



Action on Access

The National Co-ordination Team for Widening Participation

Review of Widening Participation Strategic Assessments 2009

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Foreword

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When the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Office for Fair Access wrote to the sector in January 2009 to request the submission of widening participation our intention was that the assessments should provide institutions with the opportunity to consider what they do to widen participation, but also how far their commitment to widening participation was mainstreamed and the extent to which they could demonstrate and celebrate progress made. The assessments submitted contained a wealth of information and this review provides a comprehensive overview of the current approaches and activities undertaken by institutions across the sector.

The review demonstrates high levels of commitment and support for widening participation. It illustrates the evolving policies and strategies enabling institutions to further embed and mainstream approaches to widening participation to secure its future as an institutional priority.

The review demonstrates that there is widespread recognition and use of the student life cycle model within institutional approaches to widening participation which is to be particularly welcomed. Widening participation does not stop at the point of entry but is an integral consideration in the development of inclusive learning and teaching practices and appropriate student support structures. The review demonstrates how some institutions have progressed in ensuring that both outreach and pre-entry activity delivers prospective students that are adequately prepared for higher education and that their own processes, curriculum, structures and policies deliver a successful student experience in terms of completion, attainment and employment. Whilst the review demonstrates that progress has been made in a number of institutions, there is however, more to do.

It helpfully identifies areas in which institutions could develop their approaches further. One of those areas is the evaluation of activity and in particular, evidencing impact. Consequently in autumn 2010 we published guidance for institutions on the development of effective evaluation plans for their widening participation activity. To further support institutions in developing their approaches to widening participation, a number of thematic briefings on specific areas will follow this review to facilitate the development of effective strategies and practice.

The widening participation strategic assessments submitted by both higher and further education institutions have provided an invaluable resource for the funding council as we continue to pursue, refine and develop our own widening participation policy. The overview provided in this review has helped us to identify emerging themes across the sector, and to identify areas in which there are gaps and with which institutions might engage further to develop their policy and approach.

However, I believe that one of the most valuable outcomes to come from the strategic assessment process and clearly illustrated in this review, is the commitment to and belief in widening participation that was articulated across all institution types regardless of size, mission or culture. The progress that has been made to widen participation, as demonstrated in the report we published in January (Trends in young participation to higher education: core results for England, HEFCE 2010/03), is worthy of celebration and is testament to the contribution that higher and further education institutions have made to broadening horizons and creating greater equality of opportunity. We can be certain the higher education sector will undergo significant changes over the next few years but widening participation and fair access remain important in enabling us to realise the aspiration of a more socially mobile and fair society.

Contents:	Page
<u>Foreword</u>	2
<u>Introduction</u>	4
<u>Executive Summary</u>	5
<u>1. Report Introduction</u>	15
<u>2. Approach</u>	15
<u>3. Strategic Issues</u>	16
<u>4. Activities</u>	21
<u>5. Measures</u>	53
<u>6. Conclusions</u>	60
<u>Acknowledgements</u>	66
<u>Glossary</u>	66
<u>Appendix – Framework for Analysis</u>	67

Introduction

Professor Mary Stuart, Vice Chancellor of the University of Lincoln and Chair of the Action on Access Advisory Forum

I am delighted to present this review of the Widening Participation Strategic Assessments (WPSAs) produced by higher education institutions (HEIs) in 2009. These assessments gave HEIs a developmental opportunity for an institutional dialogue about widening participation and equality. The assessments also enabled institutions to showcase the range of innovative work they are doing to promote equality and diversity in the higher education student body. This report demonstrates the breadth of work taking place across the sector, and it is particularly encouraging to see how widening participation and equality are now being addressed across the whole student life cycle, rather than predominantly in the early phases by institutions.

The WPSAs also provided the opportunity for HEIs to think strategically about widening participation and equality, to consider how institutional priorities, history and locations shape widening participation work in specific institutional contexts, and to assess current activities and future priorities and plans. Many institutions are now able to demonstrate a strong commitment to widening participation and equality, but could have been more critical and strategic in relation to thinking about the future, especially in the changing political and financial contexts.

The WPSAs only provide a snapshot of how HEIs address widening participation and equality: what they are doing, what they plan to do and how they will know whether or not they are successful. The pace of change has been rapid over the last 12 months, and thus WPSAs should be considered as living documents to assist institutions to think and plan strategically about how they will enable more students from under-represented groups to enter and succeed in HE and beyond.

This report represents a thorough review of the WPSAs, and some of the conclusions and commentary are challenging. I very much hope therefore that the report will be used as a catalyst and resource for further institutional development and change to further mainstream and sustain widening participation and equality in HEIs.

Executive Summary

About the Review

In 2009, every higher education institution (HEI), including postgraduate-only institutions and further education colleges (FECs) with over 100 full-time equivalent higher education (HE) students, was requested to submit a Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (WPSA) to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

Action on Access, the national widening participation co-ordination team, has undertaken a thematic review of the 129 WPSAs submitted by the HEIs. This includes the postgraduate-only institutions but not the FECs whose WPSAs took an alternative format and so are being reviewed separately¹. An evidence-informed framework was developed covering strategic approaches, activities and measures, which was supplemented by emerging themes from the WPSAs. The framework was used to encode the WPSAs in a systematic way, by a single researcher, with the aid of NVivo software.

The review draws on this analysis to provide a descriptive overview of the ways in which institutions in the sector are addressing widening participation and equality. It does not assess individual WPSAs, nor does it critically evaluate different approaches or compare different types of institutional approach. However, where possible, examples of effective practice have been identified and it is only possible to report on what institutions included in their WPSAs. Guidance will be integrated into a series of briefing documents relating to this WPSA review on: employer and community engagement to widen participation by adults; widening participation and admissions; student transition, retention and achievement in HE; flexible and part-time learning; equality and diversity; targeting; measures and evidence; and institutional cultural change.

Findings from the Review

1. Institutional Commitment to and Understanding of Widening Participation

It is clear that institutions have given strategic thought to their widening participation aims and objectives, and there is widespread commitment. Institutional understanding and delivery of widening participation is mediated by institutional mission, history and geographical place.

2. Links to Other Institutional Strategies, Policies and Priorities

Widening participation is increasingly connected to other institutional strategies, policies and priorities, as illustrated in Table 1.

¹ Action on Access is undertaking a review of the FEC WPSAs and a report will be submitted to HEFCE by the end of 2010.

Table 1: Links between WPSA and Other Institutional Strategies, Policies and Priorities

Strategy/Policy/Priority	Number of Institutions	Percentage of Institutions
Access Agreement	122	95%
Widening participation strategy	119	92%
Admissions	117	91%
Retention in general*	117	91%
Equality and diversity strategy	68	53%
Learning, teaching and assessment strategy	68	53%
Mission statement or corporate plan	67	52%
Other strategies	30	23%
Retention strategy*	19	15%
Estates strategy	12	9%
Human resources	9	7%

* 19 institutions (15%) refer to an institutional retention strategy, but 117 institutions (91%) discuss retention as a priority in their WPSAs. It is not always explicit whether or not there is a formal, institution-wide retention (or similarly named) strategy.

