



IDEAS Toolkit

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1. Introduction

In its collection of cases, the IDEAS project did not limit itself to interventions with specific methodologies. Rather, the only criterion for inclusion in our database of best-practice cases was for a case to be grass-roots and to have proven effectiveness in combating educational disadvantage. When conceptualising the project, we imagined that the initiatives we would be able to identify would share certain features, namely that:

- the overwhelming social good of education would lead to a collection of community-led initiatives to combat disadvantage, and enable access for underprivileged students
- developments in technology and digital education would increasingly act as an equaliser, leading to improved inclusion
- stretched public budgets would serve as a magnet for entrepreneurial social innovation.

Our research showed that each of these assumptions had its flaws. Rather than community-led initiatives for combating disadvantaged, we found that the main non-government actors in promoting access and participation to higher education were actually the universities and colleges themselves, shattering many a myth about 'ivory towers'. We were unable to find examples of technology itself driving inclusion – rather we found that policies around open content and open access (often technology-supported) were beginning show a potential for improving the diversity of student populations. Finally, while restricted budgets definitely made the case for equity more difficult, we found that universities in particular operated more sophisticated models of profit, embracing the concept of triple-bottom-line (i.e. financial, environmental and social reporting), whereby equity targets, despite financial cost, were still seen to contribute towards the overall performance of the institution.

Within this context, this toolkit has tried to categorise successful interventions, and identify the success factors behind each category.

2. Giving Under-Privileged Students a better Life-Map

2.1 Issue

Often, one of the greatest issues involving access to higher education is the fact that potential students don't see themselves as the type of persons who would follow HE, or the type of persons that would follow careers which would follow on from Higher Education.

2.2 What Works

The overall solution to the issue, is to work with communities to directly engage potential students, and persuade them that a life-plan involving Higher Education is feasible and realistic.

The IDEAS project has collected several examples of interventions by NGOs and by universities themselves which work towards changing these pre-conceptions and challenging students to consider that their life-map can realistically be enhanced through a higher education experience. Examples of successful interventions in this vein include:

- [I Belong Program, Australia](#)
- [Science Academy, France](#)
- [Professor Fluffy Programme, United Kingdom](#)
- [Manchester Access Programme \(MAP\), United Kingdom](#)
- [The Brilliant Club, United Kingdom](#)
- [Mentors of Rotterdam, Netherlands](#)

2.2.1 Building Confidence

In a large instance of cases, students will not have parents who have attended university education, meaning that the option seems completely out of their league. Building confidence therefore involves two steps:

- changing the overall aspirations of the students, by showing them the full spectrum of career options they have available to them.
- showing them what university is like, by giving them simulations of university life.

Examples from practice:

- All the cases referenced above organize university-style workshops and tutorials for students, as well as university-visits so as to make university seem less alien to them, while also better preparing them for the experience
- Having concluded that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly unlikely to enrol in science-related subjects, the Science Academy in France organises science fairs and a host of linked activities specifically to raise the interest of this target group in sciences, and encourage them to take up science-related subjects at secondary and tertiary level.
- The I Belong Programme puts a particular emphasis on exploring the range of industries operating in the city, and exploring possible careers students might pursue, and then helps them in choosing appropriate academic pathways to pursue such careers.

2.2.2 Creating Role Models

Role models do not need to be celebrities, or powerful persons. They just need to be people who have been through the university experience, who have benefited from it, and who can empathise (ideally from experience) with the challenges being faced by the prospective students targeted.

Examples from practice:

- The 'I Belong' programme includes 'campus experience' activities for potential students, which are led by 'SNAP Ambassadors', i.e. tertiary students who were admitted through its priority access scheme for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- The Brilliant Club places exclusively PhD students and post-doctoral researchers directly in schools, to ensure their initiatives' staff can speak and teach directly from experience

2.2.3 Individual Support

Confidence cannot be built at an arm's length, or through a mass-media campaign - all the interventions considered involve individual coaching, small-group tutorials, and usually, extended periods of interaction with the potential students.

Examples from practice:

- The Brilliant Club includes a maximum of 6 students in each of its tutorials, while also providing individual support
- Mentors of Rotterdam pairs high-school pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds with student mentors from university. The student mentors give approximately 20 hours of one-on-one mentoring. They

focus their mentoring on three roles: tutor (academic results), coach (self efficacy and self confidence) and talent development and career counselling

2.2.4 Reaching Out

Because of the social, cultural and economic barriers that prevents certain groups considering a university education, it is useless to set up a reactive service and 'let them come'. In each case, the organizations behind the initiative need to detect the groups who are likely to fall between the cracks, and reach out to them at school, in community centres or anywhere else they congregate with programmes and support.

