

## Widening Access: Conventional v Systems Thinking?

Conventional thinking around widening access is based upon the view that providing 'non-traditional' students with the right knowledge and skills, delivered in engaging and penetrative ways, will close the gaps between these students and their more affluent peers.

If the 'advantages' enjoyed by privileged others can be instilled in young people who are statistically less likely to succeed in education, they might be 'levelled up'. However, despite the best intentions of the Widening Participation (WP) sector, a quick glance at [annual UCAS data shows that conventional thinking is failing to make meaningful progress on closing access gaps](#).

Conventional approaches tend to adopt a deficit view of people that sit outside the traditional HE experience. Inherently, a deficit view implies that certain groups lack what is needed to access and succeed in HE and therefore must be 'fixed.' Inadvertently, these approaches risk [compounding disadvantage by creating more hurdles for their target audience to overcome](#). In essence, these students must both achieve good grades while trying to [manage the day-to-day challenges](#) that contribute to their disadvantage in the first place: poverty, racism, classism, failing schools, care responsibilities at home, working to make ends meet and so on, all the while engaging in extra programmes to address their assumed deficiencies. This is both a morally problematic starting point and, as UCAS data suggests, a sub-optimal way of closing gaps.

Acknowledging the persistence of gaps, presumably acknowledges the limitations of conventional approaches to addressing them. We have arrived at a point where we need to think about this problem differently. Rachel Carr of IntoUniversity recently encouraged providers to address complex challenges with [creativity, innovation and a long-term lens](#). I wholeheartedly support this assertion. At NTU, we are diverting resources to a [systems thinking](#) approach to widening access. We are identifying and addressing the root causes that produce and reproduce the gaps.

In this context, a system could be described as a blend of *conditions* (policies, practices, resource flows, relationships, power dynamics, mental models) in which system *actors* (individuals, communities, organisations, institutions) operate, and whose interrelationships, past and present, produce and reproduce outcomes.

Systems thinking seeks to understand how those *conditions* effect the behaviours of *the actors*. It then applies that understanding to developing system change strategies - which crucially have been co-created with other system actors. Where conventional thinking can produce remarkable outcomes for individuals and groups - the young person who works with a literacy coach sees their grades improving for example - the appeal of systems thinking, and ultimately system change, is in its potential to sustainably produce better outcomes for populations.

To these ends, NTU is coordinating several [Collective Impact](#) initiatives in communities of entrenched socio-economic disadvantage. In one such community, primary school readiness was identified as a significant barrier to long-term academic achievement. Historically, we might have considered the Early Years as out of scope

for a widening access programme. However, large numbers of unready children in classrooms effects every child in a cohort as teachers are required to use their time to develop the skills that children need to access the curriculum. [The repercussions of this bad start are felt many years hence](#) and the implications for widening access are clear.

We sought to understand the experience of those most closely involved in the development of 'school readiness'. We began by conducting an extensive listening exercise with local parents and carers, school leaders, and professionals who support families with children from pregnancy to five. We sought to understand how the pregnancy to five system functions, or dysfunctions, and why increasing numbers of children from this community struggle when they start school. Key findings included: a lack of awareness of school readiness expectations, a dearth of opportunities for families to develop social and parenting skills, a breakdown in trust between families and school, and a lack of effective cooperation between professional services. Looking at the findings together, we are co-creating strategies to build a more effective system.

Several important principles underpin these partnerships. We recognise and seek to leverage existing community assets and cultural wealth. We put parents and young people at the heart of decision making and give them a role in shaping the direction of processes, policies and practices that affect them. We build connections between community and professional support. And crucially we broker relationships between system actors that enable pockets of isolated impact to join up and become collective. In this way, [we aim to build the civic infrastructure to change systems and improve outcomes at a community level](#).

This approach represents a pivot from more commonly practiced methods of widening access. However, we recognise that if we are to meet the challenge of closing access gaps, and more broadly, our desire to play a more meaningful civic role, time and expertise should be committed to exploring new ways of thinking and acting.

We set out to consider new ways to leverage the resources of a university to achieve those ends. Systems thinking and Collective Impact give us a conceptual and operational framework to direct those efforts. We have a long way to go before we achieve the population level increases in educational outcomes that are our aim. However, the indications so far are encouraging. The primary school at the heart of the initiative described above realised significantly improved results in reading, writing and maths last year; the relationship between school and community is described as hugely improved; a group of committed parent activists have established an Early Years community support network; a new vertical network of professionals through the pregnancy to five system and community members has been established; and we are building the intra-system connections that enable mutually reinforcing support, and a better civic infrastructure to be developed.

In conclusion, I wager that another 30 years of conventional thinking around widening access will produce similar results to the first 30. As such, a radical rethink of how we use widening access funding is required. I suggest we start by considering access gaps for what they are: the symptoms of a failing system. From that starting point, universities should consider using their resources and influence to change the system and not just those disadvantaged by it.



Systems thinking provides a new paradigm to tackle the seemingly intractable problem of equitable access. It is enabling us to engage with stakeholders in different ways, and to leverage university resources more effectively. We are sharing our privilege and power in new ways. I suggest that by breaking free from conventional thinking, bold universities can create opportunities to make long-term, sustainable inroads into access gaps and help them become the civic leaders they so desire to be.

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