3. The Strategic Organisation of Widening Participation

Three types of organisational culture were identified: a centralised widening participation team or unit (13% of HEIs); widening participation dispersed or mainstreamed into academic and service functions (37%); and hybrid arrangements, with shared responsibilities for widening participation which is co-ordinated centrally (26%). Most institutions (63%) have adopted one of the latter two organisational structures which promote wider staff engagement. (Unclear or no data is available for 24% of institutions.)

4. Targeting Pre-Entry Activity

Institutions are targeting a wide range of groups for their pre-entry activity, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Widening Participation Target Groups: Institutional Frequency and Percentage²

Widening Participation Target Groups	Frequency	Percentage
Disabled students	127	98%
Black and minority ethnic groups (BME)	109	84%
Gifted and talented	101	78%
Part-time or flexible learning	92	71%
Young people NS-SEC 4-7*	88	68%
Vocational progression	87	67%
From state schools	85	66%
From a care background	80	62%
Gender	70	54%
Mature learners (e.g., from the community)	69	53%
Work-based learners	56	43%
E-Learning or distance learning	53	41%
Primary school-aged children	49	38%
First generation entrants	42	33%
Low participation neighbourhoods	33	26%
Apprentices	31	24%
Special educational needs	29	22%
Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)	20	16%
Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transsexual	16	12%
Traveller communities	3	2%

*It should be noted that institutions are using a range of terms and associated definitions to target students from lower socio-economic groups, including state schools, NS-SEC 4-7, first generation entrants, low participation neighbourhoods and Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). The issue of targeting is discussed more in section 4.1 of the main report.

5. Links with Schools and Academies

All of the WPSAs make reference to links with schools and academies. 92 institutions (71%) provide details of more formal partnerships, but the number of links varies substantially. 49 institutions (38%) are linking with primary schools in a meaningful way, while others indicated a desire to target primary schools in the future. Most of the relationships are with local schools, even when institutions have a national recruitment profile. The purposes of links are: recruitment; aspiration-raising; preparing students to enter HE; providing information about finance; developing community relations; and contributing to social and economic regeneration. Much good HEI practice is associated with Aimhigher, particularly in terms of targeting, and there may be scope in other HEIs to learn more from Aimhigher.

6. Links with Further Education Colleges

Nearly 80% of HEIs (101) refer to work with FECs to improve progression from FE (Level 3 learners) to HE, and collaborative provision. Outreach activities in colleges are very similar to those delivered in schools. Collaborative provision is mostly built on additional student numbers. Less prevalent areas of collaboration include: bridging programmes for people without appropriate Level 3 qualifications; analysis and follow-up of admissions data; staff development for FE staff

² These figures were arrived at in two different ways. Initially, the documents were coded for these groups, and then a secondary series of text searches was conducted to ensure that all statements about these groups were covered.

delivering HE programmes; shared services; international recruitment; regional planning and co-ordination.

7. Community Engagement

There is evidence in some institutions of growing local community engagement, often through existing groups, and 29 institutions (22%) link widening participation to local or regional economic and/or social regeneration.

8. Employer Engagement

Whilst 46 institutions (37%) talk about strong employer partnerships, the link between employer engagement and widening participation is not always explicit, and much of the work is in the early stages of development. A small number of HEIs have well established and effective models of employer engagement. Institutions are offering different types of learning from pre-entry to postgraduate levels, including learning from work and learning in work. Types of provision include: negotiated work-based learning (e.g., based on a learning framework); tailor-made programmes for individual employers; enterprise development and support; accreditation of training and other professional training for employers; and continuing professional development for staff. Sometimes this is delivered in short 'bite-sized' modules, but often the delivery appears relatively traditional (e.g., degree programmes rather than modules). Employer links span private, public and voluntary sectors.

9. Links with Aimhigher

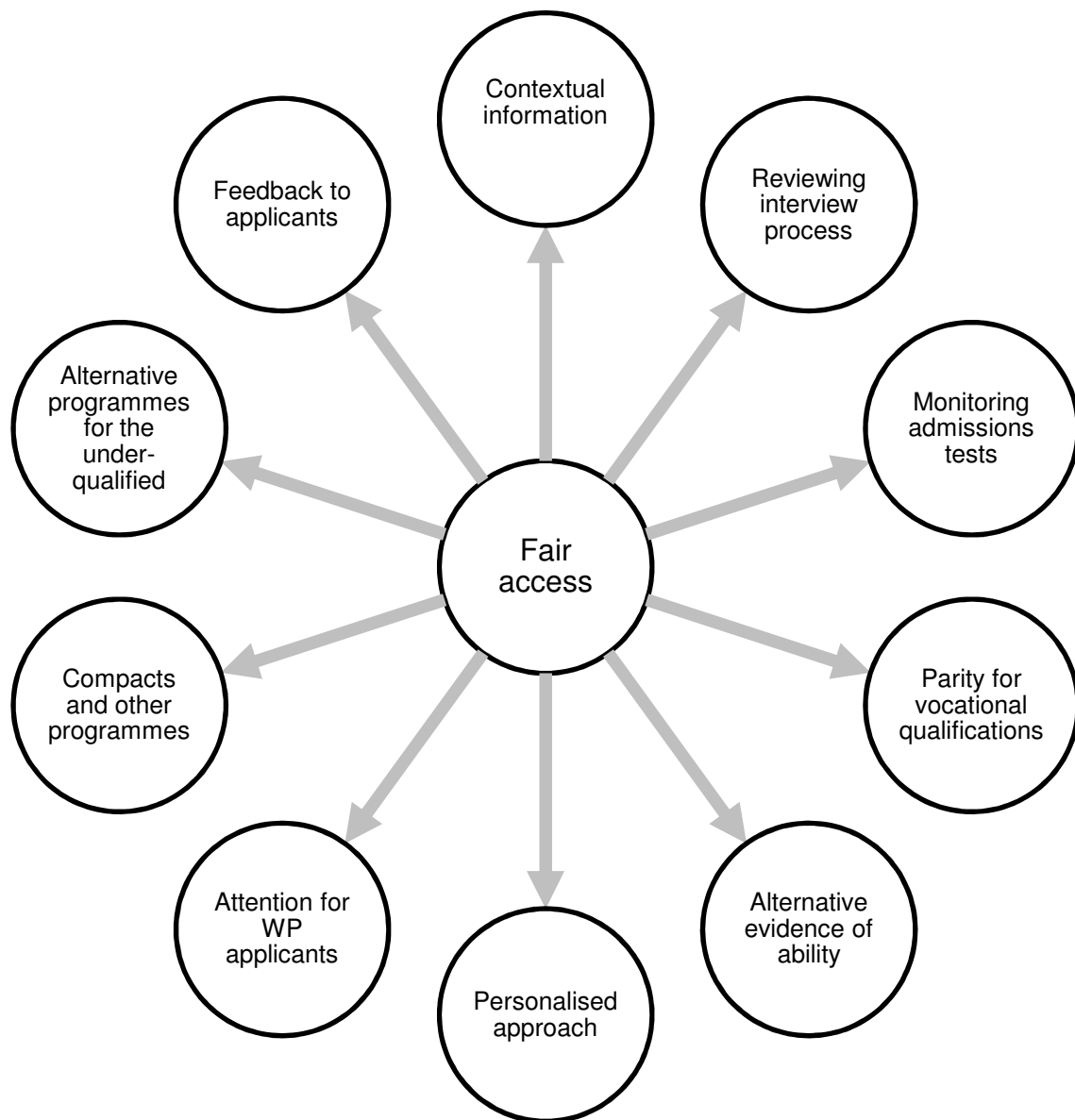
108 institutions (84%) mention links with Aimhigher, including the benefits of targeting and partnership working. Institutions included lead HEIs and HEIs which operated in more than one partnership.

