Attracting diversity recommendations

At our recent Attracting diversity cross-institutional event on Wednesday 7 June in Edinburgh, institutions and sector organisations were asked to contribute their recommendations based on the learning and progress of their attracting diversity projects.

We are beginning to see evidence of successful outcomes and underrepresented groups applying and starting on courses. Many of these recommendations build on the findings of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) funded HEA research whose job is it anyway?

These recommendations may be particularly useful for higher education institutions (HEIs) and colleges in relation to the development, implementation and review of their Gender Action Plans (GAPs), as well as for the SFC in supporting and fostering good practice.

Planning

- Use a theory of change approach from the start of projects and activities to embed evaluation and ensure coherent multi-year projects.
- Emphasise consistency and coherence in project management e.g. what happens if the project manager moves on?
- Take account of intersectionality and links between gender and other groups that we know face barriers, such as SIMD 20/40, care experienced etc., and look for opportunities to naturally extend projects to different groups.
- Institutions need to Equality Impact Assess GAPs and take steps to mitigate possible negative impacts e.g. in competition for places or access to schemes/initiatives.
- Focus staff time on fewer, higher value initiatives that are adequately resourced and supported, and robustly evaluated.

Institutional buy-in and making strategic links

- Make clear links to institutional strategies (Outcome Agreements, Equality Outcomes, Athena SWAN action plans) to support engagement.
- Internal partnerships are important to support holistic action plans, including admissions, retention, attainment and employment.
Effective mainstreaming and cultural change is needed in colleges and HEIs, which recognises that equality and diversity is everybody’s responsibility, to support cross-functional work.

There needs to be an increase in staff understanding of positive action measures to support implementation where it is appropriate.

**Collaboration**

- Develop collaborative regional approaches between schools, colleges, universities and employers.
- Engaging with employers is critical, as employers should be informing and partnering in activity with underrepresented groups throughout the education ‘pipeline’.

**Research**

- Conducting qualitative and quantitative data to analyse problems and potential solutions is key to developing effective, proportionate, and justifiable initiatives e.g. in knowing when a positive action initiative such as a single sex approach (in outreach or provision) may be justified.
- Triangulating local, regional and national data in order to identify barriers and issues is important before initiating activity to address assumed barriers.
- Involving students in the research phase of developing projects can be challenging but very rewarding and provide unique insights into identifying what the barriers are for potential applicants and may reveal unexpected issue.

**Activity**

- Activities with a strong, clear justification in local evidence and research on barriers to access have a strong track record of success.
- Think outside of the box! Creative initiatives are coming up with new ways to tackle old problems. We have seen a range of different areas of focus across initiatives. This includes some projects focusing on creating more inclusive institutional policy and practice, some focused on transitions and engagement/marketing, some on early interventions with primary schools, others on engagement with secondary schools.
- Be open to changing institutional policy and practice e.g. course structures and framing, curriculum, entry criteria, placement policies etc.
- Gender Action Plan and equality and diversity work in institutions to widen access often involves looking outwards. There is value in looking inwards and considering the implications of access activities for learning and teaching.
- Work with schools but in longitudinal projects and in more depth.
Address concerns raised by pupils that they don’t receive sufficient advice and guidance on course and career options.

**Influence**

- Universities and colleges should use their influence to put pressure on professional bodies to change, for example Royal College of Nursing, Institute of Mechanical Engineers etc.
- Test and evaluate ways of influencing key influencers - engaging parents and managing perceptions of children’s peers and dealing with peer pressure when making subject choices and in countering stereotypes is crucial, including in relation to unconscious bias.

**Evaluation**

- Focus on learning; don’t be afraid of ‘unsuccessful’ initiatives.
- Having a robust evaluation framework from the beginning of a project will improve the quality and clarity of evidence of impact gathered.
- The rate of progress and change is likely to vary in different institutions and subject areas according to different existing participation rates, variations in the level of current research or knowledge on barriers, as well as differences in barriers across locations and subjects.
- Consideration should be given to incorporating socio-economic status, experience in care and caring responsibilities within evaluations (as well as other assessments, such as Equality Impact Assessments).
- Evaluations should be published or shared across institutions and the sector to support learning about what works and scaling effective practice.

In addition to the recommendations we have collated the key discussion points around internal and external barriers which may be helpful to bear in mind when planning new activity and thinking through how you might prevent or address these:

**Internal barriers**

- There is often a strong resistance to change at subject level in colleges and HEIs.
- While there is a large national evidence base and case studies of successful initiatives, it can be difficult to know how the research applies in a particular institution or geographic area. Institutional research capacity to develop more local knowledge and contextualise national findings can be lacking.
- There are often lots of existing or past activities and initiatives, but of varying or unknown effectiveness, which can be costly in aggregate.
- Project and staff capacity has often been low, due to competing priorities for limited time and resource.
- Team continuity has been a common challenge, particularly in relation to staff turnover.
‘Unsuccessful’ projects and initiatives can be seen as ‘failed’ initiatives, rather than an opportunity to learn from what hasn’t worked and apply the learning to other projects and initiatives.

**External barriers**

- Institutions have had difficulty reaching current and potential students to undertake research on barriers to access.
- Learning environments can still act as a barrier to access, as in some contexts girls are still finding more success in single-sex environments and not continuing in mixed projects.
- Meaningful engagement with schools has often been difficult. Relationships might need to be developed. School teachers often lack confidence in gender equality, tackling stereotypes and teaching STEM related content.
- Tracking outcomes and changes and linking data across years and through transitions for schools outreach activity is difficult.

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