

Students' unions engagement and support with the widening participation agenda

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nature and extent to which students' unions have supported and contributed to the Labour Government's 1997-2009 widening participation agenda in the English higher education (HE) sector. Evidence from a questionnaire of 53 student unions in England and a series of follow-up semi-structured interviews was analysed in relation to Louise Archer's 2007 analysis of how institutional mission links to institutional engagement with widening participation. This provided a framework which enabled analysis of how a parent institution's prioritisation of research, teaching and vocational learning on local, national and international scales influenced the nature and extent to which students' unions engaged with this policy area and how this manifested itself into action. The research indicated that students' union widening participation activity is directly linked to their parent institution's approach; and where institutions were found to be less engaged, so the students' union was more likely to attempt to take a leadership role.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this research is an exploration of how students' unions supported and engaged with the Labour Government's 1997 – 2009 widening participation agenda in the English HE sector. This includes an investigation into the extent to which students' unions supported this policy area, as well as an analysis of what ways, if at all, they actively contributed to it. These results were analysed in relation to Archer's (2007) theory of the 'Trinity of Gold, Silver and Bronze'; a framework that looks at how an institution's core mission influences how they prioritise and engage with widening participation. Focus was then given to how this might, in turn, influence the nature and extent of a students' union's own support and engagement.

It is apparent that no previous research has been undertaken into this area, indeed there seems to be a limited body of literature on UK students' unions in general. However, an indication of students' union interest can be deduced by policy passed at the 2005 National Union of Students' (NUS) conference mandating NUS to "campaign and lobby universities to develop outreach schemes and widening participation strategies in partnership with their students unions" (NUS, 2005, p67).

This investigation attempts to address this dearth of information and disclose the role that students' unions have played in this policy area.

A brief history of students' unions

The origins of student representation can be found in the city-states of twelfth century Italy, most notably when the students of the University of Bologna were given rights of self-government of all organisational and academic affairs (Day, 2007). While this arrangement did not become the norm it did set a precedent and the election of a spokesperson, or rector to express the student voice at university courts was replicated across Europe.

Students' unions as we know them today developed in the aftermath of WWI (Day; 2007). Student organisations across allied countries came together with the noble aim that, as future leaders of their respective countries, greater understanding amongst them all could prevent further international conflict (ibid.). In the UK, this established the NUS and this national representation served to strengthen local representation in individual universities, as well as represent student on a national and international stage (ibid).

Virtually every education institution within the UK has a students' union, guided by a written constitution headed by an elected President and board of trustees (Day 2007). Governed by the principles of democracy, collectivism and equality, unions operate with the premise being they are run by students for students (NUS, 2009). Representation and campaigning for change is their core work with the ultimate goal of promoting, defending and extending the rights of their student body (NUS, 2009). Indeed, Jacks (1975, p7) wrote:

“representation must never be seen, except in strategic and practical terms, as an end in itself. Too many union officers see it as a question of communication and merely sitting on the appropriate committee. The purpose of representation is to secure social, educational and institutional change.”

and this may still be as true today as it was 30 years ago.

The work of representation and campaigning manifests itself in different ways across different unions, which means that there is no set blue print of how work is undertaken (Bell, 2006). The wide variations of focus and activity can largely be attributed to differing priorities, infrastructure and organisational development; some are not financially viable while others are thriving organizations which add real value to the wider university experience and make an active contribution to university committees, including being members of the senior management team (ibid).

There are numerous examples of where individual unions are engaging in widening participation activity. For instance the Higher York Lifelong Learning Network lead by the University of York St. John considers student union involvement should be at the core of its work (HEFCE, 2004). While this example demonstrates how unions act as partners in such projects, there are examples of such involvement going much further. 'Warwick Volunteers' is funded by HEFCE's HE Active Community Fund and Aimhigher; it trains over 2000 students to volunteer in local, less affluent neighbourhoods. Like the York St John project, there is an element that both the institution and students' union are key partners, but unlike it, Warwick Volunteers physically sits firmly in the arena of the students' union and is thus student lead.