10. Admissions

Institutions were required to include a high-level admissions statement, and the majority of institutions (115, 89%) refer to their undergraduate admissions processes. The link between admissions and widening participation however is not always explicit at the general level. The specific groups mentioned are vocational learners and students with other non-traditional entry qualifications. 79 HEIs (61%) run programmes identified as compact schemes.

Institutions are concerned to ensure fair access, which includes access to the institution that best meets a student's needs. Within the WPSAs, fair access may be understood as treating everyone in exactly the same way 'regardless of background': alternatively it can be recognised that some students may be disadvantaged by the selection process itself, and the different circumstances in which students gained their pre-entry qualifications. A third dimension of fair access is to ensure parity for students with vocational and alternative entry qualifications. Institutional approaches to fair selection are summarised in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1: Fair Access in Selection



These approaches to fair access in the selection process are underpinned by staff development and training, and monitoring of the admissions process.

There is little evidence in the WPSAs to suggest that institutions are taking proactive steps to support disabled students to successfully apply to HE.

11. Flexible Learning

The key areas of flexibility which we have identified in the WPSAs are: flexible admissions; other sites of learning; provision of alternative HE qualifications; alternative modes of delivery; alternative types of provision (e.g., accelerated or 'bite-sized' learning); flexible infrastructure; and combining different elements of flexibility.

- 83 institutions (64%) make explicit reference to Foundation Degrees.
- 81 institutions (63%) refer to their part-time provision in relation to widening participation.
- 50 institutions (39%) talk about their electronic learning resources and 24 institutions (19%) talk about distance learning.
- 31 institutions (24%) refer to work relating to apprentices.

- 6 institutions (5%) mention accreditation of prior (experiential) learning and a few indicate their own special entry programmes for applicants without the required qualifications.

12. Retention

There is strong commitment to enabling students to be successful in HE and 117 of the HEIs (91%) linked retention to their WPSA, and 19 discussed a formal retention strategy. However, definitions of retention and success vary from completing courses or progressing normally to reaching full potential, and many institutions do not offer a definition. Where an institutional approach is adopted, associate deans are emerging as a group with responsibility for retention at the school level, and this may be coupled with the requirement for school-level retention plans and/or school committees to address retention issues.

A key challenge is the extent to which specific groups should be identified and targeted for retention support versus mainstreaming developments to benefit all students. There is a growing awareness of the need to use institutional data to improve retention. Some institutions refer to the specific challenges of having a more diverse student population, although evidence is cited by a small number of institutions of no difference between the student population as a whole and specific target groups. However, there are few examples of subject-specific interventions. A couple of institutions have developed interventions to support students that have made poor course choices and who need support to move to a more appropriate HE programme, or to re-enter HE.

13. Induction

There is a strong recognition of the challenges of transition into HE for all students and students from non-traditional backgrounds in particular. 78 institutions (60%) make reference to induction and 58 institutions (45%) provide details about their induction arrangements. Institutions are taking a more strategic approach to induction, and recognising it as a process rather than an event. Some institutions use the induction period to try to identify the students who are at risk, or to target support at particular student groups. There are few examples however of institutions integrating equality and diversity into an inclusive induction process.

14. Learning and Teaching

There is a growing awareness of the link between widening participation and learning and teaching. 68 institutions (53%) explicitly referred to their learning and teaching strategy in their WPSA. Widening participation and learning and teaching are interacting in relation to:

- increased organisational flexibility
- embedding study skills
- changes to assessment strategies
- more student-centred learning
- curriculum development and review
- renewed emphasis on personal tutoring, especially to identify and/or follow up students who are 'at risk' of failing and/or withdrawing.

15. Personal Tutoring

Personal tutoring is a specific aspect of learning and teaching which is mentioned in WPSAs by institutions of all types. It may be conceived of as a wholly academic activity, or both academic and pastoral support. It is seen as contributing to improve student transition, retention and satisfaction, and increased rates of retention and high levels of student satisfaction are cited as evidence of the impact of personal tutoring. In summary, the emerging features of a modern personal tutoring system seem to be:

- based at school (or faculty) level
- strong academic focus

- early meetings to engage students
- identifying students at risk and providing interventions
- linked to student services, student union and peer mentoring or similar peer scheme to provide pastoral and social support.

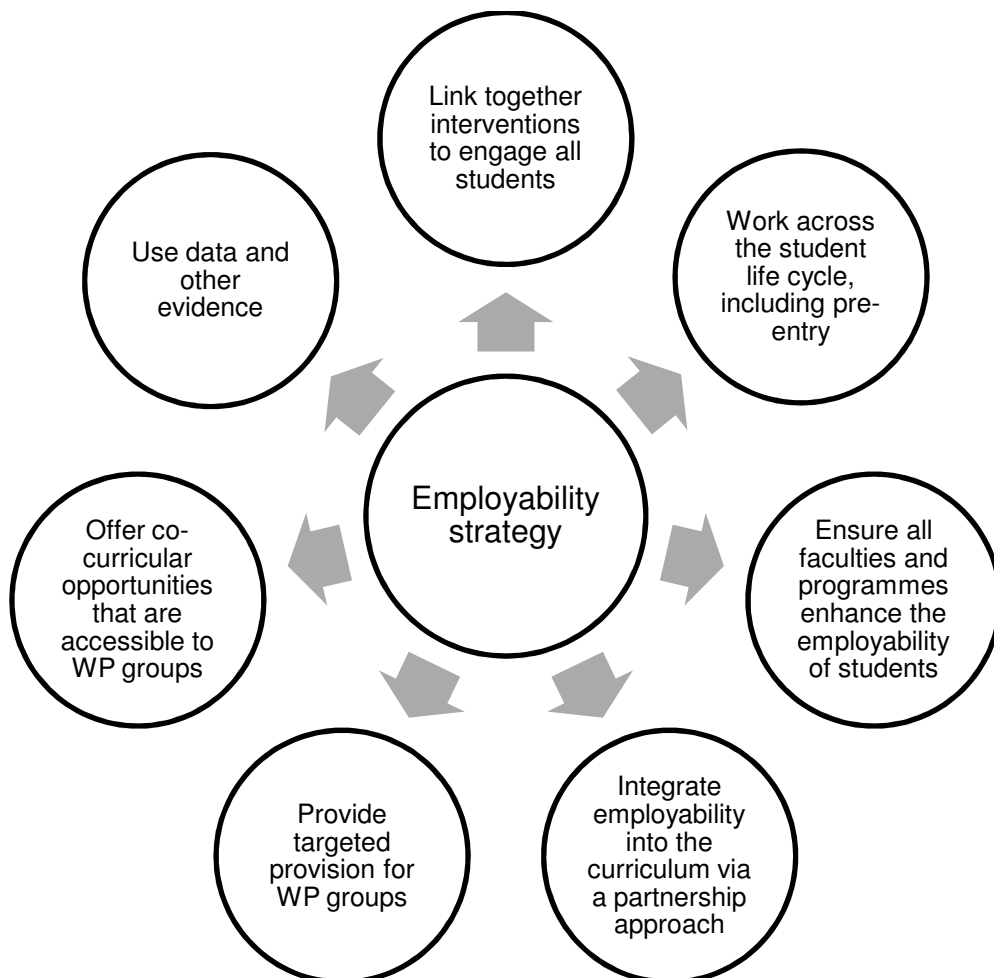
16. Retention, Achievement and Progression of Black and Minority Ethnic Groups (BME)