Examples from practice:

- The Brilliant Club places its staff directly in schools, which must meet specific disadvantage criteria. Within these schools, students with potential to access but vulnerable to exclusion from selective research universities are actively sought out and invited to join the programme.
- The University of Liverpool runs its 'Professor Fluffy' Programme directly in 60 schools across the Greater Merseyside Area. In each school, teachers use a resource pack created by the university to introduce students to university-life.

3. Giving Students the Support they need to thrive in Higher Education

3.1 Issue

Higher Education, especially in cases where an institution has limited diversity, often entails the adoption of a series of social norms. Just to give a few examples, in Higher Education a student may be expected to:

- have certain pre-existing cultural/social knowledge which wasn't imparted by their background
- participate actively or challenge lecturers in lessons, but come from a top-down educational culture
- participate in social and sports activities to which they previously had no exposure
- adjust to environment where their own religious practices are not integrated into everyday life
- complete Higher Education, even without significant support from their family and/or community

These sort of difficulties often mean that students who overcome the barrier of accessing higher education, drop out early due to a feeling of lack of belonging or due to an inability to adapt to life in higher education.

3.2 What Works

Interventions designed around helping students adapt to life in Higher Education, including through information, counselling and support. The IDEAS project has collected several examples of interventions by NGOs and by universities which work with students to help them through the challenges of a university education:

- [Academic Advancement Programme at UCLA](#)
- [Tu Kahika Programme in New Zealand](#)
- [Peer Counselling at the University of Mainz](#)
- [Mental Health & Employment Service in the UK](#)

- [POP-Corner at the University of Leiden](#)
- [Peer Assisted Study Support at Queen Mary \(United Kingdom\)](#)

Our research indicates that the following good practices form an integral part of many of the successful interventions:

3.2.1 Providing safe spaces

Safe environments are usually a physical space where students can feel comfortable, interact with other students like themselves, engage in social activities which may not be shared by the rest of the campus and find mutual assistance and support. They can take the form of dorms, activity-centres, student-club premises etc. The logic behind the spaces is that while students should be expected to integrate with the overall culture of the institution, this should not be at the expense of ignoring their own unique characteristics and heritage. Safe-spaces are *not* supposed to be refuges, and in this sense they can only work within an overall safe environment, provided for by appropriate anti-discrimination policies.

Examples from practice:

- The Tu Kahika Programme includes a foundation year for Maori students who wish enrol in the health sciences. During the foundation year, the students are given guaranteed accommodation together in a residential college so as to foster whanaungatanga (a sense of family and belonging)
- The Academic Advancement Programme at UCLA aims to provide a ‘safe haven’ (Vincent Tinto) for students who come from a background where college is not the norm therefore the program and competencies of staff and peer students involved in the program are aware of the difference in social and cultural capital.

3.2.2 Holistic support

Successful interventions go to great efforts to mitigate all of the multiple deprivation factors which may affect students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thus, they will usually provide support in the form of:

- Information, in particular to cultural norms predominant with university life
- Psychological counselling as necessary
- Support in obtaining any study-skills they may not have obtained in earlier education

Examples from practice:

- Peer counselling at the university of Mainz combines a legal support service, financial advice and a grants service into one office, run by the student union
- The Mental Health and employment service in the London borough of Hackney advocates on behalf of students with mental disabilities and is student led, the students set their own goals and support is tailored towards each on a case by case basis. Examples of support include, referring students to the college’s Additional Learning Support & Inclusion Team for in class support, the college’s Student Welfare & Advice Team for benefit and housing related issues, and helping university or job applications. The service advocates and refers to appropriate services. It is not a mental health service, but an education service, there is no clinical role

3.2.3 Easily accessible reference points

As an adjunct, to the above point, many interventions understand that, especially during early phases of Higher Education, support works best when it is administered by *trusted reference points* which are *easily accessible*. To this end, many interventions include a ‘buddy’ element whereby a new student is paired with another student, who acts as the former’s friend, mentor and guide as well as the interface between the more formal support services the student’s everyday campus life.

Examples from practice:

- The POP Corner at the University of Leiden has been centrally located within the social sciences and humanities faculty as a place to offer various services to students. It is open 5 days a week so as to help students to find their way through the maze of buildings, navigate courses and curricula and (find the right places and methods to) further develop relevant skills-sets to improve their attainment and/or increase academic challenges. One of the services provided includes the ad-hoc mentoring of freshmen by older peers.
- PASS, at Queen Mary, is a course-based mentoring scheme where first-year (and sometimes second - year) students are given the opportunity to bring queries and topics to explore with higher-year students (mentors) in an informal and friendly environment, to help them settle into university life, the department and their studies. It runs as a voluntary, drop-in scheme.