However, while these examples give us a flavour of how unions might engage with widening participation, they do not provide us with a quantifiable or broad picture of the situation, something which this research aimed to address.

A brief history of HE participation

The story of the British HE education system is one based on limited access for an elite minority (Archer, 2003). In 1938 only 2% of the population attended university, the vast majority of these males from wealthy families (Reay, 2005). This broadly continued until the 1960s when the post-war population boom, coupled with a growing consensus that education was inextricably linked to economic prosperity, resulted in the Government of the day establishing the Robbins Review and rapid expansion commenced. From 1963 – 68 the HE sector increased in size by 50%, and by a further 150% from 1970 - 89 (Reay, 2005). However this was primarily to the benefit of middle classes, particularly middle class females, meaning diversification along class lines was less successful.

Absolute participation rates continued to grow and currently reside at 42% (DIUS, 2009a). However, recent research published by HEFCE identifies that fewer than one in five young people from the most disadvantaged areas enter higher education compared to more than one in two for the most advantaged areas (HEFCE, 2010). Another recent report highlights how socio-economic differences are greatest, and progress to address this slowest, in the most selective institutions (OFFA, 2010). This highlights how the remnants of the original elite model still remain (Reay, 2005).

It is in the context of unequal participation that the 1997-2010 Labour Government turned its attention to the absolute and relative participation rates of various population groups and widening participation was prioritised. This ultimately resulted in the 2004 Education Act. By looking at access, funding and university structures, this Act sought to reshape the sector, aiming to make it fit for purpose in the modern age.

Four strategic objectives were identified, these being working to increase the educational attainment, the aspirations, application and admission to HE of non-traditional students (DfES 2003; 2006b). In order to achieve this, institutions were actively encouraged to embed widening participation in into their core mission, vision and values through HEFCE's widening participation allocation, and a whole raft of initiatives and activities were conceptualised and administered as a result (OFFA, 2010). The nature and extent of this work varies significantly, and is a key theme to this paper; examples include summer schools, flexible admissions, compact schemes and year-zero courses.

Burke (2002) responded to the growing attention given to widening participation by questioning how widening participation activities can address inequality and exclusion when it is delivered by institutions historically based on colonist, patriarchal and class advantage. Similarly, Reay (2001) states that the current system retains the prejudices of the past as it demands the non-traditional student to fit in with the middle class ideal of HE, rather than make demands from the sector itself. It is therefore argued that widening participation places too much emphasis on the individual student and their actions and decisions, whereas only real and meaningful change can come from questioning the structures of HE (ibid). Consequently it is argued by some that much of widening participation is tokenistic as it only seeks to 'widen the audience for an existing definition of what is being offered' rather than reconsider what is being offered (Minter, 2001, p78). By considering tokenistic and meaningful engagement with widening participation, Louise Archer's analyse of how differing modes of engagement in WP in relation to institution type have synergy with these discussions and are discussed next.

The Trinity of Gold, Silver and Bronze

Archer (2007) provides an interesting framework that offers critiques of widening participation and the associated activities undertaken HE institutions. By looking at the dispersion of widening participation work across the sector, she identifies the reproduction of prestige and power within the rhetoric of diversity and diversification. This is in particular reference to a speech given by Charles Clark, the then Secretary of State for Education when he celebrated how the sector was composed of “great research universities, the outstanding teaching universities and those that make a dynamic and dramatic contribution to their regional and local economies’ (Ainley, 2003, p393).

Ainley (2003) termed this as the 'trinity of Gold, Silver and Bronze', an emotive term which clearly conveys connotations of prestige, and therefore power. Archer (2007) expanded on this and theorised that the gold category is predominately Russell Group institutions: the internationally renowned research intensive universities which focus on the contributing to the knowledge economy and producing high skill, international calibre graduates. The silver category consists of well respected teaching institutions which mainly manoeuvre on a national level. Their more modest remit largely focuses on high standards of teaching quality, though in fact they may well aspire to become members of the gold club and whilst also engaging with the remit of the bronze group. This group, Archer (2007) associates with local level provision focusing on educating non-traditional students and re-skilling adults; this group being particularly dominated by post-1992 institutions and HE in Further Education provision.