Almost all institutions (109, 84%) identify BME as a target group for access to HE, but only about half of these institutions (57, 44%) are sensitive to the differential retention, achievement and progression of these groups. Institutional responses include data collection, target setting and monitoring, learning and teaching, student engagement and student support. The most popular type of intervention beyond data collection and analysis seems to be mentoring and offering role models. Much of this work is at an early stage (i.e., recognising that there is a problem rather than taking action).

17. Employability

There is widespread commitment to using the student life cycle approach to widening participation, and thus the majority of institutions (112, 87%) mention employability in their WPSAs, and 76 HEIs (59%) provide further details. However, the majority of work discussed in relation to employability is not targeted at students from specific groups (although they should benefit from embedded provision). A strategic approach to employability may include the elements identified in Diagram 2.

Diagram 2: A Strategic Approach to Widening Participation and Employability



18. Widening Participation to Postgraduate Study

The majority of institutions (over 85%) do not refer to postgraduate access or the postgraduate learning experience in their WPSA. 27 (21%) HEIs make reference to postgraduate activities, but only 18 (14%) of these references are specifically about widening participation to postgraduate study. This includes all types of institution. Widening access to postgraduate study is in the early stages of development and institutions are often not explicit about whether they are focusing on taught programmes or research programmes or both. At the moment a number of potential target groups have been mentioned, but there is a lack of evidence of robust targeting of these groups, and interventions are embryonic. This is however an important area for future widening participation activity.

19. Volumes of Activity

HEIs have submitted a wealth of detail in respect of their widening participation activities, although it is not always clear whether the beneficiaries are widening participation target groups. On the whole, there is unlikely to be sufficient detail overall for categorisation and aggregation at a national level.

20. Evaluation Process

In many cases, the relationship between planned widening participation activity and the anticipated outcome is not explicit. Institutions lack appropriate performance indicators or measures, or targets and approaches to measurement, and these terms may be used interchangeably or without precision. If outcomes are observed it is not easy to attribute cause to a specific intervention.

21. Performance Indicators or Measures

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) widening participation-related benchmark indicators are referred to by over 85% of institutions; they are used to measure performance and to set targets. Many HEIs have developed performance indicators (e.g., take up of bursaries) or tailored performance indicators to their own needs (e.g., access rates from their own compact schemes).

22. Targets

Targets generally embrace specific increases in relation to intake and planned outputs around particular aims and objectives. HESA widening participation performance indicators are often used as intake targets and expressed in terms of a small percentage change. Other numerical pre-entry targets include: increasing the numbers of schools; college partnerships and progression agreements; sponsoring academies; and developing employer initiatives. In relation to retention, and to a lesser extent achievement and employability, HESA performance indicators are frequently used to identify the institutional position and improve it. A few institutions set their own targets in respect of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and learners with disabilities. There are also some targets relating to infrastructural developments to improve support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including: social learning space; student mentoring; timely interventions; inclusive curricula; infrastructure to support; and delivering part-time learning.

23. External Data

All HEIs use HESA data, many use other national datasets and a few use other data to monitor their performance against targets. Other data include: POLAR; free school meals; Aimhigher/local authority and geo-demographic data; post-16 staying-on rates; Education Maintenance Allowance data; UCAS; Disabled Students Allowance; National Students' Satisfaction Survey; the Destinations of Leavers from HE and University tracking projects. HEIs analyse their intakes with particular reference to social class and educational background, and sometimes undertake their own postcode analysis. National data is supplemented with internally generated data.

24. Internal Data: Management Information Systems, Student Records and Tracking

Institutional student records and management information systems are used to review performance in relation to key transitional stages in the student life cycle - applications and acceptances, intake profile, retention, progression and achievement - and in some institutions this is to the level of subjects and employment sectors. Other institutions have recognised the limitations of their data management and capacity to analyse it, and so are planning to improve their resources.

25. Evaluation

Evaluation, defined as the measuring of outcomes or impact, is not generally embedded, thus the relationship between the objective and the planned course of action to achieve it remains untested without outcomes and evidence. Most institutions which tackle this issue do so numerically, for example, an increased intake of a particular widening participation group, improved continuation rates or an increase in partner schools and colleges, while evidence of success, is often seen as an improvement in the appropriate HESA benchmark.

26. Future Intentions

Intelligent monitoring rather than integrated, evidence-based planning characterises the sector. Institutions are currently able to say what has and has not happened but not necessarily why this may have been the case and how this will affect future plans. Institutions are, however, conscious of more work to be done in this respect and some have incorporated developments into their strategies.

27. Institutional Developments to Mainstream and Sustain Widening Participation and Equality

Institutions are mainstreaming widening participation and equality to a greater or lesser extent in relation to the following issues:

- There is little explicit evidence of institutions taking a systematic approach to developing an inclusive institution. In the WPSAs they describe the current situation rather than critically assessing and identifying future priorities.
- Many HEIs do not have an overt statement of their widening participation definition or institutional vision and there can be weak use of targeting.
- Widening participation is increasing as an institutional priority, evidenced by its relationship with other institutional policies, and commitment is visible in mission statements and corporate documentation, and in institutional organisation. Senior leadership of widening participation is less apparent.
- Staff engagement is being encouraged through de-centralised organisational structures with 54 institutions (42%) having identified staff training and development activities to support widening participation, and 22 institutions (17%) discussed sharing and promoting good practice across the institution. There is less evidence of staff accountability and reward for widening participation and equality to promote engagement.
- Many admissions strategies only engage with widening participation in a limited way, such as identifying support for specific groups, particularly vocational learners. They are less likely to ensure that students from widening participation target groups are not disadvantaged by the selection process itself and to recognise the different circumstances in which students gained their pre-entry qualifications.
- There is encouraging evidence about the ways in which some institutions are linking widening participation to learning and teaching and implementing more inclusive practices to improve the student experience and promote student retention and success.
- While the majority of WPSAs reference employability, it is often not fully integrated into the core curriculum to maximise the impact on widening participation target groups.

