

## Fair Access Briefing

### What is fair access?

Fair access, or widening participation, means supporting those who are marginalised or underrepresented in university to apply for, attend and succeed in higher education.

**Widening participation is a key priority for universities and the Government.**

Higher education creates opportunities for social mobility, professional development, civic engagement and personal growth. All of which shape the economic, intellectual and cultural development of the country.

However, **universities remain unequal places** when it comes to the diversity of the student population and some groups of students have very different experiences and outcomes.

Bournemouth University's Vision and Values statement, BU2018: Creating, Sharing, Inspiring strategy highlights the importance of interventions to raise aspirations of marginalised learners to engage with higher education. It emphasises how support to widen participation must be holistic and sustainable and work with diverse students' experiences and needs, from **school age through to graduation and into employment or further study.**

Understanding how students from different backgrounds access and experience university is vital for changing behaviour at a local, national and international level to make positive differences for all students.

### BU Fair Access Research Project

The university is leading a research project exploring issues of fair access to higher education. Our project involves students, professional staff and academics to help understand the complexities of widening participation to university. We look at the areas of:

- **Outreach**
- **Admissions**
- **Retention**
- **Student Experiences**

From our analysis of existing data, through focus groups, surveys and creative qualitative research **we want to establish how university is experienced differently by different groups of students.** Gaining a rich understanding of different students' experiences can help establish ways to transform policy and practice to promote equality, opportunity and achievement within higher education.

By working together with colleagues from across the university and the higher education sector, we are building a community who share experiences and expertise to meet the complex challenges facing students, communities, universities and the country.

In England, widening participation to higher education is regulated by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) through the development and monitoring of access agreements. These policies outline how institutions are going to use a proportion of the income accrued through tuition fees to support underrepresented and marginalised learners to enter and succeed in higher education.

A key area of OFFA's policy concerns the importance of collaboratively and rigorously researching what works to widen participation at different institutions, and for different groups students and developing innovative evaluation methods.

Central to the Fair Access Research project is a commitment to collaborative research to change policy and practice to make a difference to all students.

## Meet the team

We are a group of students, academics and professional staff. We each bring our different expertise, experiences and disciplinary practices to help shape new ways of doing and thinking about widening participation.

The Principal Investigators of the project are:

**Dr Vanessa Heaslip**  
(Faculty of Health & Social Sciences)



**Dr Clive Hunt**  
(Faculty of Science & Technology)



Vanessa and Clive lead a core group of researchers:

**Ed Bickle**  
(PhD student)

**Dr Sue Eccles**  
(Faculty of Media & Communications)

**Lizzie Gauntlett**  
(PhD student)

**Dr Maggie Hutchings**  
(Faculty of Health & Social Sciences)

**Professor Colin Pritchard**  
(Faculty of Health & Social Sciences)

**Jane de Vekey** (SUBU)

**Dr Alex Wardrop** (CEL)

**Julie Atherton**  
(Project Co-ordinator)

For more information and to read some of our Fair Access Research blogs take a look at the Centre for Excellence blog:

<https://www1.bournemouth.ac.uk/about/centre-excellence-learning/our-research/fair-access>

## Why does fair access research matter?

Universities and colleges in England have forecast spending £750.8 million on interventions and financial support to enable marginalised and underrepresented learners to access and succeed across higher education.

Knowing that this expenditure is being effectively used to support those students most in need is of paramount importance.

Widening participation research matters because the more that we know about the challenges that some students face in accessing and succeeding in university, the better placed we are to work together to change policy and practice.

**Researching the experiences of marginalised and underrepresented learners can be the first step in transforming educational inequalities.**

This matters to BU because the university is committed to nurturing the values of creating, sharing and inspiring. Having a diverse student body who feel included in the co-creation of the university experience is at the core of BU's values and vision.

Finding the best ways to support different groups of students to belong at BU is an essential part of ensuring students stay and succeed during their time here.

Our Fair Access Research aligns the university's vision **for a fusion of research, education and professional practice**. We recognise that it is through ongoing knowledge exchange that new ideas, new learning and new leadership in this area can be realised.

This project matters to you because it is about the students you teach and those who you reach with your research.