Both Archer and Ainley (2003) discuss how these types of groupings are often celebrated under the term 'diversity' but in fact would be more accurately termed 'stratification' and that this is in fact a blockade to widening participation. This particularly due to the issue that such rhetoric can ignore the presence of power that is inevitably interwoven into a system based on difference. Archer argues that gold institutions are associated with international research presence and knowledge economy. She continues that this carries more prestige, and therefore power, compared to the bronze institutions working on local education and re-skilling of the working classes. The gold group, and to a lesser extent the silver group, are able to maintain their power and prestige because the work of widening participation and educating non-traditional students is substantially left to the bronze category; abdicating from any meaningful engagement with the agenda. This is legitimized by the 'common sense' association of the gold category HEIs focus on research, while the bronze HEIs focus on local inclusion and learning. There is little meaningful attempt to combine the two aims and this inevitably leaves a further association of first class minds with first class universities and vice versa.

This approach is reinforced when one considers the measurement of sector wide performance indicators. These are statistical measurements that are designed to gauge how well an institution is performing in a particular area. In the case of widening participation it is apparent that, in line with Archer's argument, the Russell Group institutions are hugely out performed by the post-1992 institutions (HESA, 2008). The implications of this are apparent when one considers the demographic profile of these types of institutions. As discussed earlier, it can be argued that current figures show that the gold institutions generally serve the middle classes, while the bronze generally serve the working classes. Archer states that concentrating widening participation into bronze HEIs, hinders non-traditional students to access institutions of prestige and power, creating a rigid hierarchical system which fixes their immobility rather than liberates it. Therefore the current system is fundamentally based on structures, under the guise of diversity, that overtly advance traditional students over non-traditional students, actively reproducing class inequalities (ibid).

The issue of the gold category institutions placing less emphasis on meaningful widening participation work results in stratification between non-traditional and traditional, and Russell Group and non-Russell Group (Archer, 2007). Furthermore, as qualifications from gold category institutions result in advantage in the employment market this leaves non-traditional students with further multiply disadvantages.

As no previous research into how students' unions perceive and engage with widening participation had been undertaken, it was not possible to predict the extent to which their perceptions converge, or not, with those discussed in the previous paragraph. However, analysis of the results indicates that there is a link between students' unions perceptions and institutional mission, and that this is replicated across the country in a fairly predictable pattern.

METHODOLOGY

As the aim of this research was to provide a broad and holistic impression of students' union understanding, activity and engagement with the widening participation agenda, a multi-method approach using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews was deemed most appropriate.

The Questionnaire

The first stage of the research involved an anonymous self-completion, electronic survey of 26 questions delivered via email. The sample consisted of all Presidents from students' unions affiliated to the National Union of Students (NUS) across England: 98.2% of all English unions, or 129 in total.

Probing participants to reflect on their understanding, opinions and experiences of widening participation, the survey aimed to capture the broad national picture. The survey mainly consisted of closed questions; whilst also providing a number of open text boxes should individuals wish to add further comments. Question design was based on the diagrammatic Likert Scale, where no middle option of neutral opinion is given in an attempt to capture tangible feelings in a way that can be practically and usefully measured.

A total of 53 participants undertook the questionnaire, producing a 40.1%. The majority of participants were presidents (61.9%), a further 10.9% were education officers, 10.9% staff members and 9.1% other sabbatical officers. To allow analysis in relation to Archer's 2007 theory, respondents were also divided into the tripartite system of gold, silver and bronze: 44.9% were located in the bronze category, 30.6% in the silver category and 24.5% in the gold category.

The interview stage

An interview stage was deemed desirable as the opinions and activities of students' unions wanted to be understood, not simply measured, allowing the unearthing the 'whys' in greater depth. Semi-structured interviews were used, the benefit being that these allow participants (both the researcher and the researched) to explore the subject matter and discuss interpretations, experiences and opinions from a subjective and personal view point

(Cohen, 2000). This element was of particular interest to the researcher as part of this exploration was to unearth issues, topics and themes that are important to the participants, not simply to the researcher.