- There is currently very little recognition of the concept of widening participation with regard to postgraduate study, and, where it is recognised, policies and interventions are at an early stage of development.
- The WPSAs demonstrate that generally institutions have sufficient data about the volume of activity taking place, but are less clear about the expected outcomes of policies and interventions in relation to specific target groups. There is scope for improvement with regard to target setting and identifying methods of measurement to gauge the success or otherwise of their work.
- National and institutional data could be used more to inform decision making at either a strategic or an operational level.

1. Report Introduction

Early in 2009 every English higher education institution (HEI), including postgraduate-only institutions and further education colleges (FECs) with over 100 full-time equivalent (FTE) higher education (HE) students, was requested to submit a Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (WPSA) to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in June of the same year. This request emanated from the 2008 National Audit Office report³ into widening participation which noted that “too little is known about the widening participation activities and expenditure of institutions.” HEFCE also note that:

“An important driver behind our request for an assessment of institutional commitment to widening participation is the evidence it will provide of how widening participation has become an integral part of the policies, processes and cultures in many institutions.” (HEFCE 2009/01, paragraph 14)⁴

Action on Access, the national widening participation co-ordination team, has undertaken a thematic review of the 129 WPSAs (including those from postgraduate-only institutions) prepared by the HEIs. This analysis informs this report, which provides a descriptive overview of the ways in which institutions in the sector are addressing widening participation in general and specific issues in particular. Widening participation in the further education (FE) sector has different priorities and practices, and FECs were given alternative guidance by HEFCE to inform the preparation of their WPSAs. Action on Access is therefore undertaking a separate review of the WPSAs prepared by FECs, and a report will be submitted to HEFCE by the end of 2010.

2. Approach

Our approach has been to undertake a thematic review across the WPSAs rather than to review and analyse the individual institutional documents. This report is therefore *thematic*, and seeks to describe the range of approaches, activities and outcomes that we have seen across the WPSAs. This review document does not attempt to assess or judge individual WPSAs, nor does it critically evaluate different approaches, or compare different types of institutional approach to widening participation. Rather, this is a general overview of a broad and complex topic. Where possible we have pointed to examples of effective practice, but the report does not go into depth about good practice, or areas for development. Guidance will be integrated in to a series of briefing documents relating to this WPSA review on: employer and community engagement to widen participation to adults; widening participation and admissions; student transition, retention and achievement in HE; flexible and part-time learning; equality and diversity; targeting; measures; and evidence and institutional cultural change. Guidance documents will contextualise what institutions are doing in the current policy climate and in relation to evidence about effective practice, and support institutions to review and develop their own effectiveness in key areas.

Our analysis has used an evidence-informed framework (see Appendix 1), which was used to code the WPSAs in a systematic way. The coding framework focused broadly on the strategic approaches of institutions, the activities undertaken and the measurement of activities and outcomes. This was supplemented by an inductive approach which identified new themes during the coding process. All of the coding was undertaken by a single researcher to ensure reliability, and was done using NVivo software. The analysis of the WPSAs has then been undertaken

³National Audit Office (2008) *Widening participation in higher education*, available from http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0708/widening_participation_in_high.aspx

⁴ HEFCE (2009/01) *Request for widening participation strategic assessments* (Bristol, HEFCE). http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_01/

according to themes that we have felt to be important, either based on our framework and understanding of the sector, or because they have occurred frequently in WPSAs. We have drawn on report queries generated through NVivo and additional key word searches of the documents. This has allowed us to be confident that we have captured the breadth of information relating to specific topics. It is worth noting that after the WPSAs were coded, relevant extracts (identified by coding and key word searches) were read together, rather than individual WPSAs in their entirety.

We are mindful, however, that in our analysis we are reviewing what institutions tell us in their WPSAs. In reality there may be additional information that institutions have not reported and, furthermore, that implementation may not necessarily be the same as they state in their strategies. Additionally, the WPSAs were written at a specific time and so will always only provide a snapshot of widening participation work in the sector. The intervening period between the WPSAs' submission and the publication of this report has coincided with substantial changes in the HE sector and beyond, including the student number control, severe reductions in funding for the sector and a change of government with new and still emerging priorities for the HE sector, especially in relation to social inclusion issues.

3. Strategic Issues

This section of the report reviews the strategic approaches employed by institutions to widen participation as detailed in their WPSAs. It covers three broad strategic areas: institutional commitment to and understanding of widening participation; the relationship between widening participation and other institutional policies and priorities; and the organisation of widening participation. The following comments are based on a synthesis of these aspects in terms of their degree of prominence across the WPSAs submitted, and give a sense of the broad position that the sector has reached. It is, of necessity, provisional and contingent on the constraints of the approach we have adopted. However, it does provide a basis for further discussion and analysis, which are both very much part of the developmental spirit of the process highlighted in the WPSA guidelines to HEIs from HEFCE.

3.1 Institutional Commitment to and Understanding of Widening Participation

It is clear from the WPSAs that institutions have given much strategic thought to their widening participation aims and objectives. Perhaps this should not be surprising given that this was the main purpose of the WPSA guidance. However, it is doubtful this would have been the case in previous years and perhaps it therefore reflects the growing focus on widening participation within institutions at all levels, and also the greater integration and congruence with other internal functions such as marketing. There is a tendency towards differential positioning occurring between institutions or indeed within some institutions in relation to widening participation. But, here again, this should not be surprising given the fact that the sector is enormously diverse in relation to a growing number of indices. In some WPSAs a realignment of mission with widening participation objectives has meant redefining the mission, whereas for other institutions mission integrity is positioned as central and widening participation is seen as one amongst a number of contributing factors. Some of the examples below illustrate the ways in which widening participation is positioned vis a vis institutional mission, and this reflects the diversity of the sector and demonstrates how broader institutional mission is the mediator for both widening participation objectives and activities.

There is widespread and often explicit reference to be found throughout the documents of institutional commitment to widening participation. This is also manifested through declarations of commitment to widen participation for various target and/or under-represented groups and by various means through to the alignment of the institutions' values with widening participation. Recognising that commitment to widening participation is notoriously difficult to judge on the basis

of a planning document; we have made use of proxies as indicators of this, which have been identified through systematic analysis and review processes.

The Position of Widening Participation in Institutional Missions

Some HEIs see their widening participation objectives as inseparable from their core mission and values. For these institutions, the lack of separation between mission and widening participation aims is emblematic of their commitment. Such institutions celebrate their commitment through their mission and in this widening participation leads but is also led by the wider institutional objectives. For other institutions, the widening participation strategy is expressly separated from, but may be referenced against, the central mission statement or values (these differential positions were explored in the research by Shaw et al. 2007⁵). So the examples offered here illuminate both the position where commitment to widening participation is contingent on the contribution to, or effect it has on, core mission as well as where widening participation is an integral part of core mission and therefore inseparable. These statements drawn from the documents illustrate this issue:

Statement 1: “Progress towards widening participation while maintaining standards of excellence and building on institutional strengths.”

