
A joint practitioner-academic approach to enhance equity in higher education: A case study from the University of Exeter

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*The Centre for Social Mobility is part of a collective of institutional leaders seeking to embed equity and prioritise praxis-based frameworks.

In setting up this centre, we were inspired by the focus on praxis and research of CEEHE. We gave our centre a fully integrated practice-research strategic framework with the two joint directors drawn from the Graduate School of Education and the Widening Participation team.

Evidence and practice in education-based social mobility will be enhanced by combining the skills of a range of people. How else are we going to address the complex issues underlying the significant gaps we witness within higher education? Might it not be useful to learn from those working with potential and current students, the students themselves, as well as those who know the wider evidence around barriers hindering success? Shouldn't we make sure that all our well-meaning efforts to improve equity is evidence-driven?

In 2018 the University of Exeter founded the UK's first Centre for Social Mobility. It is uniquely co-led by a practitioner facing the daily operational and strategic pressures of widening access and supporting students, and an academic who has wide ranging research expertise in admissions, fair access, attainment and evidence-based practice.

Like our sister institute CEEHE in Newcastle, Australia, our structure and location are in themselves a fundamental statement of the value of a research-praxis nexus. We focus on our unifying value, action and research agenda to supporting social mobility that surpasses the metrics of working lives which must be met to keep the wolves from the door (whether recruitment and impact targets for practitioners or research and publication targets for academics). All members of the Centre – academics, students, outreach staff, educators, careers advisors, managers - are driven by an overarching mission to improve outcomes for marginalised and under-represented people through the transformative power of education.

The Centre is unusual in that while it seeks to create sector-relevant insights, it also has core deliverables relating to our own University performance and capacity-building within our wider region. We are building a community of research-informed practice and practice-informed-research. We invite experts to speak to us about implementing change in an institution, about frontiers in theoretical developments and international ideas. We have hosted our first regional networking and evidence-based practice sharing event; we participate in national networks and events learning about practice elsewhere and sharing our approach in turn. While these may appear small steps, they are significant. It is telling that our first Centre conference attracted as many academics as practitioners. As one academic colleague pointed out, this was the first event they had attended with professional services staff where they worked together to support each other's development.

The crossovers between research and practice continue to grow. The Centre has successfully bid for external funding by combining the expertise of practitioners and academics and we are working with the Office for Students towards enhancing evaluation across the sector. In addition to publication, findings from a Centre-led project on student transition have been incorporated within the University's own practice. We have undertaken work on the hidden curriculum, co-created with students.

We have completed a project on the experience of Exeter students driven by the wish to understand the barriers they face and how they are overcome by those from non-traditional backgrounds. This project met both regulatory and internal policy needs. Informed by theory (Professor Neil Harrison's approach of possible selves), the research questions were co-designed by practitioners and academics.

The work is published in an academic peer-reviewed journal (<https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/9/5/67>) and the practical findings are information how we as an institution approach outreach work. We are jointly co-creating research projects to address key access and retention issues faced by our University and the wider sector. In spring 2020, we quickly mobilized professional staff and academic staff resources to conduct rapid response research of the effect of school closure on disadvantaged students.

It is not always plain sailing, there are moments when we are pulled in different directions. Simply finding the time to share and collaborate can sometimes be hard, but the rewards in terms of knowledge, insight and shared purpose, are worth it. We have made a start in joining our knowledge and resources to advance social mobility through higher education and the future looks exciting.

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