Developing a UK widening participation forum

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Widening Participation (WP) addresses ‘discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different under-represented groups’.1 The United Kingdom (UK) government set a target to double WP university students by 2020, and universities invested heavily to address this.2

Medicine remains an ‘elite’ profession with the highest over-representation of people from privileged backgrounds and the highest incidence of social reproduction.3 The role of our classed society, the social exclusivity of British private education and the nature of medical selection strategies perpetuate the under-representation of students from under-privileged backgrounds. Feeling an outsider in medical school is something EH vividly remembers and has instilled a passion to ease transition for others.

The Selecting for Excellence Final Report4 confirmed this under-representation and established the Medical Schools Council Selection Alliance (MSCSA). It recommended the collection of accurate socio-economic profiles, widespread dissemination of application information, targeted outreach and improved accessibility to work experience and access programmes. MSCSA work increased the number of under-privileged students by 35%.5 However, their remit is restricted to student selection and admission.

This is where the National Medical Schools WP Forum (National Forum) comes in. We formed in 2015, after EH presented a WP workshop to a Northern England medical admissions meeting. As the workshop ended, EH invited those interested in collaborative WP work to meet him at the break. Anticipating a low uptake, he was pleasantly surprised when six people approached. Discussions initiated the creation of a small group of medical educators and the MSCSA. EH and AS became chair and deputy chair, and LA chairs the national access subgroup. All the three authors shared a strong passion for WP, and the forum enabled us to disseminate our ambitions for WP to a national audience.

The organisation expanded rapidly and became the National Forum. With 24 medical schools, the MSCSA, voluntary organisations and postgraduate medical colleges, we represent a diverse collective to identify current and emerging issues and establish practical solutions (Box 1. The National Forum’s Objectives).

To ensure the student voice is central to our mission, we appointed a student representative in 2018. A student subcommittee formed, providing a forum for WP medical student societies and advocacy for lived experiences of WP initiatives. They organised and delivered three MSCSA-funded national conferences for 300+ medical students, each providing a national platform for improving student access and success. This group enables us to understand key issues affecting students, and disseminate our work to the student body. Students also experience national leadership and opportunities to engage with key stakeholders at this early stage in their career. On reflection, we realised that the forum lacked junior doctor representation. We, therefore, formed a subcommittee, extending our work to WP junior doctor experiences.

The forum reacted early to the impact of the pandemic on WP pupils, with school closures causing inequality of academic progression. Loss of learning due to lack of equipment, internet access and peaceful study spaces could ‘reverse the years of progress’ in WP.6 We formed a ‘loss of learning’ subcommittee, to address the risk of losing an entire demographic of future doctors.

We convened a teaching and learning subcommittee, to improve the experience and success of WP students at medical school. Bassett et al7 identified financial hardship, juggling paid work and study, and difficulty developing social networks as the main issues...
Our main challenge is the lack of funding and reliance on individual institutions to cover all costs. However, we are proud of all the opportunities this group has enabled. From humble beginnings, we are now a powerful and influential national advocate for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, cooperating with key stakeholders to level the playing field. We hope our work inspires and informs clinical educators across the globe to form similar collectives to tackle under-representation in medicine. (Box 2).

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BOX 2 Quotes from National Forum Members

Quotes from National Forum Members, on how it has progressed their work in WP:

The National Medical Schools Widening Participation Forum has proved to be the key place for practitioners to meet and share ideas and their work. Over the last five years it has attracted staff and students from most of the UK medical schools and this has helped form a critical mass to develop and extend a variety of widening access initiatives.

Dr Paul Garrud, Chair MSCSA.

UKWPMed is an innovative collaboration between six medical schools who have all agreed to allow students doing any one of their Widening Participation (Preparation for Medicine) courses to receive the benefits of an automatic interview and a contextual offer. In the first year of operation, many students have participated, giving each of them a much greater chance of obtaining a place. This collaboration has attracted national interest and many others are interested in adopting this approach. The idea for UKWPMed arose out of collaboration within the National Forum. The Forum also made it possible to attract the necessary level of interest to launch the scheme.

Dr Andy Spencer, Deputy Chair, National Forum. Deputy Admissions Lead, Keele Medical School.

The National Medical Schools Widening Participation Forum is a passionate group of like-minded people committed to creating a more diverse and representative medical profession. The opportunities for networking and collaboration forged by the forum have given me the opportunity to meet and work with an amazing team of people from across the country, which has affected widening participation in all of our institutions.

Dr Clare Ray, Committee Member, National Forum. Reader, University of Birmingham.

Being part of the National Forum helped me forge collaborations with colleagues to carry out multicentre research on barriers to access, transition and progression of WP students in medicine. An important follow-up is that the students from our WAMS have set up the peer support/peer tutoring groups in response to the findings of our study and want to help their peers from WP backgrounds (this includes small group tutorials and mastering the MCQs).

Dr Nana Sartania, Research Lead, National Forum. Deputy Admissions Lead, University of Glasgow Medical School.

REFERENCES


2. Office for Students Transforming opportunity in higher education; 2020 https://www.officeforsstudents.org.uk/publications/transforming-opportunity-in-higher-education/


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