Statement 2: “Creating and facilitating opportunities for people to participate and access HE is central to our vision and corporate plan.”

Statement 3: “Widening participation is an extended part of our mission statement underpinning our ambition to serve students, staff, our partners and the community.”

The differing discourses used in institutional mission statements in relation to widening participation highlighted here suggests the extent to which widening participation, for example, leads the mission of an institution or is contingent on other mission priorities. So, in Statement 1 for example, progress in widening participation is contingent on maintaining standards of excellence. Contrast this with Statement 2 where widening participation is positioned as leading the visions and corporate plan of the university. It could be argued that Statement 3 falls somewhere in between the other two, with the underpinning reference to its “ambition to serve” being a key priority for widening participation. So the ways in which HEIs demonstrate and manifest a commitment or concern with widening participation varies. Equally, the expression of this within mission statements may be the extent to which widening participation is a defining feature of institutional identity. Some degree of this variation can be seen from the different approaches in the sample statements already referred to. However, many of the institutional missions situated their widening participation objectives in relation to two key factors: history and place. Our analysis of the WPSAs across the sector reveals that both are frequently found in the WPSA submissions.

The Importance of History and Place in WPSAs

The different types, or forms, of commitment covered considerable ground and the following examples give some sense of the overall scope. Our analysis of the strategic issues emerging from the WPSAs suggests that, as well as understanding the position that institutional commitment has in WPSAs, it is also important to recognise which other factors HEIs see as significant and influential in relation to widening participation. There are a number of references throughout the submissions to both the importance of history as well as place. In the case of the latter it would seem that place is used in some instances as a signifier of the physical features of the locality

⁵ Shaw, J., Brain, K., Bridger, K., Foreman, J. and Reid, I. 2007. *Embedding widening participation and promoting student diversity: what can be learned from a business case approach?* York: Higher Education Academy.

within which an HEI is operating its WPSA. However, there were also examples where the defining aspect of place was the social-economic position of the communities being served by the widening participation activities of the HEI. So the strategic mission statements often include reference to either or both these factors. There are examples where both history and place are included in the WPSA, and in turn this raises wider issues regarding the ways in which institutions have come to develop their own academic identities. It can be argued that both a sense of place and history have had a major impact on the mission identities of HEIs.⁶ So the answer to the question, 'what kind or type of university is this?' is often answered either partially or fully with reference to history and/or place.

We begin with a discussion about the relationship between widening participation and history as this is included in the mission statements of the strategic assessments.

Sense of History

Having a history of widening participation was highlighted by some HEIs to illustrate not only the degree of past commitment, but perhaps also was suggestive of future commitment as well. The close alignment of widening participation history with the strategy may also be seen as a way of affirming continuity of identity, reputation and also a sense of expertise about access and widening participation in HE. Below are three examples drawn from the WPSAs which illustrate the different roles that history plays in widening participation.

Example 1: "For over 180 years, the University has remained true to its original mission of creating and supporting opportunities for participation in higher education groups and is proud of this tradition."

Example 2: "We retain our absolute commitment to our historical mission of widening access and increasing participation in HE."

Example 3: "Strong history of widening participation in many forms."

Each of the above examples makes use of history differently as part of its WPSA. In Example 1, there is a strong sense of congruence being suggested as a consequence the long-lasting mission to create and support opportunities for HE participation. By placing this historical mission within its WPSA, this HEI is directly associating its history with widening participation. Example 2 does two things; it both reaffirms an absolute historical commitment to widening access and at the same time conditions this with an equally strong commitment to increasing participation. In times of expanding HE numbers, this approach seems to have much to commend it. However, in times of no expansion or the reduction of HE numbers, it is likely that this dual approach could be the source of much tension. Example 3 is the broadest in terms of scope but here again makes the link between history and widening participation in a very positive way, implying something of the breadth of this across the university. These three examples illustrate the different ways in which a sense of history can be associated with widening participation in the mission element of the WPSAs. It was by no means uncommon to find this in the WPSAs and shows the way in which, in this case, the historical dimension of an institution's mission identity conditions or mediates its widening participation commitment. This is not the only factor that has this effect. We now turn our attention to a second factor which has a prominent role in a similar way to history and this is the sense of place or locality and widening participation. We found that the notion of place was a recurring feature of many WPSAs in a similar way to the references to history just discussed.

⁶ Storan, J., 2010, Governments regional policy and its shaping of widening participation practice in England in Longworth, L., Osborne, M. (Eds), 2010, Perspectives on Learning Cities and Regions, Leicester, NIACE.

Place was used in a variety of ways in association with the WPSAs often to provide a context for the particular approach that the institution is adopting in its WPSA.

Sense of Place

The sense of place which is generally a characteristic of HEIs' mission identity also features as a strategically important element of their WPSAs and is articulated in a multitude of ways. From our analysis, we found that place is used variously in relation to widening participation and HE access. It is however, very often used as a strong signifier of both degree and type of commitment to widening participation, and there are examples of both within the WPSAs' mission sections. Our analysis suggests that a sense of place is used to denote and affirm a mission level commitment to widening participation as well as to provide a degree of specificity to HEIs. The social and economic features of the places referred to in the WPSAs were important to the rationale for institutional support for widening participation. The implication being that through widening participation to HE (not necessarily to the same university), a particular university was also contributing to, for example, the process of local economic regeneration, social cohesion and so on. Such benefits of widening participation were seen as reasons for mission commitment but also as desirable outcomes in themselves.

As with the discussion of history, we have identified three examples of the way a sense of place forms part of the strategic element of the WPSAs. It should be noted how strongly the sense of place featured across the WPSAs as a whole, not just in these limited examples.

Example 1: "Mission embraces widening participation in the context of the University's relationship with the local community."

Example 2: "The University is located in one of the most ethnically and socially diverse parts of the city and possibly the UK."

Example 3: "Widening participation is a fundamental part of the University's global position as an influential civic university with a commitment to its region and a strong culture of engagement."

Example 1 explicitly positions widening participation within and as an integral part of the University's wider relationship with the local community.⁷ References to place by mention of the local community are, from analysis, not always about place only, or as in some examples, at all. So, a number of HEIs referred to the local community, sometimes to mean business, community or even in a completely abstract form akin to the rural idyll. Example 2 draws on the differential ethnicity of the city in which it is located as being of significance for its widening participation mission. Again, defining place in this way was common to a considerable number of WPSAs, as was the broader reference to the UK. Globalisation is an important part of many universities' wider mission statements, and the final example of the use of place illustrates this in relation to widening participation. This formulation was fairly uncommon but it does nevertheless suggest how some universities see widening participation as much part of their global vision as their regional one.

3.2 Links to other Institutional Policies and Priorities

Given the guidance for the WPSAs to bring together work on outreach, admissions, bursaries and fair access, learning and teaching and the student experience, one would expect to see information about how widening participation relates to other institutional policies and priorities. Indeed, many HEIs provide information about the links between widening participation and other

⁷ Lupton, P., 2006, How does place affect education? in Delorenzi, S. (Ed), 2006, Going Places: neighbourhood, ethnicity and social mobility, London, IPPR.

institutional strategies. The following table provides information on the links with particular types of strategy.

