How Manchester’s altruistic approach widens access to an MPharm degree

Manchester University has provided a route into higher education for students who might not normally have had such an opportunity. In this article, David Allison, from the university’s school of pharmacy, together with Julian Skyrme and Mandy Crowe, from its undergraduate recruitment office, describe how this was achieved.

In 1999, the then Labour Government launched its plans to promote lifelong learning. The higher education (HE) strand of the policy is known as “widening participation” (WP) and HE was given a target of getting 50 per cent of 18- to 30-year-olds into higher education by 2010. At the time the figure was just over 30 per cent but 80 per cent of that figure comprised students from more affluent backgrounds, indicating that young people from less privileged environments were less likely to engage in HE. This is a particular problem for professional subjects such as pharmacy, medicine and dentistry, where many pupils do not consider themselves to be the “right type” for courses leading to such “high status” professions.

Hence, in order to achieve this ambitious target, a requirement was to try to engage those who do not normally participate, particularly youngsters from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, certain ethnic minority groups and those whose parents had not attended university. Most HE institutions began programmes for WP, money being allocated via the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) through the so-called “postcode premium” for accepting students from areas perceived to be disadvantaged and through “aspirational funding” given to those institutions that had a higher percentage than average of students from private and state grammar schools.

Universities were also able to bid for funding from the HEFCE to begin projects aimed at encouraging young people from poorer backgrounds with potential to consider HE options. There was often a distinction in the rationale for the WP initiatives between the older established universities, like the University of Manchester, and the newer universities created in 1992. In the former, WP programmes were often seen as raising aspirations so that young people would consider any HE institution as a destination, not necessarily the institution running the programme. In the newer universities WP programmes were often considered as part of their recruitment process and participants in the programme were seen as potential recruits.

The school of pharmacy at Manchester University considers both outcomes to be part of its WP strategy.

Pharmacy and “widening participation”

Equity of access to higher education is one of Manchester University’s core values and much of its widening participation and outreach work involves engagement with under-represented groups in local boroughs. For over 15 years Manchester has recognised that inequities of access to higher education, often associated with social background, are inherently unjust and wasteful of talent. As part of an overall programme of activities aimed at addressing existing inequity and to support the progression of a talented cohort of young people currently under-represented in HE, a number of schemes have been introduced, including those that promote pharmacy such as “Mentoring plus” and the “Pharmacy in primary schools” (PIPS) projects.

In 2009–10, the HEFCE allocated approximately £141m to universities to meet the costs of WP. The money spent on schemes designed to widen participation has led to questions about whether this resource was making an impact on those students who were accessing HE generally (the WP agenda) and also what types of institutions they were accessing (often referred to as a “fair access” agenda). Most projects, including PIPS, are long-term ones and, when improvements are observed, it is sometimes difficult to attribute these specifically or exclusively to particular activities. It can also be difficult to maintain contact with participants on these programmes to find out whether they go on to HE. This then begs the question, especially in times of fiscal constraint and student places being cut, of whether or not universities should be indulging in WP.

Contextual information

A more valid but perhaps controversial approach is to use contextual data on applicants’ individual circumstances for admissions procedures in order to assess the aptitude and potential of those from poor backgrounds to succeed. Not only is this approach more measurable in terms of success outcomes and uptake but it can also be assessed over a relatively short period compared with longer-term programmes. And such policies by universities are not only pursued through a commitment to equity: data would suggest that students from independent schools actually perform less well even if this does result in differential grade offers being made for the same subject.

In this context, the experiences of the school of pharmacy and pharmaceutical sciences at the University of Manchester in...
Using contextual data to help select students with potential from groups that are usually under-represented in higher education are of interest.

**Contextual data pilot study**

Historically, most entrants to the master of pharmacy course at Manchester were selected almost entirely on the basis of "A"-level (or equivalent) results. However, in 2007, the school of pharmacy participated in a pilot study run by the university's central admissions unit looking at the use of contextual data to widen access to HE. The overall aim of the pilot study was to use information about applicants' educational and social background in undergraduate admissions processes. In an increasingly diverse applicant pool, it cannot be assumed that the ability and potential of all applicants is expressed accurately by their educational attainment. Students who have experienced educational or social disadvantage may not have had the same opportunities to develop their academic potential and this may have compromised their academic achievement. Contextual information can be used to better understand attainment information. However, although it is not the task of HE admissions to compensate for educational or social disadvantage, it is a legitimate aim for universities to seek to recruit the best possible students regardless of their background.

