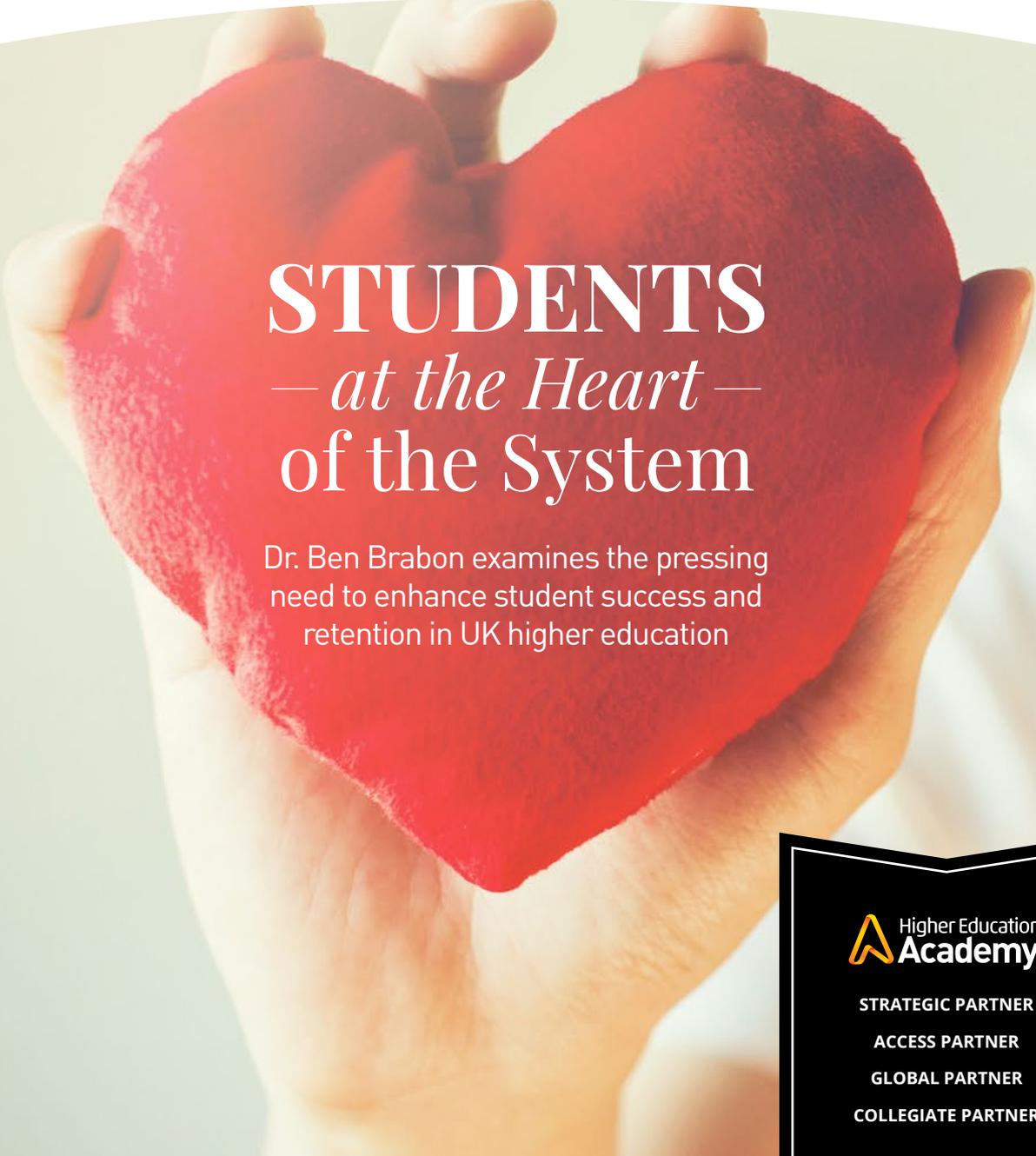Higher Education
Academy

HORIZON
SCANNING REPORT
Contemporary Issues in Teaching and Learning

STUDENTS
— *at the Heart* —
of the System

Dr. Ben Brabon examines the pressing
need to enhance student success and
retention in UK higher education

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Students *at the Heart* of the system

Dr. Ben Brabon
Higher Education Academy

With a reduction in the number of applications to study at UK HEIs for 2017-18 – particularly from the European Union (EU) – the need to further enhance institutional strategies that support student access, engagement, progression and retention has arguably never been more pressing (UCAS, 2017). While the introduction of the UK's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) will go some way to articulate the quality of the teaching experience at the 295 universities, colleges and alternative providers which took part in the TEF in year two, concerns remain within the sector about questions of student recruitment, widening participation and social mobility (HEFCE, 2017). The advent of student loans in England, potential threats to international student visas and the challenges of maintaining widened participation in a system of student finance, challenges the rhetoric of students being at the heart of the system.

