Embedding social mobility within the curriculum: 'Widening Participation' in the School of Law

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Other contributors: Lorna Brown (Head of School Administration); Thomas Heraghty (Assessment Administrator)

Summary
Inclusivity, access and opportunity are guiding principles of Glasgow’s Learning and Teaching strategy. We aim to attract the best talent, irrespective of background, and embed opportunities within the curriculum for students to develop attributes key to success in the global employment market. Data suggests, however, that our students from more deprived socioeconomic backgrounds achieve lower grades than their classmates, and withdraw from study with greater frequency. This project aims to address that problem by obtaining evidence to explain why this attainment gap exists, then using it to develop an innovative approach to supporting ‘widening participation’ (WP) students in undergraduate programmes.

The project focuses on the School of Law. It proposes a PGR student-led investigation into the experiences of WP law students. Analysis of assessment data, semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire will be used to gather evidence on why barriers to success persist within the law curriculum. This evidence will form the basis of recommendations for curriculum change and targeted support, developed collaboratively with students and key staff. The primary outcome will be implementation of the recommendations in the School in 2015/16, providing a good practice model applicable University-wide.

The project sits within the Learning and Teaching Development Fund priority theme of embedding student mobility within the curriculum, and addresses priority areas of developing and supporting the curriculum, and enhancing student retention.

Aims and Outcomes
The project aims to create an evidence base on which to develop recommendations for enhancing the attainment of WP students. That evidence base will include:

- Quantitative data on WP student grades in comparison with non-WP student grades across the four years of the UG law degree;
- Qualitative data on WP student expectations prior to entry and experiences during the degree, including factors leading to the decision to suspend studies where appropriate;
- Analysis of the data and academic literature to identify: (i) at what stage in the degree retention and/or attainment gaps arise; (ii) the challenges which give rise to the existence of these gaps; (iii) potential solutions.

The primary outcome of the project will be the development of recommendations to enhance the success of WP students, addressing particular obstacles revealed by the research. The recommendations will focus on: (i) the curriculum, particularly delivery of teaching and assessment mechanisms, to see where barriers could be dismantled without compromising academic standards, for example through better use of new technology to facilitate learning by students who may find it difficult to attend or to work in a traditional classroom environment; (ii) identifying areas where targeted support at particular times of year (eg induction, exams) or around particular attributes (eg resilience) may be of particular benefit to WP students. Implementation of these recommendations

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1 The definition of this term used by the University widening participation team is employed here to cover students from MD20 and MD40 postcodes, students who attended a school with a low rate of progression into higher education, entrants from Further Education Colleges, who have spent time in care, or who are in receipt of EMA, adult returners to education, students who are the first in the family to enter Higher Education, and students with refugee or asylum seeker status.
will benefit the WP law student cohort from October 2015 onwards, and will provide a good practice model for supporting WP students elsewhere in the University.

**Previous Work**

University strategy in respect of WP student recruitment has been very successful, as evidenced by the Enhancement-led Institutional Review [case study on Widening Access](#). The School of Law has shared in this success, with Planning Office data showing that the population of law students from the 40% most deprived postcodes in Scotland has risen from 12.1% of the Scottish-domiciled law cohort in 2008 to 17% in 2013.

To consolidate this success in recruitment, it is necessary to focus on the experience of WP students after they have achieved a place at University. Available data on progression from first year to second year shows a retention gap between WP and non-WP law students. Recent figures released by Planning Office show that, although law student progression rates as a whole are amongst the highest in the University, WP rates tend to lag behind the overall law averages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Law rate overall</th>
<th>MD0-20 rate</th>
<th>MD20-40 rate</th>
<th>MD0-40 rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>82.4%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>86.7%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>89.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
<td>97.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>95.7%</td>
<td>89.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No data is presently available on progression into later years. There is also no available data in relation to attainment. However, in a recent review of WP activity within the School, advising staff working with the WP cohort reported anecdotally that a higher percentage of WP students struggled to achieve passing grades, particularly during the first two years of the degree.

