Supporting Widening Participation students that started university during the pandemic

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Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted higher education. We developed this guidance document to explore how Widening Participation (WP) students – dealt with pandemic-related restrictions and how the university can continue to support them in their studies. We believe our findings are applicable across a range of contexts, and that by examining the themes below, creating a local steering group, and undertaking a staff consultation, significant positive changes to the experience of WP students can be made.

Major themes

We undertook a series of semi-structured interviews with WP students and triangulated the results through staff consultation. From this we derived a number of major themes, which are:

Finding connections – Student participants discussed the challenges of "fitting in" at the beginning of their course. Making judgement about which peers might be best suited in terms of forming friendships was predominantly based on initial physical appearances. Some participants expressed a preference to develop friendships with "those who are like me", in terms of gender, skin colour, or age group. For some, this was an organic process, some peers were known before the beginning of the course, either from secondary education or from halls of residence, and therefore friendships were able to be formed early on. For some Scottish home students and international students who did not know any of their peers beforehand, approaching others was more challenging. This was made significantly more difficult when all teaching was online, as students were less able to make such judgements and were more hesitant to approach other students individually through video call. When face-to-face teaching resumed, participants felt they had to make a concerted effort to approach already established peer groups, which caused them to feel nervous that they might not be welcomed or fit in. For some participants, this led them to develop a mindset of 'going it alone' and revising independently with very little support in terms of peer networks.

Whilst there was mention of induction days during Freshers week, set up in advance of the programmes beginning, some participants chose not to attend. These reasons included concerns about being in an environment where alcohol was served and age-related differences.

It's all so new – All of the student participant accounts gave mention to how the structure of the MBChB and BVM&S programmes differ significantly to how they were taught during secondary school education. Participants within both the MBChB and BVM&S programmes were generally surprised by the vast quantity of lecture material in the first year of each programme, and it took time to adapt and establish a study routine which worked for them. For some participants they continued the same methods of learning and revising which they used in secondary school for their first year at university, admitting that these methods proved unsuccessful when it came to summative assessment as they had not accessed learning material out-with that which was taught in the lectures. To the contrary, others had concerns about intended learning outcomes (ILO's) and their study style from the beginning of their first year, and aimed to learn about each topic in depth, beyond that which was expected of them. For some this led to unhealthy coping mechanisms and isolation from friends and family due to exhaustion.

Fitting in to an existing university structure – During the interviews, when asked what 'fairness' means to the participants, accounts generally reflected perceptions that whilst the university should provide equitable treatment to all students and be non-discriminatory, that students themselves have an obligation to meet the existing requirements of the university in terms of professionalism and meeting the set standards. Some participants expressed a feeling of detachment from the university.

Getting on with it and flying under the radar - Finding a balance between seeking support without being judged as "not having what it takes" to be a doctor or vet' was challenging for participants even when staff from both schools were described as 'friendly', 'welcoming' and 'helpful'. For this reason, most admitted that they preferred not to seek guidance from staff and instead would turn to peers and textbooks for academic and pastoral support. Some participants expressed concern that should they admit academic difficulty to their tutors, that they would be reported to a governing body. Therefore, being an independent learner and passing each examination to meet the set standards whilst remaining somewhat anonymous throughout the programme, was viewed more favourably than openly requesting additional guidance.

Financial concerns – Throughout the interviews, financial concerns were mentioned directly only by a small number of participants. Participants were asked about how they spend their time out-with of university, and whether they were able to find time to socialise and work part-time. For those participants who had, or were looking for part-time employment, having to pay university tuition fees as well as living costs was challenging.

Challenges

The financial challenges experienced by WP students directly impacted their ability to participate in the study. This may have a "magnifying" effect whereby the WP students struggling the most have the least time to support university efforts to improve the WP-learning environment.

Furthermore, there is considerable confusion regarding WP status. Many students who contacted us considered themselves to be WP but did not meet the criteria. Some students who met the criteria tended to minimise the challenges experienced even when they were clearly in significant difficulty.

Student-led Widening Participation Group

Edinburgh Medical School has established a a student-led WP group. This committee meets formally once a semester and is given active staff support. Besides this, ad hoc meeting occur where necessary, and members are connected via a WhatsApp group when rapid responses are required. Students discuss the impact of changes to the curriculum, how WP students find teaching and assessment, and how to best implement educational innovations and new projects. In particular, the group guides the medical school in ensuring the potential challenges faced by WP students (including those identified thematically above) can be mitigated.

Recognising that individual interviews alone might not yield a discussion of financial matters, our group triangulated the research with addition methods of data collection. A student-led group set up to support students from a WP background, were approached to informally discuss issues that WP students face. In contrast to the data provided by the interviews, students' anecdotes show that financial constraints are a significant challenge for WP students from all year groups.

This is an example of co-creation in higher education. Rather than implementing change and receiving feedback from students, students participate in the development process from the very beginning.

Triangulating with staff

Some students are difficult to reach: these include those in significant financial distress, those with caring responsibilities, and those on a leave of absence or in the process of discontinuation. We consulted with staff involved in academic and pastoral care to triangulate the themes found above. This has helped validate our themes and so made sure that our guidance and recommendations are appropriate for all WP students.

The most prominent theme from discussions with staff was that of students having difficulty "fitting in" or having "a sense of not belonging". Mention was given of previously noticed patterns in

attainment data and attendance data, whereby students who did not live in Edinburgh, were in some instances seen to have poorer attendance rates.

Policy Outcomes

Our work has been fed back into school committees (including the Student-led Widening Participation Group), and informs the design of the curriculum, our approach to offering funding for students, and appeals processes.