Interviewee participants were drawn from the respondents of the survey who indicated positively when asked if they would like to partake in further research on this topic. Sixteen did so and 4 were eventually selected. Selection was made on the basis that at least one participant was needed from each of Archer's three categories.

Four semi-structured interviews were held; a profile of the interviewee's institution can be found in table one:

<p>Participant A</p> <p>Gold Group</p> <p>Russell Group Member</p> <p>Established late 19th century</p> <p>Approx 20,000 students</p> <p>Second quartile of Times Good University Guide</p> <p>35% mature students</p> <p>26% part-time students</p> <p>State school/Private school 85:15</p>	<p>Participant B</p> <p>Silver Group</p> <p>1994-Group member</p> <p>Established mid 20th century</p> <p>Approx 16000 students</p> <p>Top quartile of Times Good University Guide</p> <p>34% mature students</p> <p>27% part-time students</p> <p>State school/Private school 82:18</p>
<p>Participant C</p> <p>Bronze Group</p> <p>Million+ member</p> <p>Established post 1992</p> <p>Approx 30000 students</p> <p>Bottom quartile of Times Good University Guide</p> <p>45% mature students</p> <p>36% part-time students</p> <p>State school/Private school 93:7</p>	<p>Participant D</p> <p>Gold Group</p> <p>Russell Group member</p> <p>Established late 19th century</p> <p>Approx 9000 students</p> <p>Strong international research profile</p> <p>Top quartile of Times Good University Guide</p> <p>31% mature students</p> <p>11% part-time students</p> <p>State school/Private school 63:37</p>

Table 1: Institutional characteristics of interviewees

RESULTS

Students' union's perceptions: institutional commitment and success

It became clear that students' union's perceptions of institutional commitment and success in the realm of widening participation was dependent on their institution's core mission, as categorised by Archer groupings (see figures 1 and 2 below). Institutions from the gold category were significantly more likely to be seen by their students' unions as less committed and less successful. Extending this, these students' unions were far more likely consider their institution should do more in this area and far less likely to consider they already do enough.

	Gold	Silver	Bronze
	%		
Very or fairly committed	72.8	92.9	94.4
Very or fairly uncommitted	27.3	7.1	5.6
Don't know	0	0	0

Figure 1: How committed respondents feel their institution was to widening participation, by all respondents, according to Archer's categorisations, (47 responses)

	Gold	Silver	Bronze
	%		
Very or fairly successful	36.4	78.6	77.8
Very or fairly unsuccessful	54.6	21.4	16.7
Don't know	9.1	0	5.6

Figure 2: How successful respondents felt that their institution was at widening participation, by all respondents, broken according to Archer's categorisations, (47 responses)

These results were reflected in the interview responses as only the bronze category interviewee considered that his university undertook a great deal of work in this area, and indeed were very successful: “They are very committed; in fact I think they do a lot in widening participation”.

This contrasts with the response from Participant A (gold category) who felt most strongly his institution did not commit enough to widening participation and therefore were grossly unsuccessful: “it is just not what they are interested in”.

These results have an interesting interplay with Archer's theory. Students' union's opinions support her assertion that the gold institutions are less committed, and therefore less successful, in the area of widening participation. However what is of real interest here is the general consensus of gold category students' unions that their institutions should be doing more in this area. This gives an indication that the abdication of widening participation from the gold group to the bronze (and to a lesser extent the silver group) is not necessarily a view that that students' unions share.

The legacy of the Tripartite Framework: differential levels of students' union support for widening participation

It was clear that overall there were extremely high levels of students' union support for widening participation (85% indicated they did support it with 34.8% very supportive and 52.2% fairly supportive). When analysing this broken down into the Archer's categories there may have been an initial expectation by the observer that students' union support would correlate with their own institution's position in relations to Archer's framework: that there would be greater support from bronze group and less support from the gold group. However it is apparent that all three groups maintain high levels of support regardless of parent institutional type.

