

WORKSHOP REPORT

The impact of social policy reforms on equality and diversity at MMU

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Introduction

The MMU Union Advice Centre Manager, Meg Coffey, and I, Paul Norman, were asked to deliver a workshop on the impact that policy changes, other than those specifically attached to higher education funding, would have on MMU as a Widening Participation (WP) university. This was something that we were quite excited to be involved in because we felt that the issue of fees has dominated discussions about the future effectiveness of education as a means of social mobility and equality of opportunity. Issues surrounding student financial support - such as maintenance grants and loans, Parents' Learning Allowance, Childcare Grant, Disabled Students' Allowance, and Access to Learning Funds - have received comparatively little airtime at a time when they have probably never been more important for ensuring that student success at university is maximised from the outset.

As advisers, Meg and I often assist students to work through their issues with Student Finance England. However, it could be argued that these issues are relatively easy to solve for those from a non-traditional student background. There are a range of other hugely influential social and financial issues that

influence student's decisions to come to university, to stay at university, and ultimately, whether or not they achieve academic success. Both the previous Government and current coalition Government have implemented a number of social reforms that will likely result in further shifts in the landscape of Higher Education, particularly in WP. Our workshop provided an opportunity to explain and discuss some of these reforms and the potential impact on students at MMU. We also considered the impact of increased fees and the Equality Act (2010) in the context of training graduates of the future and enabling social mobility.

The workshop: From University to Uni

The workshop began with a consideration of the stark differences in student profiles between universities from 'different' families. As an example, the University of Manchester boasts some 4000 students who fall within the WP profile, more than any other Russell Group University. This number accounts for less than 10% of its total student population compared with nearer 50% WP students at MMU. We drew upon Robert Steven's book "*University to Uni*", which compares the differences in mission between the elite institutions - who set out to train future leaders in society – and the former polytechnics who set out to train graduates and practitioners. We reflected that this post-92 mission, attached to the massification of HE in the 80s and 90s is regarded by many as a key enabler for social mobility and equality of opportunity.

MMU Values

We then moved on to consider the MMU 20/20 Vision document, specifically the University's values, one of which is to promote diversity. The Equality Act (2010) places an explicit duty on the university to be proactive in confronting issues affecting disadvantaged groups. There was some discussion in the workshop around whether or not this reference in the values section of the strategic plan demonstrated sufficient commitment post Equality Act, especially given the history of MMU and its hyper-diverse community.

The Student Experience

There are three main contributors to the student experience (Figure 1); academic, personal, and social life. Diversity issues impact heavily on each of these and, hence, on the likelihood of student progression and success.

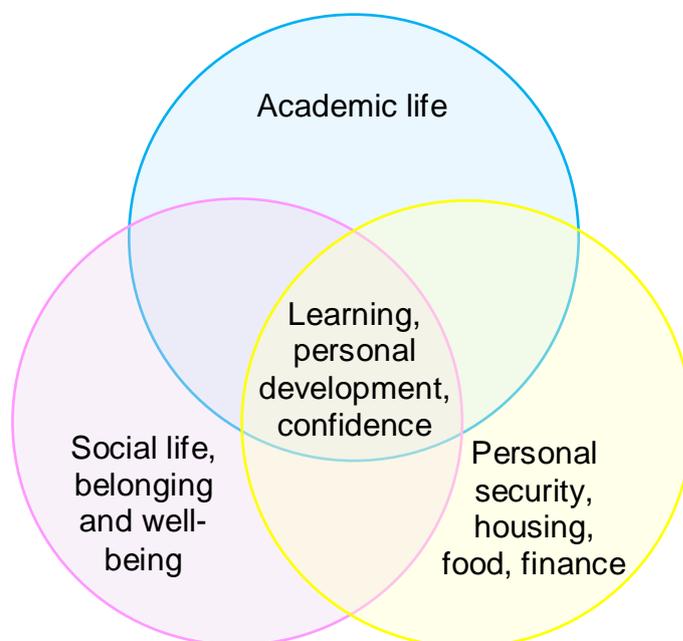


Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of the interlinked academic, social and personal factors that contribute to a students' personal development.