The changing tides of students moving into and across Higher Education (HE) in the UK – whether considered within the context of social or national identity – will undoubtedly become one of the primary drivers for developments within UK HE over the coming years. In a post-Brexit world, the reciprocal flow of students between the UK and EU will evolve, but what remains consistent is the ongoing need to focus on students at the heart of the system (BIS, 2011). From access to engagement; widening participation to inclusive curriculum design; progression to completion; the quality of the student experience through their HE lifecycle remains paramount to securing the future health of the sector.

Equality of Opportunity

In the *National Strategy for Access and Student Success in Higher Education* (2014) the benefits of Higher Education to the economy, society and individuals are captured in a few succinct sentences:

> *Higher education benefits everyone. It helps individuals to unlock their potential, it is one of the best pathways to achieving a rewarding career and it contributes significantly to physical and mental wellbeing. It also benefits the wider economy – creating jobs, helping businesses prosper by providing them with highly qualified and skilled staff, and stimulating long-term economic growth, innovation, and competitiveness in the global economy. Higher education has also been shown to have a positive impact on social cohesion and the development of active, committed citizens: for example, graduates are likely to be more engaged with their communities (BIS, 2014; p7).*

Higher Education transforms lives and improves society by developing engaged citizens who make a valuable social and economic contribution to the nation's wellbeing. Access to these benefits has improved over the last decade, with the entry rate of young people in multiple equality measure

(MEM) group 1 increasing every year, from 7.8% cent in 2006 to 13.6% in 2016 (UCAS, 2016; p18). At the same time, for the fifth of the English population with the highest entry rates, 52.1% of MEM group 5 entered Higher Education (HE) in 2016. As this data reveals, there remain significant challenges for universities to engage students from across the socio-economic spectrum and to continue to widen participation. While the 5.8% increase in student numbers from MEM group 1 is a positive indication of progress in this area, there is still a long way to go.

The government's focus in the 2016 White Paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, (BIS, 2016) highlights that "there is more to be done for our university system to fulfil its potential as an engine of social mobility." (BIS, 2016; p7). For the government, universities are a key driver for social mobility and have the potential to unlock the benefits of the graduate premium for a greater

portion of society. The uneven nature of access remains one of the primary inhibitors and HE providers are being tasked by the government to extend their outreach initiatives to address barriers to social mobility. As the Social Mobility Commission's *State of the Nation 2016: Social Mobility in Great Britain* highlights, between 2010 and 2014 only 0.1% of school leavers who received free school meals progressed to Oxbridge and universities should "play a new role in helping the towns and cities of 'left-behind' Britain to catch up. In too many areas across the country, poor access to local higher education means aspiring young people have to move out to get on." (Social Mobility Commission, 2016; p.x). In this context, excellent teaching and flexible course design underpin the role of universities as catalysts for social mobility, "since we will not truly begin to reduce inequality unless more students fulfil their aspirations and progress on into their chosen careers." (BIS, 2016; p13).

Inclusive Curricula

Questions have been raised within the sector about how accessible the design of university degrees is for a diverse student population. In particular, how inclusive is the traditional three-year undergraduate degree? If young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are more than two times less likely to go into HE compared to those students from the most advantaged backgrounds, then do degree structures and curricula need to evolve to become more inclusive in their design? The government's position in this area is clear, "courses are inflexible, based on the traditional three-year undergraduate model, with insufficient innovation and provision of two-year degrees and degree apprenticeships." (Social Mobility Commission, 2016; p8). Currently, degree structures and course design are arguably not as inclusive as they could be and they do not do enough to tackle barriers to social mobility. The role of HE as a catalyst for greater social mobility is in itself catalysed by enhanced access and inclusivity.