When presented with a selection of statements and asked to select which they agreed, an overwhelming majority of all students' unions (85.4%) supported the statement they believed that *'trying to ensure that everyone has a chance of going to university if they have the potential to succeed is the fair and right thing to do'*. However a significant majority also supported more critical views taken by Minter (2001), Burke (2002) and Reay (2005) (as outlined previously). These arguments focusing on the premise that widening participation *'places too much onus on the non-traditional student to change behaviours and not enough on challenging the structures of higher education'* (30.4% agreed) and a further 21.7% agreed it is *'tokenistic as it does not address structural inequalities in wider society'*. Only 23.9% were convinced by the argument that widening participation would aid the economy. A small minority were critical of widening participation for very different reasons: 6.5% stated that *'non-traditional groups should not get more help than any other group'* and another 6.5% agreed that widening participation will *'lead to a dumbing down in standards'*.

However, it is when these results are broken down into Archer's framework that it becomes apparent there is some divergence of opinion according to group. See figure 3 below. Most notably while all unions overwhelmingly supported the view that *'trying to ensure that*

everyone has a chance of going to university if they have the potential to succeed is the fair and just thing to do'; those from the gold category were most likely to, followed by the silver category, then the bronze group (results being 90.0%, 85.7% and 78.9% respectively). Furthermore gold grouped unions were also more likely to view widening participation as 'tokenistic' and less likely to that consider it will lead to a 'dumbing down of standards'.

	International/ gold	National/ silver	Local/bronze
	%		
Trying to ensure that everyone has a chance of going to university if they have the potential to succeed is the fair and right thing to do	90.9	85.7	78.9
It places too much onus on non-traditional student to change their behaviours and not enough on challenging the structures of higher education	27.3	28.6	31.6
It is tokenistic as it does not address structural inequalities in wider society	27.3	35.7	10.5
It is the correct thing to do for the economy	27.3	21.4	15.8
It will lead to dumbing down of standards	0.0	0.0	15.8
Non-traditional groups should not get more help than any other group	0.0	7.1	10.5

Figure 3: Percentage agree to various statements regarding widening participation, by all respondents, broken down by Archer's categories, (48 responses)

While not necessarily being representative of all similar institutions, the issue of tokenism was eloquently described by Participant D (gold category): "*widening participation is crucial, but it will take more than allowing a handful of working class students through our doors to solve the problem, my institution needs to look at its structures and move from being an ivory tower and position itself in the local communities*"

These results relate to Archer's framework in an interesting way. She states that gold category institutions are most likely to engage with widening participation in tokenistic ways as it does not form part of their main mission and from this research it is apparent that students' unions from such institutions are far more likely to take this view of widening participation activity. In addition they are the grouping least likely to be concerned with 'dumbing down of standards' whereas this could be considered a likely criticism of widening participation from their institutions. Could it be that these unions are more likely to view widening participation as tokenistic as this is their experience of at their gold institutions, where there is a lack of commitment and a lack of success. Conversely, those from the bronze group, who have a more positive opinion of widening participation in their universities, are therefore less likely to consider it tokenistic. These results continue to demonstrate that there is a gulf of opinion between the gold category institutions and their respective institutions, indicating that the unions have greater levels of support for meaningful widening participation activities.

The legacy of the Tripartite framework: differential levels of students' union activity in widening participation

The manner in which unions engaged with widening participation activities was explored, particularly in relation to whether this was done independently or in partnership with the institution. The results unearthed a huge range of activity. In almost all instances there was work being undertaken in partnership; while a significant, albeit lower, amount of independent activity was also taking place to. See figure 4 below.