Tinto (2008) argues that access without support is not opportunity. The project will draw on literature on the need to support the student body as a whole, including both theoretical work (Bamber & Tett 2001, Yorke & Longden 1994) and practical guidance (the HEA’s *What works? Student retention and success* project) on providing support within and beyond the curriculum. Nicholl & Sutton (2001) argue that localised investigation into retention and attrition has the most value given the complex factors which underscore student decision-making around this issue. From this perspective, previous LTDF-funded work on particular Glasgow cohorts within the WP umbrella – “Enhancing engagement of local ‘commuter’ students at induction” (Browitt & Croll, 2012/13) and “Attrition, Retention and Access” (Ferrie, 2009/10, on adult returners to education through the Access programme) – will be used to help design the interview questions and as a starting point for developing our recommendations applicable to the WP cohort as a whole.

**Student engagement**

The primary researcher for the project will be a PGR student. This has three key benefits. First, it removes the risk that students participating in the study will not feel able to express themselves honestly to a member of staff teaching the courses on which they are asked to comment. Reducing this anxiety for the students will enable production of more valuable qualitative data. Secondly, it allows a PGR student to obtain direct experience of project management, with demonstrable development of key graduate attributes including effective communication, resourcefulness and responsibility, and ethical and social awareness. Thirdly, it ensures the student voice is an integral aspect of the project. To this end, we will also seek input from WP students/alumni: (i) WP law graduates, identified by the applicant, will be consulted on the design of the interviews; (ii) an advisory panel of current WP students and alumni will contribute to evaluation of the research data, and development of the recommendations for curriculum enhancement and targeted support. Participation will be voluntary and students/alumni will be free to withdraw at any time.
Methodology
A mixture of qualitative and quantitative methodologies will be employed to gather evidence.

- Admissions and assessment data for each cohort admitted to the law degree from 2010/11 to 2013/14 will be analysed to: (i) identify WP students via MyCampus; (ii) compare progression rates for these students against rates for their year group as a whole; (iii) compare grade profiles for these students against profiles for their year group as a whole. This data will show the extent of any attainment gap, and may demonstrate trends in relation to the stage of the degree at which retention and/or attainment gaps open up.

- In the first semester of 2014/15, semi-structured interviews will be undertaken with around 8 WP students and 8 non-WP students in the final year of the law degree to explore their experiences of UG study, including challenges to attainment, and plans post-graduation.

- Also in the first semester, semi-structured interviews will be undertaken with around 8 WP students and 8 non-WP students in the first year of the law degree, focused on their expectations of UG study. In the second semester, these students will be interviewed again to explore how their experience compared with their expectations. Contact will be retained with any students who have suspended study.

- An online questionnaire will be developed based on the findings of the first semester interviews. All WP law students registered at the start of the year will be invited to respond to share their experiences on the degree.

Ethical approval will be sought for the interviews and questionnaire should the project be funded. Participants will be assured of anonymity.

The PGR student will be responsible for recruiting participants, managing the data collection, and analysing the data. The applicant will review the pedagogical literature, and meet regularly with the PGR student to support the progress of the project. When data analysis is complete, the PGR student and applicant will present the findings to an advisory panel comprised of WP students and alumni, key School staff, including the director of UG studies, and relevant University staff (eg from Student Services and the WP team at RIO.) The panel will work to evaluate the data and develop recommendations to enhance the WP experience. The panel will hold its initial meeting in person, with subsequent discussion conducted virtually via a Moodle page administered by the applicant to ensure the maximum opportunity for input from students who may be away from Glasgow at the start of the summer.

Potential Applicability / Transferability
The evidence in relation to WP student expectations and experiences in adjusting to University life will be of use beyond the School of Law context. It is likely to be of particular relevance to colleagues in other professional programmes, though it is anticipated that much material will be of general application throughout the University. The recommendations for curriculum change and targeted support should offer a model of good practice which other Schools can adapt to suit their particular requirements.

In addition to dissemination through publication of interim and final reports through the LTDF website, the intention is to present a paper at the Learning and Teaching Conference 2016. An opportunity will be sought to share the findings directly with colleagues working on WP outreach programmes, along with interested colleagues in other Schools, by way of a half-day workshop. The potential to present the findings of the project at BILETA, the key annual law teachers’ conference, will be explored.