Developments within the sector around degree apprenticeships and two-year degrees are in part a response to the government's efforts to create a more inclusive HE system that offers more choice, as well as creating a space for new and alternative providers to increase market competition with the expectation that this will further drive up standards. At the same time, the diversification of the HE marketplace comes at a point in time when the sector has witnessed a 30% decline in part-time students from 2011-12 to 2015-16. (HESA, 2017). New providers and alternative routes for studying at degree level need to respond in inclusive ways to changing sector trends, so that "nobody's route to a second chance at study should be blocked by a lack of courses that suit their needs." (Ebdon, 2017).

The benefits of an inclusive approach to teaching and learning are wide ranging and "can facilitate the deliverability of the institutional mission by…enabling all students to deliver to their full potential."

(DfE, 2017; p14). The advantages of inclusive design cover enhanced brand reputation, greater staff and student satisfaction, enriched professional development, better recruitment and retention, and improved teaching and learning. Strategic approaches to inclusive curriculum design also provide opportunities to work in partnership with employers to develop and enhance the employment outcomes for students.

For Hockings, "underpinning the concept of inclusive learning and teaching are values of equity and fairness. This means taking account of and valuing students' differences within mainstream curriculum, pedagogy and assessment." (Hockings, 2010; p3). This holistic approach connects with the concept of "Universal Design" and its primary aim of "the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design." In this context, HE providers need to consider ways to embrace the following principles of inclusive curriculum design:

- Learning is enriched by the varied experiences of students

- Accessible learning is relevant and approachable by all students

- The curriculum and the means of delivery are both part of this accessibility

- Students with full access to learning and teaching are more likely to engage with learning, and to reach their full potential

(DfE, 2017; p32)

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Student Success

How can the sector better understand and articulate the relationship between curriculum design and student success? HEFCE's report on *Delivering Opportunities for Students and Maximising their Success: Evidence for Policy and Practice 2015-2020*, indicates some positive improvements to the completion rates of students (HEFCE, 2015). In particular, the non-completion rate for full-time students has improved by 4%, from 14% in 2003-4 to 10% in 2013-14. The number of first and upper second degrees awarded also continues to rise with over 70% of white first degree qualifying students and nearly

60% of BME students achieving this level (Equality Challenge Unit, 2016). The latest longitudinal data from HESA reveals that three and a half years after graduating, 94.9% of the graduating class of 2010–11 were in employment or further study and earning on average £26,000 a year (HESA, 2015). These current metrics are focused primarily on outcomes and the contribution that graduates make to the economic wellbeing of the nation. In order to articulate fully each student's route towards success – as something distinct, individual and personal – and to "break the link between family income and educational achievement," alternative measures are needed (CFE Research, 2015; p74).

HEFCE's ongoing work on learning gain which aims to target acquisition measures of knowledge, skills, social capital, as well as preparedness for the workplace, should go some way to better understand student success.

However, as HEFCE notes, "there is a clear need for universities and colleges radically to improve the quality of the evaluative evidence they produce to understand 'what works' in terms of student outcomes and success" (HEFCE, 2015; p8). The expectations here are for HE providers to better support individual students to succeed by enhancing the range and quality of the measures used. In particular, there needs to be a fuller appreciation of how effective specific interventions actually are in supporting students to achieve their potential.

In this area, a priority for HEFCE in recent years has been "to work with the higher education sector to

develop an outcomes framework which, as well as robustly evaluating the effectiveness of activity across the student lifecycle, will also support the provision of indicators that could be used in quality assessment... Institutions with the most diverse student populations and which are doing the most to deliver added value through their learning and teaching, will need to be equipped to demonstrate this if they are to provide assurance and to secure recognition of and reward for their work" (HEFCE, 2015; p10). Success needs to be understood in relation to learning activities across the student lifecycle and in terms of how these activities add value or contribute to learning gain.

The HEA's work on retention and student success has highlighted how important it is to consider partnership, flexibility, inclusion and belonging in effective curriculum design. Within a market context, the connections

between student success and student belonging will become increasingly important for HE providers that want to define, differentiate and sustain their course offer. In order to put students at the heart of the system, the added value associated with an institution's graduate identity will need to be expressed in a way that responds to the fluid demands of the gig and experience economies (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Many of the current measures of student success do not fully valorise how "an experience is not an amorphous construct; it is as real an offering as any service, good, or commodity" (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). If "an experience occurs when a company intentionally

uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event," then HE providers will have to do more to re-imagine curricula that speak to the economic conditions which underpin the experience of student success (Pine and Gilmore, 1998).

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