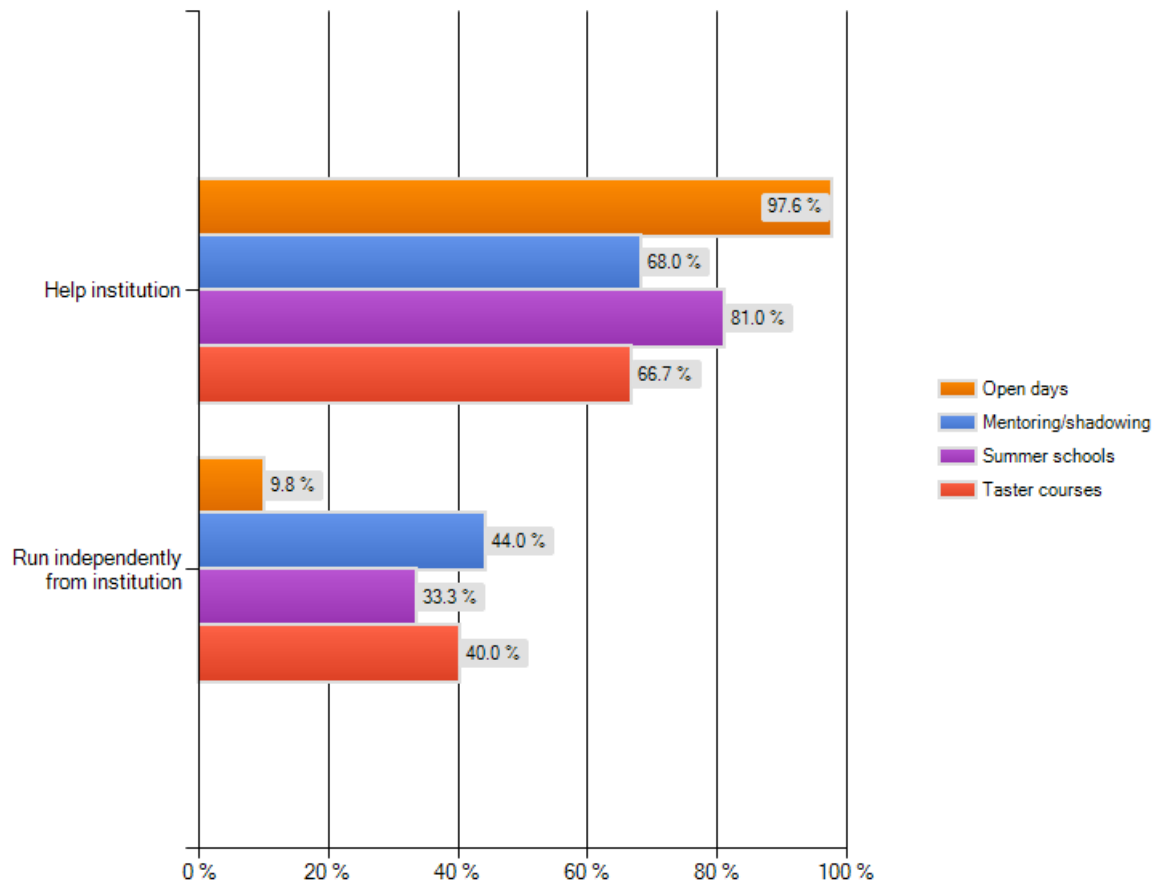


Figure 4: Student union activity in widening participation activities, independently and in partnership with their institution (46 respondents)

When these figures were analysed by the three categories it became clear that gold institutions were far more likely to undertake independent activities; see figure 5 below.

		Gold	Silver	Bronze
		%		
Open days	Independently	16.7	7.1	5.9
	Help institution	83.3	92.9	94.1
Mentoring/ shadowing	Independently	44.4	37.5	33.3
	Help institution	55.6	62.5	66.7
Summer schools	Independently	40	28.6	20
	Help institution	60	71.4	80
Taster courses	Independently	42.9	0	50
	Help institution	57.1	100	50

Figure 5: Student union activity in widening participation activities, independently and in partnership with their institution (base 46)

