

Widening Participation Strategy 2009-2012

1. Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this strategy is to provide a framework for all the widening participation (WP) activity undertaken by Brunel University's WP Office, academic Schools and support services over the next three years. It also provides a context for the additional financial support offered to students as part of the University's Access Agreement.

1.2 Brunel's Mission is "To advance knowledge and understanding, and provide society with confident, talented and versatile graduates." Our Strategic Plan 2008-2012 clearly states that we value community and partnership working. A key element of our Widening Participation strategy is therefore rightly focussed on working with our local community and educational partners to support our mission and drive aspiration to higher education within wider society. In line with our values of integrity and empowerment we are committed to ensuring that all those with the potential to benefit from Higher Education (HE) have the opportunity to do so, whatever their background. We aim to encourage individuals from under-represented backgrounds to aspire to and succeed in HE.

1.3 Our Strategic Plan also focuses on the importance of meeting the needs of our students, given the diversity of their academic experience, and understanding and responding to those needs. The Widening Participation strategy highlights the necessity to put in place activities and services which help to develop our students' confidence and their contribution to the Brunel community and also recognises that certain categories of student, often those from non-traditional backgrounds, require more assistance than others to reach their potential.

1.4 Brunel is committed to delivering a high quality learning and teaching experience which develops and supports students through their studies and prepares them for employment and a range of careers. Operating alongside other core strategies such as the Equality and Diversity Strategy, the Disability Strategy, the Employability Strategy, the Students' Plan and the External Relations and Development Plan, the WP Strategy will encourage greater diversity in the student body; help ensure that individual learners' needs are met; further improve retention and success rates and assist students to access their chosen progression routes.

1.5 The WP Office consists of two WP Officers and a Mentoring Co-ordinator. It is located within Development and External Relations and managed by the Director of External Affairs.

2. Background

2.1 The University's first three-year WP Strategy was drawn up in 2001 in response to HEFCE requirements and new government initiatives to widen participation in HE. These aim to achieve a target of 50% of 18 - 30 year-olds participating in HE by 2010.

2.2 A number of activity strands were developed under the original WP Strategy 2001 - 2006:

- Improving transition, progression, retention and employability by ensuring pre-entry and in-course support
- Increased collaboration with schools and colleges in West London and in particular the London Borough of Hillingdon, targeting those in areas of social and economic disadvantage
- Provision of promotional support materials

2.3 In response to the introduction of national campaigns such as Aimhigher in 2003, additional activities were undertaken in partnership with other HE and FE providers in the London region.

2.4 The strategy was rolled over in 2003/4 and 2004/5 with HEFCE agreement pending the publication of the report of the Office for Fair Access.

2.5 A second three-year WP Strategy was drawn up in 2006, although it was no longer a HEFCE condition of grant. It provided a framework for all WP activities at the University and re-inforced the University's ongoing commitment to widening participation. It aimed to improve further Brunel's outstanding record of increasing diversity and promoting participation in HE.

2.6 The WP Strategy 2006-9 had two main activity strands:

- Raising aspirations
- Improving transition, progression, retention and employability

It was strengthened through the Brunel Access Agreement 2006 which introduced a Student Mentoring scheme, events for parents and Brunel bursaries and Regional Partnership Scholarships. Access Agreement funding also supported the expansion of the Urban Scholars Programme and additional posts in the University Recruitment/Admissions Office and Effective Learning and Advice Service.

2.7 The strategy was routinely monitored in line with internal procedures through a Delivery Plan report and by reviewing progress against HEFCE benchmarks for participation by under-represented groups at the University.

2.8 HESA Performance Indicators 2007-8 show that the number of students admitted to Brunel from state schools has increased each year since 2001. In 2001/2 eighty nine percent of new entrants were from the state sector, exceeding the benchmark of 88%. In 2007/8 this figure had risen to 93.9% against a benchmark of 90.8%. Recruitment from under-represented social classes has likewise improved from 31% in 2001/2 to 38.6% in 2007/8, exceeding the benchmarks of 28% and 32.6% respectively. This increase is particularly pronounced and the current percentage exceeds the UK average by over nine points.

2.9 Despite this achievement in relation to social class, Brunel has not always met its benchmark over the past seven years in attracting students from low participation neighbourhoods. In 2007/8 the percentage was 5.8%, just exceeding the location-adjusted benchmark of 5.7%.

2.10 There has been a steady improvement in the proportion of full-time students in receipt of a Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) from 1.7% in 2001/2 to 4.1% in 2007/8, although the University continues to miss its benchmark of 4.6%. However, for part-time undergraduates in receipt of DSA Brunel outstrips its benchmark by 1.4%.

2.11 Brunel's mature student population has decreased from 23% in 2001/2 to 15.5% in 2007/8. The University has also had less success in recruiting under-represented groups to its mature cohort. The proportion of mature students from low participation neighbourhoods fell from 12% in 2001/2 to 3.5% in 2007/8, missing the benchmark of 15% (location-adjusted 6.7%) by a significant margin. Given the very limited provision of flexible, part-time degree and sub-degree courses at the University, it is unlikely that WP activities will have any marked impact on mature participation rates.

2.12 Since 2001 WP activities have been targeted at students mostly in the age range 14 - 30 who meet one or more of the following criteria:

- Little or no family history of HE
- From a school or college with a poor record of entry to HE
- From a low income/low participation area
- Disabled
- Traveller, refugee or looked-after by a local authority
- Have studied vocational courses

WP students from ethnic minority and/or gender groups that are under-represented in particular subject areas at Brunel have also been targeted.

