

**Case Study Paper Prepared for the Policy Forum on Higher
Education Access and Success in the UK and the USA**

North East England

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*This case study was prepared during a collaborative visit to the region by Dr James Mingle, Executive Director Emeritus of the State Higher Education Executive Officers and Professor Jim Lewis of the University of Durham between 29 June and 3 July 2000. The programme allowed for discussion with representatives from Bishop Auckland College of Further Education, the Further Education Funding Council (Northern Region), Kiaora Hall (a **learnirect** pilot project), ONE NorthEast, Universities for the North East, Ufl, University of Durham and University of Northumbria at Newcastle (UNN).*

Regional Overview

1. The North East of England is the smallest and poorest region in the country. Its population of 2.6 million is largely concentrated in the three industrial conurbations of Tyneside, Wearside and Teesside, but there are also several pockets of former mining villages and extensive rural areas. The GDP per capita of £9,071 is 15 percent below the UK average and the recent loss of the staple industries (like the production of coal, steel, ships and engineering materials) means that the region has some of the most deprived communities in the country. School results are below average; the proportion who stay in education or training after 16 (62%) is the lowest in England, and the proportion of graduates in the labour force (20%) is also at the bottom of the national table.
2. This gloomy overall picture has to be set against some areas of considerable affluence, a number of outstandingly successful firms – ranging from Nissan car manufacturing to the SAGE software company – and substantial further education and higher education sectors. Across the region, over 248,000 students are in further education and 60,000 in higher education. Indeed, the higher education sector has become an important export earner for the region, recruiting students both nationally and internationally, so there is a net inflow of nearly 6,000 undergraduates per annum into the region. However, this has little lasting benefit, as only 3,750 graduates altogether enter the regional labour market.

Regional Strategies on Post-compulsory Education

3. There is no strategic decision-making capacity for post-compulsory education and training at regional level. The major publicly funded agencies – Training & Enterprise Councils (TECs), further education colleges and universities – respond directly to national organisations (though the Further Education Funding Council has a regional office). Initiatives on Widening Participation have thus developed through ‘top-down’ funding and regulation, or the enterprise of particular institutions. It is important to note that the whole national framework has been subject to considerable change of late, most notably in relation to the creation of a Learning & Skills Council, which will take over the funding and planning of all post-16 learning (except higher education) from April 2001, but also in relation to the introduction of a new curriculum (C2K) for 16-18 year olds in September 2000.

4. There are, however, two strands of regional co-ordination. First, the newly created Regional Development Agency – ONE NorthEast – has adopted a Regional Economic Strategy for the next decade, which includes in its 6 strategic objectives ‘Placing Universities & Colleges at the heart of the region’s economy’. This includes reference to expanding the further education and higher education sectors through Widening Participation initiatives, but it has no specific funding or policies to support it.

5. Secondly, the higher education sector had already responded to the needs of employers by creating a consortium of the 5 campus universities and the Open University, and this was re-launched in 1999 as Universities for the North East. Although much of its activity relates to technology transfer, it has acted as the vehicle for a collaborative approach to Widening Participation, winning funding from the HEFCE for some evaluative studies in 1999 and then a three-year programme worth £1,713,000 for 2000-02. This allows both collective research on the region’s needs and sufficient additional funding to allow individual institutions to address issues of raising aspirations in schoolchildren, pre-entry support, curriculum development and student retention – either alone or in partnership. A smaller amount of funding (£457,000) for 2000 has been made available to develop collaborative local projects between further education colleges and higher education institutions in the 4 sub-regions. In both cases, the emphasis on institutions working through partnerships has been reinforced by other changes in the ways that additional funding is obtained since the Labour government was elected in 1997.

Institutional Strategies for Access

6. There is a long tradition of the involvement of the region’s universities and colleges in meeting the needs of their local communities. The development of technical and vocational courses to support industrial development can be traced back over almost two centuries, and the engagement in adult education (alongside religious and union organisations) goes back to the 1850s. However, there are important perceived differences locally between the two ‘old’ Universities – Durham and Newcastle – and the three ‘new’ Universities – Northumbria, Sunderland & Teesside – in terms of the vocational content of their curricula, their entry requirements and their national standing with employers. The publication of HEFCE Performance Indicators and compilation of league tables by the national press have contributed to these perceptions.¹ Both Durham and Newcastle have been conscious of the need to take specific measures to broaden their undergraduate intake in terms of school background and ethnicity, while the former polytechnics feel more concerned about improving the retention rates amongst the many non-traditional students that they already admit.