Table 1: Links between WPSA and other Institutional Strategies, Policies and Priorities

Strategy/Policy/Priority	Number of Institutions	Percentage of Institutions
Access Agreement	122	95%
Widening participation strategy	119	92%
Admissions	117	91%
Retention in general*	117	91%
Equality and diversity strategy	68	53%
Learning, teaching and assessment strategy	68	53%
Mission statement or corporate plan	67	52%
Other strategies	30	23%
Retention strategy*	19	15%
Estates strategy	12	9%
Human resources	9	7%

*19 institutions (15%) refer to an institutional retention strategy, but 117 institutions (91%) discuss retention as a priority in their WPSAs. It is not always explicit whether or not there is a formal, institution-wide retention or similar strategy.

It is particularly interesting to note that 119 (92%) institutions make reference to a widening participation strategy, which they are not required to have, while 117 (91%) institutions refer to their admissions policy, which was to be included with the WPSA. This suggests that some institutions may not be integrating widening participation and admissions in the way intended. Similarly, six (5%) institutions have not referred to their Access Agreement, again suggesting a lack of coherent approach to bursaries and outreach activity funded through fee income, and other institutional work intended to widen participation. Most institutions however appear to have made a strategic link between widening participation and student retention and success, although it is not explicit how many institutions have a formal, institution-wide approach to student retention and success.

Just over half of the institutions (68, 53%) have referred to their equality and diversity policies. These are legal requirements for institutions. Furthermore, the new Equality Act came into force on 1st October 2010, and brings together over 116 separate pieces of equality-related legislation. In addition, the Act will impose a new legal duty on public bodies, including central government and local authorities, to consider the impact their strategic decisions will have on narrowing socio-economic inequalities, such as the gap between rich and poor. The Act will simplify, strengthen and harmonise the current legislation to provide Britain with a new discrimination law which protects individuals from unfair treatment and promotes a fair and more equal society. Thus, it is perhaps surprising that institutions have not made greater links between work intended to widen access to HE and improve student success in HE and policies to promote equality and diversity, and promote greater equality of opportunity and outcomes in anticipation of this Act.

Similarly, it is perhaps surprising that only 53% of institutions have linked their WPSA to their learning and teaching strategy, especially as there are several sections in the guidelines (HEFCE 2009/01) which suggest that widening participation should be linked to learning and teaching and the development of the learning environment.

3.3 The Strategic Organisation of Widening Participation

The organisational culture of widening participation within institutions was a theme that was coded in the WPSA documents. The three types of organisational culture that were examined were: a centralised widening participation team or unit; dispersed or mainstreamed into academic or service functions; or hybrid arrangements, with shared responsibilities, co-ordinated centrally. However, in a significant number of instances (21%) the WPSAs did not make the institutional organisational culture of widening participation work clear. Furthermore, four institutions made no reference to how their widening participation work is organised. Table 2 shows the breakdown of how institutions organise their widening participation work.

Table 2: Institutional Organisation of Widening Participation

Organisation of Widening Participation	Number of Institutions	Percentage of Institutions
Dispersed or mainstreamed into academic and service functions	48	37%
Hybrid shared responsibilities co-ordinated centrally	33	26%
Unclear	27	21%
Central widening participation unit	17	13%
Total*	125	97%

*The remaining four institutions (3%) made no reference to how their widening participation work is organised.

Table 2 is interesting as it suggests that in 37% of institutions the organisation of widening participation is supporting a mainstreamed approach. In other words, responsibility for widening participation does not rest solely with a few named individuals, but rather it is dispersed across the institution into academic departments and institutional services, thus promoting a culture of staff-wide responsibility for and engagement in widening participation, especially if it is underpinned by staff accountability, recognition and reward. A further 26% have adopted a hybrid model, with responsibility mainstreamed into departments and services, while the institutional response to widening participation is co-ordinated centrally, potentially providing greater management and coherence to 'the student experience' across the institution. It would appear that a relatively small number of institutions (17) have retained a central widening participation unit that has significant responsibility for widening participation.

4. Activities

A significant proportion of the WPSAs is dedicated to the activities that institutions are engaged in to widen participation. The following sections provide a descriptive account of these activities.

4.1 Pre-Entry Activity

Work with Schools

All of the WPSAs make reference to links with schools and academies, overwhelmingly in the context of outreach work. The purposes of links are identified as: recruitment; raising aspirations; preparing students for entering HE; providing information about finance; developing community relation; and contributing to social and economic regeneration.

49 institutions are linking with primary schools (see below), and 92 institutions provide details of more formal partnerships. Most of the relationships are with local schools, even when institutions have a national recruitment profile. There are some notable exceptions; one highly selective

university offers a link with an individual for every school and college in the country. Another selecting institution has established a school and college network with members across the country, which they feel reflect the university's recruitment patterns. A third, similar type of institution, is part of a national schools and colleges programme, but also recognises the importance of local links with schools and colleges.

The number of links that institutions have varies substantially; unsurprisingly, institutions with a large teacher training portfolio tending to have the largest numbers. There is some interest in broadening the purpose of initial teacher training links to contribute more to widening participation and student recruitment (Thomas et al. 2010⁸ and Woods and Kendall 2010⁹).

The WPSAs demonstrate that Aimhigher has the potential to improve institutions' work with schools and colleges, and collectively the WPSAs identify a range of benefits to HEIs of working with Aimhigher partnerships: co-ordination of work with schools and colleges to avoid duplication; co-ordinated access to limited school and college time, with associated economies of scale; effective targeting of schools and colleges and learners within them; positive relationships with local data providers (such as local education authorities and Connexions); robust monitoring and tracking; and evaluation strategies.

There is, on the whole, a strong commitment to working with academies and trust schools. Many HEIs are involved with these developing institutions in supportive strategic partnerships which will develop students, staff, leaders and whole institutions. A limited number of HEIs have opted not to engage with academies and trust schools; one institution states that this is because they recruit their students nationally, not locally.

Links with Primary Schools and/or Outreach with Primary School-aged Children

As noted above, 49 HEIs discuss links with primary schools or deliver outreach work to this cohort. Some HEIs explicitly state they are delivering this work via Aimhigher, although other evidence from partnerships would suggest this number is higher. Where HEIs outline the reasoning behind working with the primary sector it is usually for the purpose of recognising the importance of early intervention to raise both awareness of, and aspiration towards, progression into HE. Where a large amount of work is being done it is invariably part of a coherent programme rather than one-off activities. The breadth of work varies enormously from working closely with one school through targeting a specific ward, to working with anything from a dozen primaries to upwards of 30, with one institution reporting that they work with 6000 pupils across 164 primary schools. The majority of HEIs highlight the importance of targeting socially disadvantaged pupils (often Aimhigher provides mechanisms for identifying and targeting schools). There is a strong emphasis on stressing the vocabulary of HE and raising attainment levels. Interventions vary and include: campus visits; curriculum workshops; extended projects; mentoring; supporting clubs and other extra curricular activities. Programmes leading to mini graduation ceremonies are popular. In some cases HEIs support parents within the primary schools to train to become classroom assistants. There are several examples of specialist institutions linking with primary schools to increase interest in, and aspiration to, studying their own disciplines.