When asked about money spent on such activities, gold category unions spent significantly more than the other groups (see figure 6 below). However perhaps this is less surprising in the context that these students' unions were also shown to undertake greater levels of independent activity, which would likely greater costs than partnership activities. It is also worthy to note that there is a strong feeling from students' unions from the silver group in particular, that there are other ways to make a positive impact on this area that does not involve high levels of expenditure. For these unions, it seems that working in partnership with their institution enables them to have the necessary impact without having to prioritise it over other work. This would seem sensible if they felt there was less of an imperative to work on widening participation as they had greater levels of confidence with what their institution already did (which they are according to earlier results). This again highlights how there are different patterns of students' union interaction with widening participation

and that this is at least partially influenced by their institution's position in relation to Archer's framework.

	Gold	Silver	Bronze
	%		
Under £5000	55.5	60	78.6
Over £5000	45.5	40	21.4

Figure 6: Amount of students' union money spent on widening participation per year, by all respondents according to Archer's categories, (37 responses)

When asked about the wish to undertake a greater amount of work, there were high levels of aspiration to do this (82%). However, when broken down, it can be seen that there is more eagerness from both the gold and bronze universities, compared to the silver profile institutions. See figure 7 below.

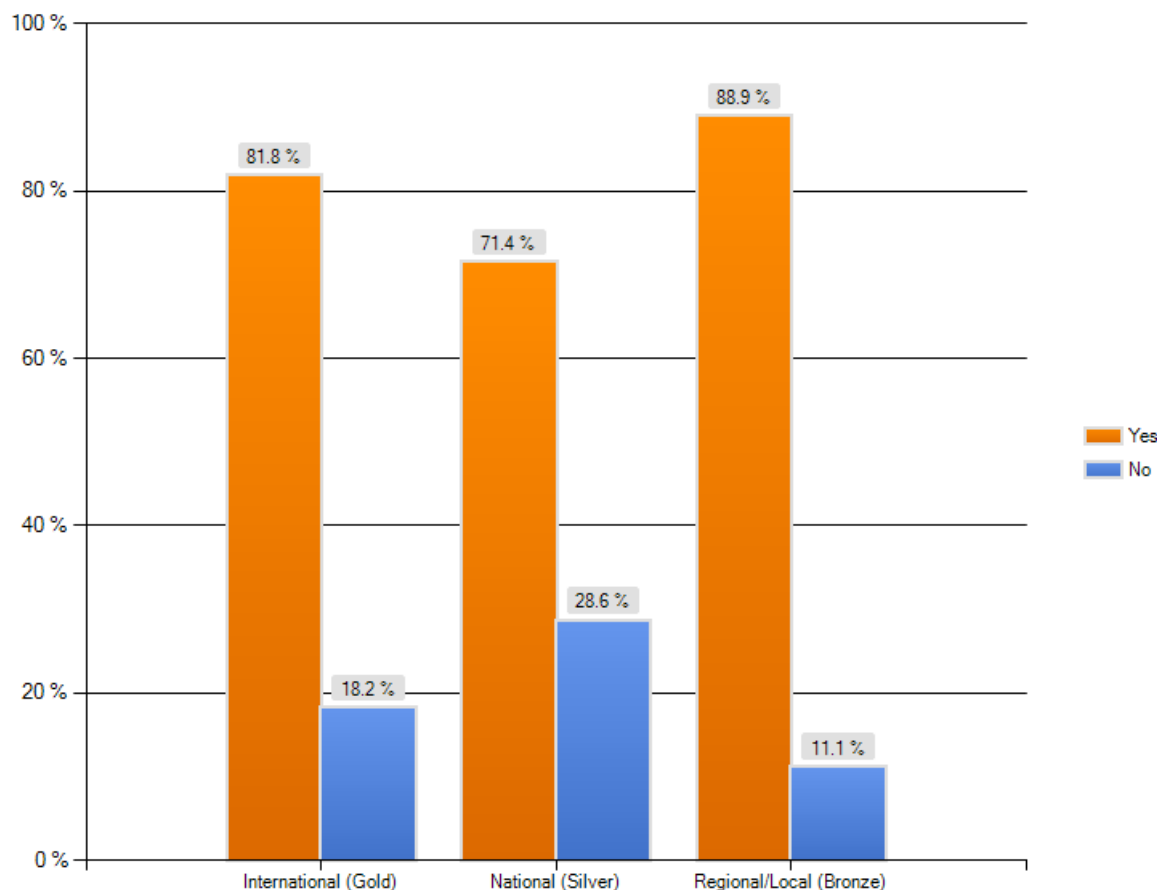


Figure 7: Whether students' unions would like to do more in the remit of widening participation by all respondents, according to Archer's categorisations, (47 responses)