7. All the universities have had a Widening Participation strategy as part of their annual plan since 1999. These have provided a means of formalising a variety of initiatives that may have started several years earlier and accounting for the use of specific funding from the HEFCE (e.g. the 5% premium attached to students from low participation postcodes). In the North East, these strategies all include dedicated programmes for encouraging schoolchildren and college students to consider higher education – some of them

regarded as nationally significant – and a range of community outreach provisionⁱⁱ. The universities' ability to support non-traditional students once they are admitted is currently more variable, as has been their adaptation of the curriculum to meet their flexible time and location requirements. Partly as a result of the success of earlier initiatives, the student services sections that deal with the problems of undergraduates feel that they are always 'fire-fighting' and failing to build long-term, sustainable relationships.

8. The 25 further education colleges have important roles in meeting employer's needs and in widening access. They provide a large number of vocational courses on a part-time basis that attract those already in work and have a strong presence in 'first rung' provision within disadvantaged localities. There is only a limited provision of HEFCE-funded courses in further education colleges (5,000 FTE in 1998-99) and the majority of these are in just 3 'mixed-economy' further education colleges. However, some universities operate through franchise arrangements with colleges (1,200 FTE) and also support access courses that feed into their own provision.

9. A new dimension is emerging with the formal launch in October 2000 of **learndirect**, the provider of on-line learning for the Government's Ufl. This initiative is targeted at workers in small enterprises and deprived communities, with a hierarchy of learning centres and access points offering vocational and basic skill qualifications. This has particular significance for the region, as the past year of **learndirect** pilot work has been preceded by two projects – Ufl and Learning North East – that trailed many of the approaches now adopted by the national scheme. The potential of this initiative to widen participation in higher education was thus included in the programme of the study visit.

Institutional Best Practice in Response to the Access Agenda

10. Raising Aspirations. The two largest schemes for encouraging pupils at schools without a tradition of progression into further education or higher education are very similar. They are both collaborative between universities – 'Students into Schools' between Newcastle and Northumbria, and 'Student Ambassadors' between Durham and Teesside – and involve current undergraduates acting as mentors to pupils in Years 9 or 10 (i.e. aged 14 or 15). The activities undertaken range from students acting as classroom assistants to campus visits, and feedback from participating children is overwhelmingly positive. Though each university has its own system, the students who volunteer for this work also benefit by acquiring course credits, a specific mentoring certificate or recognition in terms of Key Skills programmes. The University of Sunderland operates a more decentralised system for supporting local schools, and Durham has just introduced a less intensive variant (STARS) as a scheme that takes account of the rural nature of Co Durham. There is also the Meteor scheme run by the University of Teesside, which concentrates on Year 6 pupils in 6 nearby primary schools and should lead on to a programme of regular contact with the university.

11. Pre-entry Guidance. Providing realistic and appropriate advice to potential students – of any age – who have no access to the experience of higher education in their family or neighbourhood is a key component of Widening Participation strategies. Its simplest form

in the region is the use of Aiming at a College Education (ACE) Day, whereby Year 11 pupils spend time in structured activity on a campus, and issues like the choice of course and student finance are introduced. The University of Sunderland has a more elaborate scheme – SUPA – which covers personal career plans and a series of open learning workbooks for participants. For mature students, this sort of information is normally provided as part of taster courses that can be offered on campus or in community locations. Both sets of potential students find this guidance essential in the face of the increasing complexity of qualifications systems.

12. Dialogue with Schools. Both of the above activities involve partnership between higher education and schools or colleges, but best practice should also include discussion between practitioners. UNN illustrates this in its involvement in Progression 2000+ which brings together admissions tutors and pupil advisors in key areas (like business, information technology, tourism) to review changes in the school/college curriculum and in the expectations of universities. Although started in response to the introduction of General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), these groups have been continued to establish the transparency necessary for Curriculum 2000 (C2K) to succeed.

13. Access & Foundation Courses. It would be difficult to pick out any one difference between the arrangements in Kentucky and the North East as the most significant, but a persistent theme in interviews was the contrast over admissions policies. For those without the appropriate grades at A-level/GNVQ, North East universities require the completion of a one-year access or foundation courseⁱⁱⁱ. These provide a mix of study skills, confidence building and subject specific knowledge that is intended to remove the need for remedial modules during the degree programme. One of the best examples comes from UNN's Higher Education Foundation Course (HEFC) which started in 1981. It currently has 1,200 enrollments a year, spread across 14 further education colleges and community schools, and has evolved from an A-level curriculum for adults into its own standard unitised, curriculum with personal tutors to support core skills. Since 300 applicants a year progress to UNN, this might seem like a marketing tool, but it is a well-respected qualification for entry into any of the region's universities and is an exemplar of the benefits of collaboration between further education and higher education. There are also small-scale versions of this approach in Summer Colleges (such as that run by Teesside and its further education partners).

