Rural Policy Centre

SRUC

Commission on Widening Access
SRUC 9th July 2015
Call for Evidence

Leading the way in Agriculture and Rural Research, Education and Consulting

Introduction

SRUC (Scotland's Rural College) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Commission on Widening Access – Call for Evidence.

SRUC is an innovative, knowledge-based organisation that supports the rural sector through research, education and expert consultancy services. SRUC wishes to see, and contribute significantly to delivering, a sustainable agricultural and rural land use sector in Scotland. SRUC staff work in a broad range of areas (for more information see www.sruc.ac.uk) and our responses to the questions below reflect this broad expertise, but draw on specific research projects where appropriate.

Several SRUC staff have contributed to this submission[1] which has been co-ordinated by SRUC's Rural Policy Centre.

RESPONSE FORM
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1. The identification and removal of barriers to access and retention

Submissions addressing the following questions are of particular interest to the Commission:

- What are the main barriers to accessing university and higher education in colleges for people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds and those with care experience, and how can these be overcome?

- What more can be done specifically by colleges and universities, including institutions with the highest entry requirements, to generate a greater volume of successful applications from people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds?

- What actions can be taken to support people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds who enter higher education to successfully complete their course?

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[1] Dr Kyrsten Black, Assistant Principal HE and Sonia Filby, Student Experience Manager

Main barriers include a lack of role models and consistent support. This is a particular issue for those experiencing care who find themselves moved around schools and residences. They potentially lack an advocate to support and encourage that other young people in a more stable environment will have access to.   This is an issue for local authorities who manage the care service. Working closer with their local universities and colleges to develop the awareness of social work teams (and within schools) of post school opportunities and support would assist. For those in rural areas there are frequently family expectations to remain at home post school age. The challenges of rural living including lack of transport infrastructure, reliable information technology access and smaller schools with a reduced curriculum offering might contribute to a limiting of knowledge or indeed barriers to fulfilling aspirations. Universities and colleges meanwhile need to be cautious in the image they promote.   The message of 'bettering yourself' can be a strong motivator for some (as heard at recent Who Cares and Buttle conferences) but it might also be viewed as condescending. The images of gown and academic elitism are not necessarily the messages that are welcome particularly where there may be a strong desire to fit /blend in.   We should be seeking those where potential students feel their contribution is welcome and their values and experiences matter. This is particularly the case for those who lack a family or community legacy of post school education.   The introduction of Corporate Parenting provides a legislative framework in which institutions will be able to further develop their support. For those from a care experience background it is important to signpost support but we would argue to keep it mainstream to avoid repeating the potential stigma these students may have been exposed to previously. Formal opportunity to disclose their background should be available (application/enrolment for example) but this should be complemented with discrete signposting to individuals and services. Meanwhile institutions need to make all staff aware of where services/staff to support care experienced students (or indeed all students coming through a WP background) are located. At SRUC we will be running staff awareness campaigns over the summer, launching at the Teaching Staff seminar on 20th August.

Early interactions with Higher Education providers (at school, at the Institution or through Distance learning) should be encouraged to raise awareness of the opportunities available, particularly in vocational subjects.

2. The identification and scaling up of best practice

Submissions addressing the following questions are of particular interest to the Commission:

- What can be learned from Scottish access programmes, across the education system and early years, about best practice in relation to improving access, retention and successful completion?

- What new programmes might be introduced in Scotland, drawing on experiences in the rest of the UK and other countries, that have had proven success in improving access, retention and successful completion for people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds?

- Which widening access programmes, initiatives and curriculum components, with a proven record of success, have the potential to be scaled up nationally?

Work with parents as part of the LEAPS programme has evident value. This could be usefully scaled up to encompass a similar scheme for social workers supporting those in care (as mentioned in response to 1.) It could be developed on line and form part of required CPD. A representative group of Universities/HE providers could be involved working with Celcis. SRUC is supportive and involved in all the SHEP initiatives. We welcome their continued support.

3. The data and measures needed to support access and retention

Submissions addressing the following questions are of particular interest to the Commission:

- What evidence or data is required to effectively measure Scotland's progress on widening access to higher education at both a national and institutional level?

- What evidence or data should be considered as part of the admissions process for students from socio-economically deprived backgrounds?

- Do we have enough evidence on the effectiveness of existing widening access programmes and initiatives and, if not, what else do we need to do to build a robust evidence base in this area?

The issue with effective measurement concerns the level of confidence we have that we are accurately defining what WP is. The SHEP schemes use progression to HE data to identify under performing schools where progression to HE is weak in comparison with others within regions/or compared with its own history. Free school meals are another. These, when combined with other indicators, are considered appropriate measures as part of contextual admissions. However, others used, based solely upon postcodes are not. Rural deprivation is not necessarily defined by financial indicators although this will contribute. As mentioned in 1, transport and information technology, and others such as off grid energy supplies, proportion of single/couple owned and run enterprises could all be relevant as they contribute to a local/regional tradition and aspiration. Potential students with these challenges may find themselves with limited opportunities for extracurricular activities either due to the choice available, access to them or personal time available when compared to those from other backgrounds. This must be taken into account as part of the admissions process. Overcoming the potential barriers these issues raise are valid considerations within contextual admissions. If we broadened our definitions of WP to include these it would enable us to accurately assess the effectiveness and success of WP as a sector and a nation. A shortcoming of the existing SHEP programmes is the inability to track a student through FE into HE. This is a well utilised and positive route into HE but is not currently regarded as a success indicator. It is an indicator of success that SRUC utilises.

4. Any other comments

SRUC wishes to highlight two issues that we believe are critical to the success of widening participation in Higher Education. As mentioned in 3 above, bringing students in at FE level

to enable them to eventually progress to HE is another critical success factor that must be acknowledged and measured. Again there is often a family /community tradition of leaving school after 4th or 5th year to return to family enterprises. Opening up the opportunities of post school education with access/NC level studies enables young people to still contribute to family business whilst progressing their education and future opportunities. Our role is then to enable them to maximise their potential and ensure there is understanding of the meaningful benefits of progressing into HE.

Additionally SRUC feels strongly about the issue of rurality. : Although rural poverty and disadvantage are known to exist, the way in which they are measured – through the Scottish Index of Deprivation (SIMD) - lead to two over-arching problems:

> *(i)   rural poverty and disadvantage remain hidden since they occur "below the radar" of SIMD;*
> *(ii)   rural poverty and disadvantage are then not tackled systematically, because anti-poverty policies are based on SIMD-derived targeting.*

A further, more significant, long-term effect is that evidence shows rural poverty and disadvantage falling between the gap: rural policy relies on national approaches, national approaches rely on SIMD. So, although policies have been in place since 1999, rural poverty and disadvantage remain largely unaddressed.