4. Bypassing structural barriers

4.1 Issue

Structural barriers can often completely exclude certain segments of society from Higher Education. Such structural barriers can include admission tests which have an inherent social bias, requirements to attend lectures at times and places the students cannot access due to other commitments, or barriers due to the cost (including ancillary costs such as housing, etc.) of Higher Education.

4.2 What Works

System-level structural barriers can be hard, expensive and time-consuming to dismantle completely, and often require policy change at governmental level. However, from a micro-innovation perspective it is often possible for actors much further down the line to create solutions which bypass the structural barriers, by neutralising their effects or finding ways to avoid them entirely.

Examples of systems successfully mitigating structural barriers include:

- Special Entry Access Scheme at Monash University in Australia
- Borderless Higher Education for Refugees, Canada and Kenya
- Schools Network Access Program (SNAP), Australia

Successful implementation of interventions in this area often require:

4.2.1 Granular Information

To successfully design interventions which bypass barriers, an actor needs to specifically establish the causal link between the social factor, the barrier and the consequent educational disadvantage. For example, if an institution determined that students cannot attend certain lectures due to other commitments, they might address this issue in different ways if students:

- work during lecture times
- have childcare obligations
- provide support for relatives
- hold a leading position in the community

Designing appropriate interventions for each scenario requires collecting enough information to address it appropriately. Thus, in the first example above the barrier might be the timetable of the university in question, in the second and third it might be the lack of alternative support options for students' dependents and in the fourth it might be the inability to apply for a sabbatical from studies.

Examples from practice:

- VASVU organizes special admissions support for international students who would be able to gain access to Higher Education in their home countries, but are unable to do so in the Netherlands. Support may include administrative help, language lessons and other interventions. Properly targeting this support requires granular information about the students, which is collected through a detailed application process for the scheme including an enrolment examination

4.2.2 Creating alternate pathways to access and participation in education

In many cases, the best way to dealing with structural barriers is to create additional or alternative options for students who may be affected by them. Some notional examples may include:

- if the admission system is known to discriminate students from certain backgrounds, create an alternative admission pathway for these students or mitigate the social bias by 'training' them for the exams
- if restrictive timetables form a structural barrier, expand the use of distance education to introduce some elements of flexibility

Examples from practice:

- The OER University addresses students who are not able to enrol in traditional universities due to geographic and financial disadvantage. To get around this problem, it has created a network of global universities who offer freely available course modules online. Students may take these modules from home, completely without fees, and are awarded credit by the participating institutions for completing the modules, all without the need to enrol at the participating institutions.
- The Special Entry Access Scheme at Monash University augments the results of students' entry exams, based on factors of disadvantage. Thus, for example students with a disability, from a lower socio-economic background, from a rural area, etc. would have their entry-grades increased by set multiples, which would then be considered as their 'actual' grade for purposes of admission. Repeated surveys show that the students who enter thanks to these augmented grades consistently perform better in subsequent examinations, than their peers who had originally outperformed them.

4.3

5. Conclusion – Ensuring Sustainability

5.1 Commitment from Management

Interventions which address structural barriers invariably require support and commitment from management of Higher Education Institutions. Successful interventions in this area are thus directly supported by the highest levels of management in HEIs, and are often promulgated by special groups working under their direction.

Many of the cases take place within an overall diversity policy promulgated by the same HEIs, with the cases carefully monitored so as to quantify their contribution to institutional targets. Here, the role of policymakers becomes particularly important, as, in many cases, these diversity policies are in turn set in response to legislative imperatives set by governments or supervisory authorities.

5.2 Scaling Up

Practically all of the cases in our databases depend heavily upon the work of volunteers, backed up by small numbers of support staff, to reach their goals. We find that the most successful cases deploy a mix of strategies to ensuring appropriate scaling of the initiatives, including:

- documenting the core processes of the initiative in such a way as to allow for replication
- creating a value proposition for volunteers, usually in the form of volunteers working directly with the groups they are helping, and thus form personal connections
- investing in 'multipliers' or 'ambassadors' who in turn recruit more volunteers into the initiative
- drawing on persons who have benefited from an intervention to assist in subsequent cycles of the initiative

5.3 Effective Communications

Across the cases, we were able to note a distinct correlation between sustainability and communications-ability. The most successful cases often employed communications officers, presented professionally designed web communications including multimedia materials, had persons dedicated to managing relations with funders and communicated with both their specific target groups and the public at large through multiple communication channels.

Where an initiative shows solid benefit and is properly executed, this additional communications-savvy seems to attract additional resources in terms of money, personnel and political support, all of which are essential in scaling up and spreading initiatives.