
Widening participation: how do we measure up?



Tracey Stanley
Head of Planning and
Resources,
JB Morrell Library,
University of York
Tel: 01904 433868
E-mail: tss502@york.ac.uk

In common with most other universities, the University of York is committed to widening participation in higher education. The university participates in a broad range of local, regional and national widening-participation initiatives, which are intended to raise aspirations and attainment levels among young people from neighbourhoods with historically low participation in higher education. The university has a widening participation strategy, which is available on our website.¹

University libraries have generally been proactive in engaging with widening-participation initiatives at the institutional level. This article identifies some of the widening-participation developments that have taken place in libraries and explores how libraries can contribute to helping to break down some of the perceived barriers to higher education.

HOW ARE LIBRARIES CONTRIBUTING?

Feedback from university libraries indicates that the involvement of the library in a widening-participation initiative can assist in helping to break down perceived barriers to higher education. Libraries can often present a 'friendly' face of the university – especially where school pupils (and their parents) are given the opportunity to explore the collections, experiment with online resources and handle interesting artefacts, such as archival materials.

A survey of activities in this area revealed a wealth of initiatives currently under way in university libraries.² Some institutions offer reference access for all secondary schools in the local

area, or for sixth-formers.³ Visits can be formal – directly arranged with local teachers and with participation from library staff, who might offer tours, presentations and other activities – or informal, where school pupils can just turn up and use the collections. Frequent-user day passes might be issued to regular users of the library. There may be some restrictions placed around access – for example, some institutions may only allow reference access at certain times of the day, or may restrict access during exam periods.⁴

At the **University of York**, we have been running structured sessions for some local sixth forms for a number of years. These are arranged directly with a teacher, and usually take place during the university summer vacation, or towards the end of the summer term, when exams are drawing to a close. The sessions usually include a presentation from an academic liaison librarian, a tour of the library and the opportunity to browse the collections and make photocopies. In some cases we have also offered a structured exercise that aims to introduce pupils to different aspects of the library collections in an interesting and engaging way. Ongoing reference access is then available for pupils who want to come back and use the collections in their own time. Feedback from the schools involved has been very positive – the pupils enjoy their visit, are impressed by the range of resources available to them and are generally enthused by the experience. However, we have little evidence to show whether they come back to use the facilities on an ongoing basis, or that the experience has any longer-term impact on their later decisions to apply for university courses.

Our engagement with local schools so far has largely been on an ad hoc basis – the schools have tended to approach us and we have responded. The visits have not, so far, been linked to any wider strategy for the library service, or to wider university initiatives.

Initiatives often tend to be most successful when they are embedded into the wider programmes that take place at a university level. In this context, we have worked with the National Excellence Hub for Yorkshire and the Humber, which is based at the University of York.⁵ The 'Young, Gifted and Talented' programme runs an annual summer school for pupils in the region, with a range of activities taking place involving academic departments. The library contributes to this programme through a specific programme on 'learning about health and illness', co-ordinated by our health sciences department. Library activities

have included tours, presentations and literature-searching activities structured around specific topics being covered in the summer school.

The Borthwick Institute for Archives⁶ (part of the overall library service) at York has been closely involved with a number of initiatives with a widening-participation focus. The Borthwick is one of the biggest archive repositories outside London, and it has a wealth of archival materials, with a local and regional focus. As such it tends to be of considerable interest to local schools and teachers, and there is a strong synergy with existing work on community outreach. In 2007, the Borthwick hosted a number of visits from local primary schools. The children spent time with their teachers and an archivist in the archive search rooms, working with a range of documents including census materials from Victorian York.

The Borthwick has also produced a set of web-pages on equality and diversity issues using materials from the archives, which were utilized by local secondary school pupils, who then followed up with a visit to look at original documents.⁷ These materials contain local histories taken from the archival records, plus photographs and scanned images of documents, resulting in a rich resource that is of great interest to local school pupils and their teachers.

The Borthwick also contributes to the National Excellence Hub activities, supporting the history department with sessions on seventeenth-century cause papers and slavery archives, and supporting science departments through providing tours of the conservation unit.

Other institutions have reported a wide range of different types of activities in support of widening participation.

The library at the **University of Huddersfield** has done a lot of work to develop a website aimed at years 7–11 (pupils aged 11–15), which includes a set of online information-skills tutorials. The material is intended to help pupils find books, archival resources and other information on specific subjects (including pointers to the Intute subject gateways and other free electronic resources).⁸ Huddersfield is also a member of the a local scheme called 'Welcome', which is a partnership of libraries and information organisations in the Kirklees area of West Yorkshire, aimed at supporting adult learners and those returning to education.⁹

Edinburgh University Library contributes to a university widening-participation programme called LEAPS,¹⁰ which includes a summer school. Summer-school pupils study two academic subjects, plus taking a compulsory learning skills course. The learning skills course includes the following topics:

- how to use the university library;
- time-management and reflective practice;
- academic writing;
- note-taking and reading;
- referencing and using evidence;
- delivering a successful presentation;
- effective exam preparation.

