

Widening Participation: Diversity, Isolation or Integration in Higher Education

University of Hertfordshire, UK and Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India have successfully established a research collaboration titled **“Widening Participation: Diversity, Isolation or Integration in Higher Education”** with the objective of enhancing equality, social justice, community and social cohesion within the current globalised, market oriented context of higher education. The collaboration was initiated with the aim to explore the nature of social cohesion, integration and separation, diversity, equality and discrimination experienced by diverse, minority, disadvantaged and under-represented students attending higher education in the UK and India.



The collaboration is moving ahead successfully and is keen on delivering its objectives. Effective communication channels have been established via a closed web-based networking site and through email. Substantial progress has been made towards gaining improved understanding of the different contexts in which the collaborators work and the different issues that may

arise and need to be addressed as the research progresses. Mary Thornton, Project Director from University of Hertfordshire shares her experience so far- *“In many ways our UKIERI project has required us to live and experience the very subject we are researching (regarding widening participation - diversity, isolation or integration in Higher Education), and we have learnt a great deal by doing so, about ourselves, our students and international research collaborations. As our networking expands so too does the learning and commitment of the core team, who work well together, are highly supportive of each other and who all work towards the principle of enhancing equality of opportunity within our diverse, globalised world.”*

There have been many exchange visits of senior research members, faculty and students under the project. The experience, knowledge and understandings of all have already been enhanced and continue to grow as the project proceeds. Links between the institutions involved have been established, and is spreading to other staff and departments as the research gets underway. The prognosis at this stage of the project is that enhanced and extended links between the UK and Indian academics through mutual research and the sharing of understandings about Widening Participation issues in Higher Education are being established.

The research teams believe that this collaboration has been a process of mutual development and enhancement of understandings through cross fertilisation of ideas,

knowledge and shared methods. The team is confident that this will eventually lead to enhanced global/ trans-national understandings of inequalities in education, and how they can be effectively addressed, from an internationalised perspective rather than an ethnocentric/ Anglo-centric/ India-centric one, thereby enabling findings to be transferable within the international/ multicultural arena of globalised HE, and recommendations to be addressed in a trans-national way.

Good working relationships have been established during the past 2 years, not only between core team members of the project, but have also been extended to include networker/ collaborator/ strategists who now regularly work with and alongside the core team. Links between academics in India and UK have been expanded, not only in the area of educational inequalities but in more general social inequalities and into a diverse range of educational areas related to teacher education and teaching resources. Networks continue to expand and develop, drawing in more people from a wide-range of linked areas and continue to be nurtured through visits, dialogue and collaborations.

Links between academics have been established and are maintained electronically, to ensure commitment and continuation, through both email and a closed networking website. All those involved with this project, whether core team members or linked through networking are keen to maintain and extend those links that have been established. Additional movements of people has been planned for the final year of the project and dissemination conferences are to take place that will further expand contacts and networking; which will be a long term dividend in terms of wider UK-India relationships in HE.

For the purpose of interim dissemination, two very successful seminars had been organised in UK in the months of July and October 2009. Both seminars saw major participation from HE fraternity and students. 'A summary of the UKIERI Widening participation project will appear in 'Research Intelligence', No.110, Spring/Summer 2010, the magazine for members of the British Educational Research Association (BERA). The seminar papers is also being published in academic journals in both countries. They will also be presented in international conferences like INCULT and HEA (UK), EERA (Finland) and AARE (Australia) all 2010; ICET (Scotland) 2011.



For the purpose of final dissemination, the teams have planned two additional conferences, one each in India and the UK respectively. The project teams are aiming to get extensive participation from institutes other than those involved in the project directly, who are working on similar issues related to 'Strategies for Change'. These

conferences will be used as a platform for the final dissemination of outcomes of the project.

The real key to success and impact of the project has been the expansion of networking academic and research staff beyond the core UKIERI institutions. This is reinforced by attendees at the event, from outside of the core team and their institutions, already signing up for/ submitting abstracts for the final dissemination conference in UK in September 2010 and enquiries already being generated for attendance at the Indian conference in November 2010.

Affiliated research projects on 'Strategies for Change' have been extended to a number of universities and institutions across India and the UK alongside those taking place with an extended network of collaborators who are non-core team academics based at the leading institutions for the UKIERI project.

- University of Cambridge Faculty of Education on group working
- Universities of Bradford and York St. John on accommodation and space strategies
- University of York on internationalising the curriculum
- University of Mumbai on strategies for social cohesion
- Guru Nanak College of Arts, Science and Commerce on values education

In addition, the networking facilitated through the UKIERI Widening Participation Project has enabled expansion of the Geogebra teaching resource network (Dr Lavica, Cambridge) to academics in Mumbai; exploration of collaborative research possibilities on Caste and Education (Dr Green, UH and TISS), and enabled the establishment of teacher education links at masters level between the University of Hertfordshire (Ms Lee) and TATA Institute of Social Sciences, links that will facilitate parallel developments of teacher education programmes in India emanating from Delhi and DfID.

Academic links forged under this collaboration will be sustained and extend well into the future through email contacts, collaborative research and joint publications even where funds for face-to-face visits become more limited. Other opportunities for funding further development of the current research project and spin-offs from it are already being sorted by members of the core team and their linked networkers, collaborators and strategists. This will be the foundation for building a larger network of colleagues, students and institutions involved in intercultural/ international education.

Prof Govardhan Wankhede, Project Director, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India stated *"It has been a wonderful and enriching experience for Ms. Ponni Ayer and me both academically and socially. The academic gains out of the project are immense and vivid. The entire team has been very active, cooperative and supportive under the leadership of Prof. Mary Thornton. I must also place it on record that the topic of the project is highly relevant in the global context today that may pave way for others to adopt and implement the principle of equal access and social solidarity in higher education."*