

INTRODUCTION

By the time the speech to the *Pathways to Education Connections Conference*, which this chapter reflects, came around in 2010, I was already firmly on a new pathway of my own – to retirement from full-time work – onto which I stepped that same year.

York St John achieved powers to award its own degrees (rather than those of another institution as it had to this point) and the ability to call itself a university in 2006. I had played a leading role in the processes to achieve both of these strategically important judgements, and to follow them up with necessary changes to institutional policies and practices.

Throughout those years I had not given up my commitment to widening participation and the desire to see strategic changes to policy and practice in that field. It had been challenging, to say the least, maintaining the momentum on thinking about the need to change widening participation policies and strategies, and trying to implement them, alongside helping the institution through external inspections regarding its future status and to carry them through to a successful conclusion.

Those five or more years had been hard ones. Also, 2010 coincided with the existing Vice Chancellor retiring. It was a perfect year for me to step aside and hand my reins to another as well.

And so, the *Pathways to Education Connections Conference* that same year came at just the right time to take stock. To look back and to look forward – which is what I tried to do in the speech and later this chapter built upon it. As the chapter starts,

The history of widening access to higher education in England since the early 1960's is one of considerable success. Although, as the paper reveals, this is not a story of perfect progress by any means.

The chapter summarises a range of evidence on this which was relevant at the time. For example, it cites the National Audit Office (NAO) data published in 2008 which showed that,

People from lower socio-economic backgrounds make up around one half of the population of England, but represent just 29 per cent of young full-time, first-time entrants to higher education.

The title of the speech was 'From Access to Engagement', and in line with this, the chapter argues that to achieve more we require,

...university and college strategies which encourage local communities to help shape the what, where, when and how of the higher education offer.

At the same time, the chapter goes on to argue,

If we are to sustain the progress made so far and also meet the challenges which still remain with regard to

patterns of participation in higher education, it is higher education itself which must change.

I was by no means the first to argue along these lines. For example, Geoff Layer, later Vice Chancellor of Wolverhampton University, had done so as far back as 2005.

To those who know me and my work in ‘widening participation’, it will be of little surprise that since 2010 I have continued to write and speak along these lines, and repeatedly emphasised the need to abandon the terminology of *widening participation* and speak and write about *widening engagement*.