the foundations for the future of the HE system, and the parameters of what is possible, with very wide-reaching consequences and implications.

Of course, a University education is not the only pathway available. There are many routes for young people and adults to develop the skills and capabilities they need to realise their ambitions. There must continue to be many equally valued routes into career pathways. However, we must also ensure that for those whose ambitions can be best realised through higher education, or whose talent can best be developed at University – that fair access is the reality, not just an ideal – whatever background the individual comes from. Not easy in a funding system that does not recognise the true financial costs and benefits of widening participation activity - throughout the student journey. It is also not easy at a time when funding for this activity seems to be rapidly drying up as a result of the increasingly challenging economic environment. As I am sure Aaron will address – even now as a sector we still have a long way to go to ensure fair access for all.

The role of universities in social mobility, raising aspirations and providing opportunities, is very much in the rhetoric of politicians but we are yet to see that make its way into practical, consistent and adequately resourced policy. Indeed, squaring this up with the extensive cuts to higher education that are expected to come out of the CSR tomorrow will be very challenging.

- I believe we need to continue with a regional approach to widening participation planning and activity, building on the infrastructure that has been developed to 1) focus on the whole student journey; 2) ensure resources are targeted at the places where they will have the most impact, given the priorities of increasing attainment in schools, and the need to find better ways to identify and support talent and potential; and 3) we need a stronger system of accountability – the current benchmarking system provides very useful information but does little to incentivise improved performance. Something Browne does pick up in his review.

All of these points are of course under threat in an over-subscribed and under-funded system.

I don't need to make the case to you as to how important widening participation and fair access is to building a just, inclusive and economically viable civil society. Wasted talent is clearly bad for individuals, society and the economy.

Universities have advanced a variety of initiatives to raise aspirations and attainment, promote opportunities for higher education and ensure that we utilise the talent of all individuals.

- UWE engages with learners in schools and colleges on a large scale and through a number of different routes. In the academic year 2008/09 alone, we worked with over 37,000 young people from schools and colleges serving some of the most deprived communities within our region – in order to both support their attainment and increase their awareness of the benefits of higher education.

We have developed a comprehensive programme of activities to support young people aged 9 to 19, older learners, young people in care and prospective students with disabilities.

One of our biggest assets as a university in delivering our widening participation outreach programme is our student body – each year around 600 of our undergraduate students come forward as ambassadors, mentors and tutors, contributing around 28,000 hours of their time in order to support the learning and raise the aspirations of the people they live amongst.

5. We realise that we cannot operate in isolation to widen participation, social inclusion and equality of opportunity. Whilst being clear about our own strategic intent and direction, effective strategic partnership working is vital for expanding equity of access to higher education.

UWE plays a major role in the delivery of the Aimhigher West strategic plan. As well as being represented on all of the partnerships various sub-groups, we host campus visits to give participants a taste of university life, provide subject-specific enrichment opportunities to support attainment and progression, offer classroom support, and hold family events to promote the benefits of higher education. In line with HEFCE guidance, all of these interventions are targeted at learners from the most disadvantaged communities and lowest-socio-economic backgrounds.

UWE also contributes to the work of the Western Vocational Lifelong Learning Network (WVLLN) to improve progression for vocational and work-based learners, particularly those from the most disadvantaged areas. We work with the Open College Network South West Region (OCNSWR), in order to strengthen the Access to HE pathway into the University's undergraduate programmes. We also engage with 14-19 partnerships and consortia in order to harmonise curricula and smooth learner transition to further and higher education opportunities in the locality.

At UWE we have used some of our additional fee income to support the cost of developing and implementing the UWE Federation - a strategic partnership between the University and FE colleges in the region. Its purpose is to extend opportunities to study higher education at a local level, enabling students to have a higher education experience at their local college.

