

Collaboration in Widening Participation

Summary

This briefing paper presents key points regarding collaboration in the field of widening participation research and practice. It draws upon REAP's experience as researchers and deliverers of outreach activities, including work with the Cumbria partnership of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP). Here we aim to provide other researchers and practitioners with an insight into some issues associated with collaboration.

What is collaboration?

The term has different meanings depending on context; here we follow Giwa (2008: 80): 'Collaborative approaches within education are defined as the establishment of links between providers and networking within the community to meet the needs of learners in a particular area'.

Widening participation policy

Collaboration has been strongly promoted in recent policy in England and Wales as key to the success of widening participation initiatives. For instance, in their access and participation plan guidance, the Office for Students (2018: 23) state: 'Collaboration between providers and other stakeholders (such as schools, colleges and the third sector) is crucial for sustained engagement with schools and for students to receive high quality, impartial advice and guidance relating to higher education. Collaboration also helps to increase coverage and avoid duplication'.

Collaboration has also been highlighted in evaluation reports; for example, CFE research (2018: 21) state: 'Collaboration across a range of partners helps to enhance expertise, generate fresh ideas and ensure a varied offer of experiences and opportunities for learners'.

Collaborative process

Below we consider the reasons for collaborating, the participants involved and the way collaboration is approached.

Why collaborate?

In the case of NCOP, collaboration aims to improve higher education participation amongst underrepresented groups. However, stakeholders or partners may have different or additional interests and motivations for involvement. For example, community groups and external education providers may look to such initiatives as an income source to ensure their existing activities can be sustained which may result in diversion of funds to meet these ends.

Who is collaborating?

There may be collaboration between institutions (e.g. further and higher education providers, employers) and/or within institutions (e.g. departments and services). This means that while all partners may broadly subscribe to a programme's objectives, there could be tensions; for example, institutions may be competing to recruit students while departments will have other internal targets which may be prioritised over collaborative goals. There may also be shifting contexts such as changes in funders' expectations.

How to collaborate?

There are different models of collaboration. Brown (2001, in Giwa 2008) offers a useful distinction between:

- ad hoc (loose),
- strategic alliances (pool resources but remain autonomous),
- strategic planning (joint provision),
- mergers (one organisation subsumes another).

Benefits and challenges

Collaboration has both advantages and disadvantages, some of the most notable we identified are summarised below:

Benefits

Collaboration may work to the advantage of both those delivering activities and the individual beneficiaries by:

- sharing resources to lower costs and avoid unnecessary duplication of effort;
- bringing together different areas of expertise to better meet learners' needs;
- developing knowledge across sectors as participants learn from each other;
- creative and innovative practices and activities arising from the meeting of different institutional cultures.

Challenges

Some of the difficulties in collaborating include:

- developing shared aims and expectations;
- logistics (e.g. finding a time and place to meet which is suitable for all partners);
- sustaining communication, particularly if there is high staff turnover in the organisations concerned;
- maintaining partnerships, particularly if there is perceived inequality in the resources allocated to the various partners.

References and further reading

- CFE Research [Tazzyman, S. et al] (2018) [National Collaborative Outreach Programme: Year One report](#).
- Dent, P. et al (2014) [Toolkits for Practitioners: 1 Partnership](#). Third Edition. HEFCE.
- Giwa, M. (2008) 'How effective are collaborative approaches for widening participation in further education and training?', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 13(1): 79-105.
- Office for Students (2018) [Regulatory Notice 1: Access and participation plan guidance for 2019-20](#).
- Wiggins, J. (2012) [Collaboration and partnership working in a competitive environment](#). York: HEA.



We are a team of researchers based in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University. For more information, please go to our [website](#).

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An example

One example of successful collaboration is a healthcare event organised by the Cumbria and Lancashire Network for Collaborative Outreach. This event responded to a need for health-related careers advice and guidance identified by four universities and the NHS. Key reasons for its success included the event's interactive character but also how providers were not competing to recruit students as they were offering different but complementary courses.



Flyer for collaborative outreach event.

Concluding points

Collaborative working is beneficial if challenging in practice; some difficulties relate to a policy context which encourages providers to both compete and collaborate at the same time.

Working with

hello future.

Cumbria Collaborative Outreach Programme