When reading the text responses and the interview results what becomes clear is that there are different ways in which both the gold category and bronze category would like this future activity to take place and this reflects the previous results that indicate that gold group are more likely to want to take an independent steer whereas the bronze group focused more on partnership. For instance:

Participant from gold group: “there is always more we can do, we've applied for more funding for more projects and hope this will come to fruition, no one is better placed than us to reach out to the local areas”.

The participant from the silver group took a slightly different approach: “I don't necessarily think that a union should be spending priority resource on widening participation, however it should be at least ensuring its membership get the best possible benefit from university, and that includes getting a realistic view of the world as well as supporting moral imperatives such as widening participation openly”.

While these statements are not necessarily representative of all similar institutions in the HE sector, they do reflect the differing ways unions can and wish to engage with their institution. It again relates to degrees of partnership or independence that has become a theme in this research project and reinforces earlier conclusions that there is a clear differential between students' unions favouring the more independent approach and bronze unions favouring partnership approach.

CONCLUSIONS

This research sought to identify ways in which Archer's framework could be used as a lens to analyse how students' unions engagement with widening access policy and practice. One might have been assumed that the students' unions in the gold category universities would share their institution's lack of prioritisation of widening participation, therefore protecting their privileged positions in powerful institutions. Similarly it might have been assumed that bronze students' unions would be most active in this area as it could be argued that they are most disadvantaged by the system and have the most to gain from the opening up of access. However, the results painted a significantly different and more complex picture.

Firstly, what was apparent from the outset was the overwhelming support students' unions gave to national widening participation policy. However, what was also clear was that the nature of this support manifested itself in different ways according to the prioritisation of teaching and research and vocational education in the institution. The findings show that students' unions of the gold category institutions were less likely to support their institutions approach to widening participation. In fact, they seemed to be critical of it and as a result many had already taken active steps to make progress in the area independently of their institution. This is apparent in the fact they were more likely to describe their institutions as lacking in commitment and success in widening participation, and say that what was being done was 'tokenistic'. It is also apparent that, unlike unions from other groups, they believed unions were best placed to lead on activity in this area and more likely to undertake independent activities. These results indicate that their high level of support for widening participation, coupled with their institution's general lack of commitment and success in the area, makes this issue of greater imperative to them and ultimately radicalises their opinions and approach to the issue.

This theory also accounts for the greater likelihood of students unions from silver and bronze institutions considering that partnership working within their institutions' region is the most appropriate approach to widening participation. In these cases there were greater levels of conviction that the institution was more committed and successful in access work and therefore the union did not feel it necessary to take a leadership role. Such a partnership role enabled them to maintain a high level of involvement, reflecting their high level of support for the agenda, whilst not spending their limited resources unnecessarily.

These results pose many further questions including enquiring into the effectiveness of students' union widening participation work. More information is needed on the potential for such activity. The question of the role that student unions could, or should have within the broader widening participation strategy of the sector is also important. How this would

work in relation to the institutions is also very significant. These interesting questions, if answered have the potential to substantially add to the policy development in this area and its practical implementation. However, what has been found within this specific research project is that there is a hive of activity currently being undertaken by students' unions. The extent and nature of this, is at least partially related to how their institution is found to already be engaging with the area and this relates to the fundamental core academic profile and mission of the university. Indeed, it has become apparent that unions have the potential to positively impact on the realm of widening participation, particularly in cases where their institution might be more reluctant to do so.

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