

## Fair Access Briefing: Two

### Working with Students' Unions

Students' Unions are independent organisations with the purpose of democratically representing and supporting all students.

Student sabbatical officers are elected annually by the student body to work and speak for students. In addition to these elected officers, Unions are run by students and full-time members of staff.

Many Unions in England are affiliated with the National Union of Students who work to ensure that students' voices shape policy and action at a national level.

Students' Unions can provide unique insight into how higher education policies and research are lived by students.

Unions have access to a lot of knowledge, data and experience that can be invaluable to those working in the area of fair access to higher education.

Working in partnership with Unions for widening participation research, practice and policy means that your work can:

- be embedded with the democratic ethos at the heart of the student movement
- be informed by the lived experiences and voices of students
- be championed by students within institutions and nationally.

### Together for Widening Participation

Bournemouth University is leading a research project exploring issues of fair access to higher education. At the heart of the programme of Fair Access Research is a commitment to working and learning together for widening participation research, policy and practice.

Higher education in England is undergoing significant changes. In addition to the ongoing national and international uncertainties, the Government has published a White Paper that proposes a new Higher Education Bill outlining their vision for the future of the sector.

This includes transforming how widening participation to higher education will be regulated. The proposed Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) emphasises the importance of supporting students across the whole learning journey. Ensuring that all students have access to teaching and learning environments that enable them to thrive is central to these policies.

We see renewed importance of the sector working together to help tackle persistent lower retention and attainment for certain groups of students.

Issues of fair access impact all areas of higher education. To create and sustain a culture of widening participation requires the collective effort of policymakers, practitioners, administrators, academics and students.

This is why we wish to focus this Fair Access Briefing on working in partnership with Students' Unions.



## Meet the team:

Dr Vanessa Heaslip and Dr Clive Hunt lead a research group of students, academics and professional staff.



## Jane de Vekey

Jane is SUBU's Research and Information Manager. In addition to her commitment to giving voices to students, Jane brings with her extensive experience in research and analysis relating to widening participation, learning development and student experiences.



## Students' Unions:

Joff is the Head of Student Engagement at SUBU. He is a leading higher education student experience specialist and has a track record of engaging students with research and embedding research into the Students' Union.



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

[www1.bournemouth.ac.uk/about/centre-excellence-learning/our-research/fair-access](http://www1.bournemouth.ac.uk/about/centre-excellence-learning/our-research/fair-access)

## Why working with Students' Unions matters

The work of widening participation focuses on transforming institutions into more accessible, more equitable and more just places of learning for students.

This means that the experiences and voices of students must shape the work we do – whether this is research, policy or practice. Without working with students we cannot do work that is for students.

Part of the guidance from the Office for Fair Access makes it clear that Students' Unions must be involved, in some form, with the development of an institution's access agreement.

The history of activism and advocacy which shapes Students' Unions means they can provide researchers, policymakers and practitioners with a way of working that ensures students' voices are heard.

As organisations run by students for students, Students' Unions have significant insight into the complexities of becoming and being a student in the 21st century.

Their unique understanding of the lived experiences of students is particularly important when working with groups of students whose lives are all too often marginalised within institutions and society.

Unions can help level the playing field by enabling students from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds access to opportunities, resources, experiences and a dedicated team of staff.

The student-centred approach rooted in trust and mutual respect that Students' Unions work with can help researchers and policymakers with their way of working with students.

Working in partnership with Students' Unions is invaluable if you want to develop research, policies, services and teaching and learning strategies which empower students and enable them to succeed.

**Working with Students' Unions matters because working with students matters.**



# Case study: Understanding student experiences

One of the major strands of the Fair Access Research programme is a survey of all students developed in partnership with SUBU.

We wanted to understand how students themselves conceive of their experiences and to find out how students from different backgrounds feel about university.

Understanding what it is like being a student – particularly a student from a non-traditional background – can help us make the university better for all students.

We developed the survey over the course of the year, responding to pilot testing last summer.

Key findings from the pilot study include:

- Students who are the first in their family to go to university prioritise getting a good job when reflecting on their decisions to go to university
- These students also reported lacking some social capital and networking skills
- Mature students reported feeling that the social side of university is not for them, giving them a potentially limited student experience.

In May, an online survey was shared with all students. We've had a really positive response and will analyse the data over the summer.

## Why this matters to you:

We know that some groups of students are more likely to leave university early. We also know that some groups of students face persistent gaps in belonging that seriously affects their opportunities to succeed.

Finding out how students themselves understand their experiences of being at university is vital to help you implement approaches that are best tailored to the needs of your students.



The government proposals for TEF means that reducing non-continuation rates and improving students' attainment outcomes is a key sector and institutional priority.

Finding out more about how your students experience university – including negatively – is critical to helping improve the lives of all students.

## What could you do?

Students' Unions are working with academics and policymakers to ensure that teaching and learning represents all students and works towards liberation and social justice.

Meeting with your Students' Union could help you find ways to make sure that what and how you teach empowers all your students. Working with your Students' Union offers more opportunities for widening participation students to engage in voluntary and work experiences.

## Events:

As part of the Festival of Learning, we held a workshop exploring grassroots solutions to regional educational challenges on 27 June in the new Fusion Building.

Visible Students/Invisible Needs: All faculties are invited to an event on 11 July 2016 10am - 2pm at Executive Business Centre 202 and 203. We will share our research and explore ways to embed widening participation into practice at a faculty level. To book a place email [awardrop@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:awardrop@bournemouth.ac.uk)

In July we will be holding a workshop, with guests from across the sector, to pilot an online resource to help build and sustain partnerships between Students' Unions and institutions.

## Publications:

An article we've authored has been accepted for publication in the influential journal, Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning: *Wardrop, A., Hutchings, M., Collins, B., Eccles, S., Heaslip, V., Hunt, C., Pritchard, C. (forthcoming)* "Troubling ideas for widening participation: how higher education institutions in England engage with research in their access agreements". This article argues the importance of embedding research within widening participation policy and practice.

## External work:

Vanessa has been leading national research into Additional Admissions Assessment for Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA). Vanessa presented this work at the SPA National Conference on 14 June 2016, when the guidance from this research will be launched.

The research team has been working with Rachael Tooth, OFFA's Head of Evidence and Good Practice, on a systematic review of how the impact of outreach activity is understood in research.

## 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 a 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 email Vanessa ([vheaslip@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:vheaslip@bournemouth.ac.uk)) or Clive ([chunt@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:chunt@bournemouth.ac.uk)).**



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