



CAMPWS PRIFYSGOL
Grŵp Colegau NPTC
UNIVERSITY CAMPUS
NPTC Group of Colleges



Do approaches towards widening access deliver on their intended outcomes of providing an inclusive and equal environment to higher education?

The topic of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) is critical in Higher Education (HE), especially in my professional practice.

This poster explores widening access through my experiences in a Russell Group university planning office, where meeting widening access goals seemed mandatory, and in a Welsh HE college within a Further Education (FE) setting, serving students from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds. I question if widening access efforts truly create inclusive and equal HE environments. The poster blends personal insights, policies, and academic literature on evaluating widening access, its differences across devolved nations, and the impact on local economies.

Definition

Widening Access: The process of including students from underrepresented groups, including those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds is commonly referred to as widening access within the HE domain (Burke, 2017).

Discussion Points:

Measures and Metrics of Widening Access Across the UK

Across the UK, metrics like the Scottish Index for Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) are used to evaluate widening access to Higher Education (HE), aiming for 20% of Scottish HE entrants from the most deprived areas. While SIMD considers various factors like health, housing, employment, and education, some argue against relying solely on it. It's crucial not only to increase enrolment of students from deprived backgrounds but also to ensure their retention rates are comparable to the overall student cohort. Despite higher participation rates in Scotland, structural inequalities persist, with studies showing that the absence of tuition fees has not led to a more socially inclusive HE system. This raises questions about whether current measures genuinely support the widening access agenda or merely fulfil bureaucratic requirements.

Higher Education within Further Education

In discussions on widening access in Higher Education (HE), articulation—progressing from a Higher National qualification at a college to a university degree without duplicating academic levels—is crucial. Many students who advance this way come from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds. Research shows that HE through Further Education (FE) settings positively impacts

students intellectually, socially, and emotionally, as seen in a South Wales college study (Trotman, 2023). This approach enhances accessibility through location, flexibility, and appeal to individuals balancing work and caregiving duties. However, FE institutions face challenges in providing sufficient support, as they lack the financial resources of larger universities, indicating that while bursaries help, they are insufficient alone to ensure greater diversity in HE.

Changing Landscape

A key topic in widening access is the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) development of outcome agreements with HE providers in Scotland. This approach aims to reshape course portfolios to equip students with relevant skills and identify workforce gaps in collaboration with businesses and industries. However, despite these discussions, little progress has been made. The closure of blast furnaces at the Tata Steel plant in South Wales highlights the need for workforce retraining and stronger connections between HE institutions and industries. Local colleges might adopt SFC's strategies to better address the evolving needs of their local economies, similar to efforts following the 1990s coal mine closures in South Wales.

Conclusions and Future Work

Despite the imperfections in current widening access metrics, they remain the most effective tools available for encouraging change. To genuinely increase HE participation, the government should provide more financial support and policy focus on Further Education (FE) colleges within HE. FE colleges must be central to discussions about expanding HE involvement. HE institutions need to keep pace with economic and societal changes, such as advancements in AI and industrial shifts like the Tata Steel plant closures, through ongoing collaboration with businesses and industries. Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) are crucial for widening access, ensuring that policy and practice in HE support inclusive and equal opportunities for underrepresented students facing numerous barriers.