Diversity Streams

We explored the main diversity streams of disability, age, faith, race/residency, sexual orientation, childcare responsibility, and gender. We argued that these characteristics should not be viewed as labels or in singularity, but rather as issues of life itself for those who are disadvantaged or treated inequitably through societal ignorance. In reality, the Equality Act is for the benefit of the whole of society, not just for the individuals who are most disadvantaged.

And this is where social mobility through education, specifically higher education, is so important. On the 18th August 2010, Nick Clegg, the Deputy Prime Minister, delivered a speech on social mobility stating it to be:

'the mark of a good society, a badge of fairness, and that fairness means the chance for everyone to do well, irrespective of their beginnings.'

[http://www.libdems.org.uk/press_releases_detail.aspx?title=Nick Clegg delivers speech on social mobility&pPK=38cf9a88-0577-403e-9dcb-50b8e30ed119](http://www.libdems.org.uk/press_releases_detail.aspx?title=Nick+Clegg+delivers+speech+on+social+mobility&pPK=38cf9a88-0577-403e-9dcb-50b8e30ed119)

Nick Clegg also highlighted education as the best route to achieve this 'fairness' but criticised what he saw as an 'educational apartheid' and called for the removal of traditional barriers in Higher Education.

However, it is not always that easy for prospective students to decide if it will be possible for them to return to education. For example, childcare requirements cannot be scoped or planned for in advance, and financial support for childcare cannot be applied for in advance. Changes to the benefits system, an essential source of additional income for parents and

disabled students, as well as part-time students, is shifting significantly as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Changes made or anticipated to selected welfare benefits 2011-13

Year	Disability benefits	Parents benefits	Housing benefits
2011	<p>No new claims for Incapacity Benefit</p> <p>No new claims for Income Support on disability grounds</p>	<p>Health in Pregnancy Grant abolished.</p> <p>Sure Start Maternity Grant restricted to the first child only.</p> <p>The rates of Child Benefit for the first and subsequent children frozen for three years from April.</p> <p>Children born after December 2010 not eligible for a Child Trust Fund.</p>	<p>Local Housing Allowance rates capped and removal of 5 bedroom rate</p>
2012	<p>Existing contribution based Employment Support Allowance claimants limited to 12 months</p>	<p>Lone parents – have to claim Job Seekers' Allowance instead of Income Support (if youngest child is aged 5 or over). This means parents will be required to actively seek work outside of term time.</p> <p>Parent couples must work combined 24h per week with one working 16h to qualify for Working Tax Credit</p> <p>Family element of Child Tax Credit to be withdrawn after the child element</p> <p>Backdated claims for tax credits reduced from 3 to 1 month</p>	<p>Government contribution to discretionary housing payments increasing by £40m each year</p> <p>Local Housing Allowance rates changed for single claimants under 35</p>
2013	<p>Working age Disability Living Allowance replaced by new Personal Independence Payment</p>	<p>Child Benefit withdrawn from households paying higher tax rate</p>	<p>Housing Benefit awards reduced to 90% of initial award after 12 month if receiving JSA</p>

In addition to these benefits changes, there are also fewer advisors available to guide and advise people through the complicated application and appeal processes. For instance, the Manchester Citizens' Advice Bureau, the North Manchester Law Centre, and Manchester Advice, have all closed due to a lack of funding. As part of the workshop, we also considered the Universal Credit Scheme pilots that begin in 2013, the national roll-out of the Universal Credit Scheme, and the future of the Access to Learning Fund (to assist students from a non traditional background). It seems unfortunate that potential barriers to WP students may be increasing rather than decreasing, despite the incredibly positive influence of the Equality Act. This is where it is vital that we, as employees of MMU, do all that we can individually and collectively, to ensure that students of all backgrounds and characteristics, receive all the support and encouragement available.