Pupils are expected to undertake an assignment which covers evidence across these skills. Edinburgh has also been offering an inter-library loan service for local schools.

The John Rylands University Library at the **University of Manchester** has developed a well-established widening-participation programme in support of university initiatives. The university runs a targeted access scheme (TAS), which recruits bright youngsters from deprived areas of the city. The scheme commences with a series of higher education awareness days aimed at different year groups. Year 10 pupils (aged 14) undertake an activity which involves completing a task to gain information on a specific topic from around the university and from the web – for example, using library resources to find information on famous Manchester graduates. Evening tours of the campus are also arranged – and, as part of this, the library offers tours to parents and pupils, including a tour of the special collections. A summer school is also held, and as part of this pupils do a more detailed research project in the library. They produce a poster and give a two-minute presentation on their topic.¹¹

A number of institutions – including Manchester and the University of the West of England – have made efforts to provide access to electronic resources, where licence agreements permit this. This can be quite complex, as it involves a detailed study of the various e-resource licences to identify which services permit access by walk-in users, and the setting up of systems to control access.

The library at the **University of the West of England** is part of a schools-link project which is developing mentoring arrangements between black and minority ethnic children and students from similar backgrounds. As part of the pro-

gramme, the pupils visit the library and explore the activities going on within the building. This is intended to stimulate discussion on what it means to be a student and what it must be like, as well as questions about the library and studying. The pupils are also introduced to the Intute Virtual Training Suite,¹² and encouraged to think about tips and techniques for finding information. Library staff also work closely with school librarians, and go into local schools to work with pupils on information-searching strategies.¹³

A wide range of other approaches at different institutions have been reported, including Saturday schools in the summer holidays, use of student mentors to support library and other staff, remote training in information literacy and seminars for school librarians.¹⁴

In addition, some 90 per cent of university libraries in England have now registered with the INSPIRE partnership, contributing to widening participation through allowing free reference access to their print resources for all. The INSPIRE partnership also supports collaboration between the education and public library sectors to encourage and support lifelong learning.¹⁵

Perhaps the most interesting approach comes from the university library at the **University of Wolverhampton**, who arrange an annual 18-hour 'sleepover' in the library for 12–14-year-olds from the region.¹⁶ Pupils spend a night in the library, with their teachers and some library staff. During this time, they use the library space to get involved in a variety of activities, including producing music and artwork, working on library computers to search for relevant information, making a radio broadcast and putting together a photography exhibition. The pupils sleep in the library (between the shelves!), and food and drink are provided. The following morning, pupils give a presentation on their activities and experiences to their teachers and parents. The intention is to break down the barriers to higher education, by encouraging schoolchildren to see the university as a non-threatening and friendly environment, where they can have fun as well as doing some learning. The library provides an ideal venue for this to take place as the pupils have access to a wealth of resources in comfortable and welcoming surroundings that are conducive to group and individual study.

ARE WE HAVING AN IMPACT?

Surprisingly little has been written so far on the actual impact of the involvement of libraries in widening participation activities. It is very difficult to track the extent to which widening-participation activities really do make a difference.

In 2006, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) produced a report on the impact of widening-participation activities. This indicated that there was considerable evidence that widening-participation initiatives have an impact on learners' aspirations and interest in entering higher education, and also on parents' attitudes to higher education. However, there is little research that has been done so far on whether these aspirations are then translated into improved long-term attainment, although a number of longitudinal studies on this are now taking place.¹⁷

The University of the West of England has undertaken some evaluation of its activities with local teachers, who have indicated that their pupils have been helped considerably by having training sessions on information-seeking that have raised their awareness of the need to critically evaluate information sources and identify quality information. Teachers felt that this had both raised attainment levels and also given the pupils a good grounding for when they arrive at university, thus indirectly supporting student retention in the longer term.¹⁸

Other libraries have also attempted to track the impact of their involvement in widening-participation initiatives. For example, the University of Huddersfield tracks the correlation between library cards issued to local schoolchildren and later applications to the university. Manchester has attempted to undertake some formal evaluation through analysing data from access-control systems to identify regular use of the library by local school pupils. This is also tracked to applications to the university via a university widening-participation database.¹⁹ One difficulty with this approach is that pupils may not always apply to the local university that they visited during a widening-participation initiative, so an analysis of local applications will not give the true picture of the overall impact; other methods, including longitudinal studies, will be required.

WHAT NEXT?

At York, we plan to further develop our widening-participation activities as a coherent strategy, working much more closely with the university to embed our activities within institutional programmes. Key activities for the future include the proposed development of a learning skills module for local schools, extending the reference-access scheme, a possible joint 'open day' with the Borthwick Institute and introducing walk-in access to electronic resources from autumn 2008. We also intend to do more to track the impact of our activities – starting with follow-up discussions with local schoolteachers about the longer-term impact of library visits on their pupils. We'd be interested in exploring options for local collaboration, and in sharing experiences on local and national levels, especially in relation to gathering evidence on impact.

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