UWE has also directed a proportion of its additional fee income to hands-on engagement with schools targeting major improvements in their educational offer, including in academies and trust schools. UWE was the first HE institution to support an Academy back in 2002. Since then the City Academy, in the Lawrence Hill area of Bristol, has seen a dramatic rise in the proportion of its students achieving 5 or more good grades at GCSE, and in the numbers staying on at age 16 and progressing to higher education by age 18/19.

In September 2010 we launched a three year Family and Community Engagement (FACE) Project to develop a range of activities, where we work with families and communities to help Bristol become a city where education is more highly valued. We have a fundraising programme in place to support this activity.

The point I want to make is that a large amount of activity is taking place to raise awareness of HE opportunities, offer role models and learning support. Without the infrastructure and partnerships in place, it becomes exceptionally hard to run activities efficiently, to monitor their effectiveness, and to provide consistent information.


Much more takes place than generally makes its way into the press, where the focus tends to be on Russell Group.

At UWE we have invested a lot of time and money into reaching the hard to reach. It is part of our heritage, and as I mentioned, our ethos and values. This means that it is embedded in people's minds and activities across the institution. It is the work of the University as a whole.

However, we, and the society at large, are all faced with a number of significant problems in an over-subscribed and under-funded sector:

- Expectations have been raised but we are unable to deliver the places. Changing or re-focusing expectations is a big task and needs to be steered by a clear set of outcomes for individuals
- 'Doing' widening participation properly is very resource intensive. It involves developing links with communities, building trust and managing expectations, and ensuring there are flexible pathways into HE. It is not simply a case of attracting the numbers.
- Less funding is available to support students from LSEG and LPNs, so that they do not present a risk to the key measures of success for universities, rightly or wrongly – tariff on entry, progression, degree level, student satisfaction and graduate prospects.

If we are unable to address these and other associated problems, there is a very real risk that the gap in access and the quality of the higher education experience, between the wealthy and the under-privileged will widen, not narrow.



6. So, we are left with three core questions, in a restricted system with reduced funding:
- How do we make sure those with the most potential are gaining the benefits of HE?
  - How do we make sure we keep focusing on the individual throughout their student journey?
  - How do we best mobilise the opportunities of HE, to transform lives and society for the better?
7. How we answer these questions again goes back to what sort of HE system we want, and which elements of the Browne Review the government decides to take forward.

As I stated at the beginning of my presentation, I certainly believe that we have to take a regional approach to WP. A regional approach that centres on what actually needs to be delivered - raising attainment and awareness, and providing flexible entry pathways. A regional approach that does not simply ask what can be offered by the organisations that currently exist. Without this, how can we ever hope to focus on the whole student journey in a meaningful way? To do this requires leadership, coordination, and resources. The government has been right to say that schools, colleges, universities and employers should work more closely together. But this is resource intensive – words alone will not achieve this.

The government has been right to ask universities to provide more information on what they are looking for in applications, on what students can expect from the courses they take up, and on the employment prospects that they can expect from their investment in their chosen HE experience.

We will need to continue to find smarter ways of funding and delivering bursaries to those who need them.

We must recognise and utilise the key role that FE has in the delivery of provision and the opening up of opportunities. Universities and FE must continue to work together.

We must ensure that our efforts to widen participation are linked into regional and national employment. Raising expectations, without integrating graduate destinations is not the most sensible investment and it is not fair on the individual concerned.

We must also move to regional benchmarks for widening participation, regional benchmarks which are enforced at the local level. Partnership working, collaboration and regional planning are absolutely key to widening participation in an over-subscribed system.

Much of what I have outlined is already developing. We have much success to be proud of. However, the infrastructure for this is at risk, and we need to get better at communicating that message to the public and to government.

I can assure you that UWE will continue to highlight the value of WP and attempt to shape future developments, demonstrating why it is such a crucial investment.

8. However, one University cannot do this on its own. We must work together, in partnership, to make sure this fundamental dimension of education – opportunity and transforming lives – isn't forced to give way to other academic priorities.

*Thank you.*

