**Rural aspiration: access to Higher Education in rural, coastal and dispersed communities – Summary**

**A report by IntoUniversity commissioned by the Cabinet Office Social Action Fund**

## Introduction

- Some of the lowest rates of participation in Higher Education are found in rural, coastal and dispersed communities.
- These communities represent a major challenge for existing widening participation practice, which is largely adapted to operating in an urban environment.
- There are a number of reasons why these communities have lower rates of participation:

  - geographical distance from universities
  - misconceptions and social-cultural differences created by that distance
  - lack of knowledge of university as a result of that distance

- Given this, any service would have to provide not only information about university and homework support, but also pastoral care to help young people deal with the social and cultural issues surrounding Higher Education.
- The acute service gap for disadvantaged young people from these communities is therefore for a mixture of locally based and long-term academic and pastoral support.

## Challenges

- Securing funding for projects in these areas may be difficult. Existing funding is often skewed towards urban projects, although it is possible that the innovative nature of any such programme would attract a forward-thinking funder.
- There would need to be considerable investment in research, due diligence, groundwork and risk assessment.
- Any intervention would have to be carefully targeted given the dense mix of affluence and deprivation that often characterises these areas.
- Operational costs would be higher because of the dispersed nature of the communities served by the programme, the increased number of staff needed and the substantial cost of the transport required.

## Opportunities

- There is growing interest at a national level in the problem of widening participation in rural, coastal and dispersed areas. Alongside **Into**University, Teach First and The Bridge Group are also considering how to adapt their models to these areas, while a number of think tanks are examining the issues involved.

- Schools and other stakeholders within the areas themselves are enthusiastic about the prospect of these projects and many have offered spaces and resources.
- A number of widening participation professionals were brought up in areas of this type. As a result of this, they are passionate about the projects and can bring shared experience to bear when working with young people.
- There is often a strong voluntary ethos in these communities, as well as a pool of active or retired professionals who could potentially act as mentors and/or assist with after-school homework support.

## Young people's views and needs

- For pupils aged 10-14, the key problems were the absence of homework support and a general lack of knowledge about university. Even if they did know something about university, they were still having trouble negotiating the social and cultural issues that surround graduate education in their communities.
- Amongst Year 13 pupils who had just finished their A-levels and were going onto university, it was clear that this decision had not been an easy one and that they had been struggling with the social and practical implications of this for some time.
- Following the focus groups held with the above groups of students, the key needs that a programme for these areas would have to address are as follows:

  o help with homework
  o long-term support to work through personal and practical issues
  o pastoral and academic support equivalent to that received by their more affluent peers

## Volunteering

- Reaching the pool of active and retired professionals who are potential volunteers would be crucial to the success of any programme.
- As well as these groups, other members of the community could also assist by supervising children, helping with set-up of spaces and other similar tasks. This would have the added benefit of increasing local involvement in the programme, vital in creating a sense of community ownership.
- Graduates from the local area who have returned to live and work there would be another valuable volunteering resource, providing excellent role-models for the young people.

## The potential models

- Hub and Spokes – In this model a hub similar to an **Into**University is set up in a town surrounded by dispersed or coastal communities. The centre would serve pupils within the town, with pupils from outside either travelling in or provided with services locally.
- Outreach – Instead of a hub, in this model the delivery staff are peripatetic. They would deliver the programmes in villages or schools identified as having the highest need, using whichever suitable spaces can be found.

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