Owing to the availability and comparability of data, the use of contextual information was applied to UK home applicants only. Key principles concerning the use of contextual data included the following: each applicant would be considered on his or her own merits; decisions would be evidence-based, verifiable and reliable and relevant to the admission–decision making process; such mechanisms would only be used to complement and enhance existing selective mechanisms; and what, how and when information is used would be clear to applicants. The four contextual indicators that were used were:

1. Average school/college performance at "A"-level or equivalent
2. Geodemographic indicator of disadvantage and low progression to HE
3. Whether the applicant's parents had experienced HE
4. Whether an applicant had experienced a period of local authority care

Applicants who qualified under indicator 4 were always flagged. Others needed to qualify under at least two indicators, one of which had to be 1 or 2. At the outset of the study it was agreed that each of the participating schools would use the contextual flag in the way that best suited their admission process. No applicant would be selected purely because their application was flagged. Rather, the flag would be used alongside all the information used by the school to make admissions decisions. For pharmacy, flags were used at the stage of selecting for interviews and review of applicants narrowly missing offer grades at confirmation.

**Selection of candidates**

Analysis of the UK home admissions data for the school of pharmacy revealed the following. Out of the 1,261 applications received, 341 (27 per cent) were flagged as satisfying the contextual requirements. Of those, 229 were invited for interview and the contextual data were used on 20. Hence, 20 applicants were invited for interview that would otherwise have been rejected. Following interview, 13 offers were made at standard entry grade level. Seven of the students declined the offer and five put Manchester as their firm choice and one as insurance. At results confirmation, three of the five students met the conditions of their offer, one missed it by a large margin and was rejected and one narrowly missed out on an automatic place on the course. The contextual information for this candidate was reviewed and the decision made to admit the individual to the course with grades slightly below the normal acceptance level. Thus, for the 2007–08 recruitment cycle, four students were admitted to the MPharm course at the University of Manchester through consideration of contextual information who, in previous years, would have been rejected.

**An altruistic approach**

Since registering on the MPharm course in September 2008, all four “contextual” students have made excellent progress, passing both their first- and second-year examinations. Interestingly, the student that had contextual considerations at both flags currently has an average of 69 per cent and is in the top 20 per cent of students for the year.

Although it is early days yet, this demonstrates the positive benefits of using contextual data and how consideration of such social and geodemographic information can make a difference to the lives of some individuals. It is important to emphasise, however, that the generation of a flag when processing an application does not necessarily lead to the lowering of our standard entry threshold offer. Admissions decisions have to be based on students’ achievements and potential. Flaged applicants are simply being highlighted for further consideration by admissions staff. Although not likely to have a significant impact on MPharm admissions, use of contextual information will provide significant opportunities for some individuals who might otherwise have been discounted. This in turn can only be of benefit to pharmacy, since a more diverse range of people, more representative of society at large, will be able to access this high status profession. In recognition of the positive benefits not only for the school of pharmacy, but also for the other academic schools that participated in the pilot study, the university will be rolling out contextual consideration as a means of identifying exceptional students, irrespective of background, as a standard procedure for all courses for September 2011 entry. (The criteria have been modified to include consideration of average school performance at GCSE level or equivalent, but not parental education.)

**Unique foundation course**

The benefits of taking contextual information into consideration have led Manchester to develop a unique pharmacy foundation year programme. This one-year course, launched in 2009, openly targets applicants who have experienced educational or social disadvantage measured geodemographically and by prior educational context. Following interview, students who satisfy the contextual requirements are made an offer that exceeds the average "A"-level score for their school or college, achievement of which will partially demonstrate their academic potential. The course comprises modules in chemistry and biology at "A"-level standard, both with integrated mathematics, and a module on orientation to the practice of pharmacy. The foundation year does not provide an automatic route to the MPharm since students still have to prove themselves academically able and pass all end-of-semester examinations to a suitable standard before progressing to year 1 of the MPharm course. Those who fail to achieve this standard will leave with nothing. However, for successful students the foundation year provides not only a route into the University of Manchester and HE, but also opens the door to the pharmacy profession, regardless of whether they stay on at Manchester or use the course as a stepping stone to join an MPharm programme elsewhere, to students who would not normally have had such an opportunity.

**References**