

Socioeconomic and Marital Status Focus Group Wednesday 17th March

The discussion concentrated on socioeconomic factors.

Slides were shown highlighting the vast difference in numbers of students in Materials from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The representation of people from lower POLAR4 and IMD quintiles is slightly higher on our MSE courses than on our FBT courses.

Widening Participation and Outreach

We only have limited data available at the moment, which is likely only for UK Students. The top POLAR4 and IMD quintile is vastly overrepresented, and the drop-off is rapid as you move through the lower quintiles. This indicates we should aim to increase the representation of people from all of the lower quintiles, not just the bottom one. We need details of which areas are the most deprived and then have a strategy to target people from those areas.

The Post-92 universities are doing a better job at recruiting from lower income areas. They may be seen as more accessible/less exclusive and snobby, and more vocational.

Tuition fees are a big barrier to entry to students from poorer backgrounds, as well as accommodation costs. Specifically targeting students from Greater Manchester may be beneficial, as living at home can help significantly with living costs. In EU countries, people often go to their local university. We should emphasise to local students that we are one of their local universities. If we do attract commuter students, we need to be able to support them as they have different needs. One way to make the university more accessible/affordable could be to offer distance learning, using the expertise we have developed during the pandemic.

We need to recognise the financial barriers facing WP students and look at strategies the university could implement to mitigate some of them. This could tie in quite nicely to the action for asking WP students already here what barriers they faced when coming here, and indeed what barriers they are facing now they are here.

We also spoke about the advantages and disadvantages of access courses which could improve representation of people from lower POLAR4 and IMD quintiles.

The bad press UoM received over the last summer due to the erection of fences, and the racial profiling of a student by security staff at our Fallowfield halls of residence, has made the job of attracting students more difficult and the University needs to take action to turn this around.

ACTION: Determine the POLAR4 and IMD Quintiles of each region in Manchester, and build a plan for our WP/Outreach activities to target the lower quintiles.

ACTION: Press UoM to implement a target for the number of privately educated UK students on our courses, that is consistent with the national ratio of private:state education student numbers.

It is not clear how effective the current approach to outreach is (for example, one-off talks to groups at large numbers of schools), and there is concern that these activities could just be for show. A better approach may be to engage repeatedly with the same schools and to mentor individual students (Nuffield Studentships are an excellent mechanism to facilitate this). To determine the effects of our current outreach strategy, it would be useful to look at the statistics over the last few years. Has there been an improvement in representation of people from the lower POLAR4 and IMD quintiles over that period? If there hasn't been much of a change, we will need to take a different approach.

ACTION: Investigate how the representation of people from different socioeconomic backgrounds has changed over the last ten years. If there hasn't been a significant change, we will need to review the types of outreach activities we undertake.

Representation of diverse groups within our staff is crucial to attract a diverse range of students.

ACTION: Investigate how other Russell Group Universities are finding ways to change perceptions and to increase the diversity of their staff.

Statistics show that approximately 21% of UoM students went to private school, whereas the national figure is 7%. We should aim to reflect this. There should be more of a focus on potential, and less on current grades. Interviewers need to be trained to identify potential rather than assessing factors such as e.g. how many popular science books the student has read, which may be measuring privilege more than potential ability. Some schools provide much better coaching for interviews than others. One way to balance this out would be to send the students the questions they will be asked at interviews beforehand.

ACTION: Standardise UG and PG interview questions and distribute them to applicants prior to their interview.

The addition of interview training could include training for staff to highlight our own biases in terms of behavioural expectations of students in interviews.

ACTION: Include interview training as part of our outreach activities.

ACTION: Ask WP students who are already here what barriers they had to overcome to get here. We could link with Stellify to increase the number of students who take part.

It is not clear whether A-level grades accurately capture ability and potential – for example, arguably, achieving a B at a lower ranked state school is more impressive than achieving an A at a top private school.

ACTION: Investigate correlations between entry grades and final degree classifications for students from different backgrounds (POLAR4 quintiles, IMD quintiles and private school vs state school). This information could be used to tailor future grade offers.

It is important to discuss aspects of money and affordability with potential students on outreach visits and share case studies about people from similar backgrounds.

ACTION: Include details/links of what schemes are available to help with finance on pages advertising courses and in outreach material.

ACTION: Work with current students to develop case studies (perhaps a short video) that can be shared with potential students on outreach visits.