

History Survey: Supporting More Diverse Students

Recent government directives have made access and widening participation a pressing issue for higher education institutions, and thus a challenge for disciplinary communities. In 2003, the Subject Centre sent an email to all history departments asking for information on some key widening participation issues. What follows is based upon the responses received, supplemented by information contained in the annual survey of university history departments published in *History Today* and recent government publications in this area such as *Successful Student Diversity* (HEFCE Guide, 48, November 2002). It provides a sketch of initiatives currently underway in the history community and keys to effective practice.

Widening Participation is a term open to many interpretations. For a few respondents to the questionnaire it was seen primarily as the admission of mature students. History has an honourable tradition in this area, though, as recent surveys of history departments demonstrate, the recruitment of mature students is now proving more difficult due to the financial demands of undertaking a degree. Most respondents, however, saw widening participation in broader terms: as relating to activities to recruit students from groups traditionally under-represented in higher education (including mature students but also students from social or cultural backgrounds with little tradition of university entrance to history). There was little specific mention of disability, though this is clearly an important issue for many departments, given the requirements of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) of 2001, which emphasises that it is unlawful to discriminate in admissions and provision of student services, and demands that reasonable adjustments are made to incorporate students with disabilities.

Many respondents suggested that Widening Participation initiatives were being dealt with more at wider Faculty or Institutional levels, often through university-wide committees on access or student retention, and by university Widening Participation officers. Nonetheless, there are some interesting initiatives being taken at departmental level, and these are briefly described below in relation to recruitment; induction, retention and support; and the curriculum.

Recruitment

A wide variety of strategies is being adopted to encourage applications from students traditionally under-represented in History, and to make university seem a less threatening and alien environment. These include:

- participation in university summer-schools for ‘gifted and talented’ pupils from local schools where participation in higher education is traditionally low;
- provision of day schools, ‘taster’ or ‘focus’ days on historical topics and study skills, allied to an introduction to history for local schools;
- talks by historians as part of university efforts to bring in students from schools in ‘deprived local areas’ to ‘sample’ university;
- advice sessions for sixth-formers and younger students from particular local schools where the department has a contact;
- visits to local schools by history tutors to talk about studying history or provide ‘masterclasses’ with pre-GCSE school students defined as ‘gifted and talented’;

- compacts with local schools flagging up suitable applicants and guaranteeing an interview;
- reduced entry requirements for non-standard entrants: lower A-level points scores or accreditation of prior learning in assessing applications;
- a policy of interviewing all non-traditional applicants;
- collaboration with university Continuing Education departments who run programmes in adult and further education, for example on local history;
- meetings with representatives of local FE colleges, and preferential treatment for those on relevant Access courses;
- collaboration with local FE colleges to set up Access courses;
- provision of 'flexible' part-time degrees or evening courses on history degrees, or as part of a humanities degree with a strong contribution from history;
- franchise arrangements with local colleges who teach the first-year of a degree programme;
- provision of Diplomas in Higher Education which take students from diverse backgrounds and which, if they complete year one successfully, allows them to transfer into year two of a history degree, or into year three if they complete the diploma.

Overall, there seems to be a growing professionalism in the recruitment process, assisted in some cases by the appointment of designated departmental officers for Widening Participation issues. An appreciation of the need to establish positive links with (mostly local) schools seems to be growing, and departments are increasingly keen to have a schools and colleges liaison officer or an 'outreach' officer who is available to answer queries and ensure that publicity complies with government legislation and is as informative as possible on issues such as delivery, timetabling and student support. One department reported a Faculty initiative to recruit a principal lecturer for Widening Participation. Greater efforts are also being made generally to link to FE, though the true extent of HE in FE in History remains unclear.

Induction, retention and support

Respondents noted a strong desire to treat those students from under-represented groups in the same way as traditional students. They made the point that the transition to university is a major step for *all* students. As one commented:

We have not discerned a "retention" problem associated with WP, although it is certainly clear that many students are finding financial problems, and the associated pressures of balancing work and study, are leading to greater numbers of withdrawals and interruptions. We seek to address these individually as helpfully as we can, and we are also trying to develop easy-access sources of information for students who are having problems, but we would not wish to distinguish a group of WP students for specific support, not least because we do not think they would want to be singled out as "different".

The provision of information, especially during the first semester, is clearly important, and this is provided in a variety of ways. As well as the traditional handbooks, providing course advice and sources of departmental and institutional study and personal support, an increasing number of departments places information on the Web. Most departments recognise the importance of personal contact and

support during induction, and meetings with personal tutors who explain the system and the meaning of seminars and lectures in history, and provide opportunities for students to ask questions. Indeed, strong personal tutor schemes are particularly important to student retention, as are clear availability times or 'office hours' when students can see their academic tutors. A few departments also arrange 'exit interviews' with those who do withdraw, as a means of identifying aspects of the student experience that need to be addressed.