3. Widening Participation Strategy 2009-2012

3.1 This new strategy builds upon the strategy and action plan agreed in 2006 and the additional activities developed subsequently in response to new government initiatives. Activities will be targeted at students from the under-represented groups described in para 2.12 with particular emphasis on students from low participation neighbourhoods, disabled students and care leavers.

3.2 The aim is to consolidate work to ensure that Brunel continues to exceed its WP benchmarks in key areas and meets its benchmarks in areas where it currently fails and where there is realistic potential for improvement. This will be achieved by introducing more focused activities in priority areas.

The new strategy has four main strands:

Outreach activities

Outreach activities to raise aspirations will continue to target young people in local schools, colleges and community groups aged 14 - 30 who are currently under-represented in HE. These activities will be enhanced by additional outreach activities funded by Aimhigher 2009-11.

3.3 The University will continue to focus on the six west London boroughs of Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham, Harrow, Hillingdon and Hounslow but will also engage with partner schools, colleges and HEIs

in the expanded West, Central and North London (WECAN) Aimhigher area. We will provide additional support to each of our partner Academies in Hillingdon - Harefield and Stockley.

3.4 We will continue to develop aspiration-raising activities for young people through HE awareness visits, master classes, subject taster days, information, advice and guidance (IAG) sessions and summer schools in order to increase further the number of admissions from groups under-represented in HE. We will give ongoing support to academic Schools wishing to run WP activity and to the Brunel Urban Scholars Programme as it enters a new phase in 2010-11 working with Year 12/13 students. The introduction of Urban Scholarships in 2010, funded by alumni and other supporters, will further encourage participants to progress to HE.

3.5 The University will continue to work with national and regional initiatives. We will support and contribute to the Hillingdon Aimhigher Partnership programme, the WECAN Aimhigher Partnership programme and the National Mentoring Consortium (NMC) initiative. We will work alongside charities and trusts to deliver activities to specific cohorts of WP learners, as requested.

Support for students with disability

The support available for Brunel students with disabilities has increased significantly over the past three years. WP funding has been used to improve further the Assistive Technology Centre and to provide pre-induction and induction sessions. In 2008 the Brunel Disability and Dyslexia Service was awarded the Times Higher Education Award for Outstanding Support for Disabled Students and in 2009 was declared by the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign to have the best university facilities for disabled students in the UK.

3.6 The University will continue to develop its service to disabled students, in particular by ensuring that an increased percentage of students enter Brunel having already applied for the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). This will be achieved through targeted outreach activities and an enhanced pre-induction programme.

Looked-after children and care leavers

Since 2007 the WP Office has worked closely with the London Borough of Hillingdon Looked-After Children's Education and Care Leavers' teams to provide an annual guidance weekend for Hillingdon looked-after students. We have now decided to seek The Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark for our work with care leavers in order to support further a group of young people who are very poorly represented in HE.

3.7 We will put in place a framework of support for care leavers at the University in order to increase care-leaver enrolments and promote successful progression and employability.

Improving transition, progression, retention and employability

Brunel performs well at retaining students. In 2006/7 the non-continuation rate at Brunel for young, full-time first degree entrants was 6% against a benchmark of 7.5%. Only 3.4% of those from low participation neighbourhoods failed to continue against a benchmark of 8.1%. The following measures aim to ensure that the University continues to exceed its benchmark for the retention of students.

3.8 We will continue to:

- Provide HE talks and IAG workshops for students, parents, staff and community groups to prepare students for HE.

- Keep under review the financial support available to students from WP backgrounds. The introduction of Brunel Alumni Scholarships in 2009 will offer up to £6,000pa to the 5 applicants from under-represented groups in six West London boroughs who achieve the highest number of UCAS tariff points, paid on the same basis as Brunel Regional Partnership Scholarships (see para 3.6 below).
- Work with applicants in specific subject areas to ensure they meet the entry requirements by providing help such as intensive maths and essential study skills sessions.
- Support activities to promote successful induction and integration of WP students.
- Support the Brunel Academic Skills Centre (ASK), formerly known as the Effective Learning and Advice Service (ELAS) to ensure that students have access to central study skills support.
- Organise a minimum of two professional mentoring programmes for WP students across the University.
- Work with Disability, Counselling and other student services to enhance the student experience and promote retention.

Access Agreement

3.9 The measures above are underpinned by the Brunel Access Agreement which provides financial support to students in receipt of full grant (£1K pa) and partial grant (£500 pa). In addition, up to 25 Regional Partnership Scholarships worth up to £3,000 pa are offered to high-performing students who attend a maintained school or college in six West London boroughs and who meet one or more of the under-represented criteria: they have a disability; are a care leaver or come from a low-income background.

4. Monitoring and Evaluation

4.1 The new strategy will be monitored in line with standard University practices. The Delivery Plan will be reviewed annually by the Strategic Planning and Resources Committee (SPARC) and the annual report will form part of the University's Corporate Planning Statement to HEFCE.

4.2 The University's Access Agreement will be reviewed annually by SPARC and approved by Senate and Council. It will form part of the governance documentation submitted to HEFCE each December.

4.3 The delivery plan will detail the use of resources provided from the HEFCE WP allocation and other income to support the activities in this strategy.