**Widening participation does not begin or end with entry to university. It is something which extends to every area of higher education.**

We want to know how widening participation fits into your teaching and research practice and find ways to create a sustainable culture of widening participation.

**By working together, we can find ways to reduce the barriers and improve the opportunities for all students.**

# Case study: Student perceptions of disability

Dr Vanessa Heaslip and Dr Sue Eccles undertook a review of all applications to BU between 2010 and 2014. During this time, the university had a sustained record of attracting applications from students from widening participation backgrounds. These included;

- Low participation neighbourhood
- Care Leavers
- Disability
- Socio-economic class

Finding out if there are any different patterns in application, admissions and enrolment for different groups of people is important because there remains significant differences in who applications and admission rates at a national level.

**The Government has called on the sector to double the proportion of university entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds by 2020.**

Improving admission rates has thus become a priority for all universities and colleges in England.

**From the analysis we found that 1,257 applicants to BU did not specify during their UCAS application whether or not they had a disability.**

This is important because disclosing a disability during application can ensure that any additional requirements are provided to applicants early on. We are exploring this further with two Undergraduate Research Assistants, who outline their project.



## By Lydia Schmidt & Olivia Berry

Supervised by Sue and Vanessa, we are researching perspectives of disability amongst higher education students, in particular the process of declaring disability in the application process with UCAS.

We are part of the Undergraduate Research Programme. Olivia is studying Psychology and is in her second year, and Lydia is in the second year of her BA (Hons) Sociology & Anthropology.

Our research methods include an in-depth literature review, focus groups with students and interviews. We are interested to see how students view disability, and what factors influence whether an individual would declare a specific disability on the UCAS application form, or why they would choose not to declare a disability.

This includes whether students perceive particular impairments, such as physical disability or mental illness, as a disability – and if not, why not?

As undergraduate students we hope to use our current research skills whilst building upon these and working with senior academics. We also hope to contribute to a richer understanding of student perceptions of disability, which could possibly improve the student experience.

## Why this matters to you

You have a statutory duty to ensure that disabled students are not discriminated against. Understanding more about how students perceive disability could ensure that applicants are supported early and offers a way to foster an anti-discriminatory behaviour in all students.

Disabled students who do not receive the support that they need are more likely to leave university early and have worse outcomes.

## What could you do?

To create a culture of belonging for disabled students, you could raise awareness of the services available to disabled students at BU. Alternatively, you could use the TEL Toolkit to find ways to use technology to support disabled students.

## Publications

An article co-authored by Vanessa and colleagues in the Faculty of Health & Social Sciences has been published in the influential journal, Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning.

**Heaslip, V., Hewitt-Taylor, J., Alexander, P., Ellis-Hill, C., Seibert-Santos, C., 2015. What factors influence Fair Access students to consider university and what do they look for? *Journal of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*. 17(4); 67-88.**

Our PhD Students, Ed and Lizzie, presented a paper at an international conference at the Open University in April 2016. Their paper explored the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis for understanding widening participation. Ed and Lizzie concentrated on the areas of outreach and student resilience and their research was received really positively. Alex also presented at the conference, sharing a paper exploring how universities in England engage with research addressing the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic students in their access agreement policy documents.

## External work

Because exchanging knowledge and experiences across different professional boundaries in order to make sustainable changes for students at BU and beyond is central to the ethos of the Fair Access Research project, we are working with a number of different sector partners to enhance thinking, policy and practice.

Vanessa was invited to join Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Expert Think Tank and is coordinating a national, multi site research into the use of additional assessment during the admissions process. She will be presenting the findings of this research at the SPA National Conference in June 2016.

Clive and Alex sit on a steering group with colleagues from University of Bristol, Sheffield University and The Sutton Trust. It is being led by the University of Warwick and the Office for Fair Access. The group organised a symposium on the politics and practice of evaluating outreach and are continuing to co-ordinate work in the area of evaluation and outreach.

## Get in touch

**At the heart of the Fair Access Research project is a commitment to working together for widening participation.**

**We understand that to make a difference to students requires collective effort and a sharing of different expertise. We want to work with you to find ways to transform the practice of higher education.**

**If you want to know more about the project, develop an idea or find ways to embed fair access research into your work please email:**

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**The next Fair Access Briefing will include a case study about working with Students' Unions to develop widening participation research.**

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