Nonetheless, whilst the mainstreaming of non-traditional students into the student population as a whole is typical in History, students are now routinely asked to declare any disability at the start of their course so that individual help can be provided. So too, student 'buddy' schemes with students from similar backgrounds are used to help students to acclimatise to their new environment. Such student mentoring schemes seem particularly appropriate in a context of Widening Participation. One department noted that they had appointed a retention officer 'who monitors attendance and contacts students who seem to be in difficulties - over and above the normal processes of personal tutoring'. There are also increasingly tutors who act as the disability officer in a department.

In general, support is commonly provided in association with university-wide initiatives such as Learning Support Units, Student Services Support Centres, counselling and careers services, and staff handbooks are often used to inform lecturers about these.

Curricular matters

Teaching is considered a key aspect of Widening Participation strategies. Strategies capable of addressing those traditionally under-represented in university history are also, it is recognised, helpful in encouraging standard entry students to engage more actively with learning in the subject. Indeed, history tutors often comment that those with high A-level scores often seem lacking in historical knowledge, awareness of historiography and competence in the basic historical thinking skills required of advanced study in the subject when they arrive at university. Similarly, employment of a range of teaching and assessment strategies, with an emphasis upon student-centred, active learning methods, can help to address the needs of all students, as was underlined in the History Benchmark Statement.

Nonetheless the Widening Participation agenda has boosted activity in several areas:

- *Delivery of study skills support*, especially in the first year. This might be generic (as in study skills handouts or writing workshops), but increasingly there have been greater efforts to integrate learning and study skills into the subject matter of history itself, whether a substantive period of history or historiography or history theory (see www.hca.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/TDG/reports/foyster). These are delivered both traditionally and, in a few cases, in web-based modules.
- *Employability*. The explicit teaching and assessment of transferable skills is now ubiquitous in the subject, further reinforced by the History Benchmark Statement (2000). Increasing numbers of history departments are going further, and introducing work-based learning with work-placements of various types. Career management modules are also becoming more common, emphasising that

Widening Participation involves the need to address not merely recruitment and retention, but also exit and employment.

- *Personal development planning*. From 2005 this will be compulsory, and some departments, often following institutional leads, have incorporated PDP into their curriculum using record sheets tied to individual modules or for meetings with personal tutors, in order to increase students' reflection on their studies and their personal development, and to allow them to discuss issues more easily with personal tutors.
- *Web-based or distance learning modules*, often using virtual learning environments such as WebCT or Blackboard which provide a wide range of materials that can be accessed from outside the university, and thus more flexible provision.

In recent years, curriculum content has also diversified. There have been notable efforts in departments to extend the history curriculum beyond a Western European focus and to include the history of sub-groups and minority cultures. The growth of oral and community history courses also provides attractive options for some non-traditional students and can help to exploit students' experiences and knowledge.

Conclusion

Clearly, departmental needs vary according to the particular mix of students recruited, and it is clear that those departments that are experiencing more difficulty recruiting students to their degree programmes are making the most concerted efforts in the widening participation area. Most history departments, however, are supportive of policies that make the study of history more inclusive and are keen to create admissions policies and support provide and teaching strategies that foster inclusivity.

This does not mean special treatment or a 'dumbing down' of the curriculum. The survey underlines the view that it is particularly important to identify the needs of students from under-represented groups, whilst helping them to integrate with more traditional students. Strategies of benefit to students in a context of Widening Participation can help all students to become more confident as historians and learners, minimise their transition to university and maximise their chances of finding rewarding employment.

Keys to success include identifying potential students early and supporting them, from pre-entry to graduation, in a way that mainstreams them yet recognises their needs. This includes providing flexible, varied and interesting curricula and student-centred teaching and assessment methods, with appropriate levels of challenge and support, and ensuring that strong support is available for students in the transition to university and for those in difficulty, and that staff and students know where it is provided. Above all, perhaps, the key, as in all good teaching, is the creation of a context in which students of all types and backgrounds feel recognised and supported.

Resources

The Subject Centre has a number of resources to support initiatives in widening participation. These include bibliographical references and links to recent initiatives and government publications. A good short introduction with examples of practice from several disciplines and institutions is the free HEFCE guide *Successful Student Diversity* (November 2002/48).

The Subject centre has also established a History Employability Network coordinated by Dr Pauline Elkes at Staffordshire University, covering employability and many related issues. Pauline would welcome information on initiatives and relevant materials (contact p.elkes@staffs.ac.uk).

The Subject Centre would also like to build up a collection of case studies of personal or departmental initiatives in Widening Participation in each of its three subjects to help colleagues to respond effectively to this important issue. If you would like to contribute ideas, experiences, materials or links to its website or discuss the issues raised here, please contact the Subject Centre Manager or the Subject Directors for History, Classics or Archaeology.