Evaluation
Evaluation of the data by students and staff has been integrated into the methodology of the project, as outlined above. Evaluation of the outcomes of the project will not be possible until the recommendations are implemented in 2015/16. The key indicator of success is likely to be a
reduction in retention and/or attainment gaps between WP and non-WP students. A second indicator of success would be positive changes in the WP student experience following implementation of the strategy. The advisory panel will produce a detailed evaluation plan alongside the recommendations for change, likely to require School monitoring of retention and attainment data through 2015-17, and qualitative assessment of WP student experiences perhaps through focus groups. The design of the evaluation plan will be informed by the reflection of all parties on the evidence gathered during the project and the process of obtaining it, and the School is committed to resourcing this evaluation work in due course.

**Timetable**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July - Aug 14</td>
<td>Write job description and recruit PGR team member; collate existing data on progression rates and grade profiles; develop research instruments; apply for ethical approval; assemble literature for review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept - Dec 14</td>
<td>Analysis of existing data; interviews with first and final year cohorts conducted &amp; transcribed; literature review conducted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan – Mar 15</td>
<td>Analysis of interview data; development and administration of online questionnaire; second interview with first year cohort conducted &amp; transcribed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April – June 15</td>
<td>Analysis of second interview &amp; questionnaire data; recruitment of advisory panel; development of recommendations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 15</td>
<td>Final reflection and preparations to implement in 2015/16</td>
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**Budget**

No funding is requested for UoG staff buyout; the School of Law has agreed to attribute 100 hours in the applicant’s work model allocation to the project, and other staff will contribute in the context of their regular School responsibilities. Salary costs relate to the PGR student only. The consumables budget includes funds for incentives for participation in the research eg Amazon vouchers. The total funding sought is £12,188.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Cost (£)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>McCarthy</td>
<td>100 hours (including employers’ NI &amp; pension costs)</td>
<td>£3,258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PGR Student</td>
<td>43 weeks at 0.25 FTE (grade 6, spine point 27, including employers’ NI &amp; pension costs)</td>
<td>£7,368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipment</td>
<td>Voice recorder with microphone</td>
<td>£180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcribing</td>
<td>48 x 1 hour interviews x £80 per hour transcription cost</td>
<td>£3,840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumables</td>
<td>Paper, printer cartridges etc for PGR student incentives for research participation</td>
<td>£200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>£600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total cost</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>£15,446</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matching funding</td>
<td>Obtained from School re McCarthy</td>
<td>(£3,258)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Funding sought</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>£12,188</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Approval:** Should this application be successful, I give consent for this application to be published on the Learning and Teaching Centre website.

**Signature of Project Leader:** Frankie McCarthy

**References**


9th April 2014

To Learning and Teaching Development Fund Committee,

**Embedding social mobility within the curriculum: 'Widening Participation' in the School of Law**

I am writing to provide unreserved support for Dr Frankie McCarthy's application to the Learning and Teaching Development Fund in respect of the above named project.

When preparing to take on the role of Head of School in July 2013, I identified widening participation as a priority objective for my term 'in office.' The necessary first step in that process was a review of our current WP practice. Dr McCarthy was the member of academic staff most obviously qualified to undertake this task, given her experience teaching on the Access programme and acting as a specialist advisor of studies to WP students. I know that Dr McCarthy is committed to widening access to legal education, and that commitment came across clearly in her approach to conducting the review, which she carried out efficiently and effectively during the first semester this year. She reported back to the School in March with a set of recommendations which received the unanimous support of School staff. One of those recommendations was that funding be sought for a project to develop a model for embedding WP support more fully within the curriculum. I am delighted to see a bid for that funding going forward to the LTDF, and confirm that it has the full support of myself and the School. As noted in the bid, the School will allocate 100 hours of Dr McCarthy's time to the project should it be funded.

I would ask reviewers to note that Dr McCarthy is a hard-working and enthusiastic member of staff who consistently performs beyond the expectations set out in her job description. She is a 'safe pair of hands' who can be counted on to deliver whatever is asked of her. If the project is funded, I have no doubt that she will produce the specified outcomes to a high standard within the 12 month time frame.

Yours faithfully,

Mark Furse  
Professor of Competition Law and Policy  
Head of School  
School of Law  
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