14. Curriculum Changes. This aspect of Widening Participation was not that evident in the North East. While it was true that all institutions had an eye on the market opportunities presented by local demand (e.g. for programmes related to sport), there has been relatively little change in terms of content or delivery. Discussions with local businesses about their specific needs are relatively rare. In particular, there is a marked contrast between further education, where the vast majority of students study part-time, and higher education, where there is limited evening or weekend provision and the proportion of part-time students is below the national average. Likewise there is a clear difference in terms of location of provision, with a further education college like Bishop Auckland responding to a dispersed and deprived population by providing opportunities in

local shopping centres and village halls, while higher education remains very campus-bound. Looking ahead, there are some signs of higher education interest in on-line learning (including parts of the HEFC for rural areas) as a source of flexibility, but the early impressions of **learnirect** are that it will not help to widen participation in higher education without much stronger learner support structures.

15. Student Support. All students need some structured non-academic support, but this is particularly true for non-traditional students who cannot access the information any other way. Increasingly, further education and higher education institutions are recognising the interrelated nature of the individual problems that members of this group face (e.g. financial problems, drug abuse and domestic violence) by providing an integrated and professional service. Once again, UNN is the best example, as it has brought together into a central location those who deal with welfare, childcare, disability and study skills. They deal with some 2,300 referrals per annum (from 15,000 students). A significant – and growing – demand has come about because of the complexity of student financial arrangements, and the need to make sense of the different streams of financial support that are available to students dependent on the rules for trainee nurses, teachers, linguists, etc. It is almost certainly the case that these kinds of services have not grown in line with the region's increase in non-traditional students, which means that staff are overstretched and have difficulty in deciding how much to prioritise the Widening Participation cohorts over their original clients.

Assessment

16. Projects rather than Strategy. There can be no doubting the energy, money and resourcefulness that is being invested in Widening Participation in this region. Some of the schemes summarised above are examples to the rest of the country. However, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that a wide range of short-term projects, funded from a variety of sources with their own requirements, does not add up to a strategy – either for an institution or the region. This is as true of the cocktail of FEFC, regeneration and European funding that are supporting 'lifestyle' learning opportunities for a year in the villages of Co Durham as it is of HEFCE premiums for students from low participation postcodes in the main cities.

17. Misplaced Investments. Following on from the previous observation, we conclude that there is probably misplaced investment. In a system that is increasingly funding-driven, the means come to dominate the ends. In the case of a further education college, it may be easier to build a new outreach centre in the hope of attracting new learners than to refurbish old premises that are overstretched. For higher education, it could be more attractive to run a photogenic summer school than put extra staff into processing access funds.

18. Institutions Tackling Social Problems. A more diverse student body is placing a new strain on further education and higher education institutions. Financial problems apart, the complexity of student needs requires a new range of skills. Staff now need to be able to address a range of issues like hard drug abuse, marital breakdown, alcohol

dependency, previous criminality and malnourishment. We found colleges and universities willing to take on these challenges, so long as they were not left alone in dealing with the issues and judged on the basis of crude indicators of retention.

19. Fear of Failure. This issue is another of the 'great divides' between Kentucky and the North East, although not specific to the region. So much of the English education & training system works on the basis of failing people at successive stages that further education and higher education are seen in the same light. This does not encourage people to take the risk in personal terms, but the disincentive is even clearer in financial terms as higher education student support is limited to 3-4 years. This system needs review to make it possible to 'fail' at one point but re-enter later,

20. Aversion to Loans. A common theme of our interviews was the problems that had been created by the presentation of the Labour policy on student loans. Part of this related to the new levels of uncertainty about exactly how a potential student would fare in relation to various state benefits (e.g. a spouse's disability payment, Council Tax rebate), and some related to the unfairness of including a parent's or partner's income in the calculation of eligibility. However, the major issue was simply the introduction of the term 'loan' as a deterrent to people who have lived so far on 'paying my way' on a weekly basis. If students from low-income backgrounds do end up having to make a financial contribution, it needs to be called a 'fee' or a 'tax deduction' – anything apart from a loan.

21. Real Returns on Learning. Our final observation is that encouraging an individual to progress through further education and higher education in the hope of a well-paid graduate job within the region is currently not justified. If non-traditional students are more tied to the locality in terms of job search, the returns on £10,000 of loan may not seem that great if the main opportunities pay £130 a week. Nor can the region expect to keep more of the influx of undergraduates until the quality of jobs for graduates rises significantly.

Conclusion

22. There is a great deal of innovative and well-founded work on Widening Participation within the region (and certainly far more than can be covered in this summary). This is reflected in the very high levels of postcode premium payment from HEFCE and its additional support from Special Funding. Some of this is worth careful consideration by American policy makers but they – and others – need to reflect on the balance of advantages in increasing access while there are no suitable jobs in the locality.

End Notes

ⁱ There is also overt political pressure which manifested itself during the study tour in the aftermath of the Laura Spence case (a local schoolgirl who had failed to secure a place at Oxford but obtained one at Harvard).

ⁱⁱ Baxter, A. & L. Hunt; Widening Participation to Higher Education in the North East. Universities for the North East, 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ These are not to be confused with the plans to introduce Foundation Degrees in 2001.