⁸ Thomas, L. with Ashley, M., Diamond, J., Grime, K., Farrelly, N., Murtagh, L., Richards, A. and Woolhouse, C. (2010) *From projects to whole school/college-higher education institution partnerships: Identifying the critical success factors under-pinning effective strategic partnerships*. Report submitted to HEFCE by Edge Hill University. Bristol: HEFCE

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2010/rd07_10/

⁹ Woods, R., and Kendall, S. with Barrett, D. (2010) *Bringing the tapestry together: Building systemic partnership in and beyond Bedfordshire*. Report submitted to HEFCE by University of Bedfordshire. Bristol: HEFCE http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2010/rd07_10/

Work with FEC Partners

Nearly 80% of HEIs (101, 78%) refer to work with FECs to widen participation and some provide details of well-developed and comprehensive links with FE partners. Much of the work across the sector falls into two broad areas: improving progression from FE (Level 3 learners) to HE; and collaborative provision (either franchised or externally validated and most often Foundation Degrees). There are also some examples of collaborative curriculum development. Whilst it is not possible to gauge from the WPSAs the impact of collaborative provision on widening participation, the high level of engagement with FECs is obviously valued by the HEIs in terms of their widening participation strategies, and should be an area prioritised for future monitoring and evaluation.

Outreach activities in colleges are in essence very similar to those delivered in schools (aspiration-raising and provision of information, advice and guidance, even when targeting mature and vocational learners). Lifelong Learning Networks, often in collaboration with Aimhigher partnerships, appear to be very important vehicles in establishing progression routes into HE for vocational learners. Collaborative provision is mostly built on additional student numbers, and future work in this area is threatened by the cap on student numbers. For example, one institution states that they will focus on consolidation rather than expansion or growth, while another institution will “work with those FE colleges which can use their own HEFCE contract to supply franchise numbers.” A third university is developing a smaller number of “more substantial” partnerships, and committing to developing university centres. In other institutions, further development is likely to focus on progression from Foundation Degrees to top-up degrees. There is therefore some concern expressed about the possibility of FECs being able to validate Foundation Degrees.

Other areas of current collaboration but which are less widespread include: bridging programmes for people without appropriate Level 3 qualifications; analysis and follow-up of admissions data, which demonstrates that over a number of years applicants from FECs are less likely to achieve an offer than other school applicants; and some innovative programmes to encourage target groups into HE. A limited number of institutions extend their partnership working with FECs to include staff development for staff delivering HE in partner institutions, but very few institutions report explicitly trying to develop the HE in FE student experience, although one institution reports that they extended the work of their Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning into some of their FE partners. A few institutions have very close relations with FE partners; for example, one university is looking to share services and resources with a local FE partner and develop collaborative working beyond the area of widening participation – in this case into international recruitment. Another institution has an explicit commitment to harnessing FE collaboration for the purpose of regional planning and co-ordination:

“The intention is to move beyond a set of bilateral agreements between individual partners and [name of university] towards a more collegiate planning process across the defined geographical area and delivered by partners in accordance with local demand and the capability and capacity of individual partners.”

Work with Communities and other Partners

There is evidence in some institutions of growing local community engagement to provide access for excluded communities and to increase recruitment from these areas. Engagement is often through existing community, youth, faith and sports groups or through the arts (by both specialist and non-specialist institutions). Institutions may then offer a range of adult learning opportunities in the community or in the workplace. Community engagement can also be linked to student volunteering, which can be used to enrich the student experience of HE students.

Some local work is targeted towards regeneration. This is mentioned by almost a quarter of HEIs. This includes a range of types of universities, predominantly those located in urban areas which

were traditionally heavily involved in manufacturing and the coal and steel industries. Approaches vary from recruiting local students (and thus improving the skills base), collaborative provision (e.g., with FECs) to education-led regeneration and large-scale capital investment.

“The University is also at the centre of regeneration through education in [name of place]. The overriding aim is to create a knowledge economy for [name of place and wider area] through education-led regeneration.”

Much of this regeneration development has a strong arts focus, although other foci are also implied. This work is often underpinned by seemingly untested assumptions, such as the notion that local graduates will stay and develop the area rather than using HE as a passport to leave the area. Furthermore, the link between regeneration and widening participation is sometimes only implied. The link between regeneration and widening participation is explicitly stated by one institution:

“The University is fully committed to working in partnership at regional, sub-regional and local levels. This is seen as a major contribution to widening participation through the development of strategic approaches, for example - helping to develop the Regional Development Agency’s¹⁰ Regional Skills Strategy; the Workforce Development Plan and, at local level, the [name of city] Partnership’s Community Plan and 14-19 Action Plan. All of these programmes are significant sources of support for widening participation which enable the University to:

- provide programmes for small and medium-sized enterprises’ workforce without higher level skills
- enable those living in poorer communities to acquire employment-related skills
- help people disadvantaged by ethnicity, gender or disability to gain employment-related skills
- encourage and support within disadvantaged communities the capability to define learning needs and develop the means to meet them.”

Work with other partners includes work with prisons, and an increasing number of institutions include work with young offenders as part of their outreach work. Institutions are also actively engaged in working with employers, as discussed below.

Employer Links

Increasingly, engagement with employers is being seen as part of institutions’ widening participation strategies and 46 institutions talk about their employer links in their WPSA. In some institutions there is an explicit link between employer engagement and widening participation. In others the relationship to widening participation is more tangential in the sense that the activities undertaken may not be targeting under-represented groups. Much of the work appears to be in the early stages of development, including several substantial HEFCE-funded projects. There are also at least two new academic departments specifically opened to develop work in this area, and one new academic school has specific objectives related to employer engagement. The institutions that appear to have well-established and effective modes of employer engagement are all post-1992 institutions and are few in number.

Institutions are offering different types of learning, including learning from work and learning in work. In these 46 WPSAs there are, as perhaps would be expected, a significant number of

¹⁰ The coalition government plans to replace Regional Development Agencies with Local Enterprise Partnerships. Much of the detail is not yet available, and is anticipated in a White Paper later in 2010.

mentions of Foundation Degrees. Institutions are also delivering provision from pre-entry to postgraduate/professional levels. Types of provision include: negotiated work-based learning (e.g., based on a learning framework); tailor-made programmes for individual employers; enterprise development and support; accreditation of training and other professional training for employers; and continuing professional development for staff. Sometimes this is delivered in short ‘bite-sized’ modules, but often the delivery appears relatively traditional (e.g., degree programme rather than modules, etc.). The employer links span private, public and voluntary sectors. (This topic is covered in more detail in the section on flexible learning.)

Target Groups and Targeting

The groups targeted by institutions for outreach or internal activities are shown in Table 3. These figures were arrived at in two different ways. Initially, the documents were coded for these groups, and then a secondary series of text searches was conducted to ensure that all statements about these groups were covered.

Table 3: Widening Participation Target Groups – Institutional Frequency and Percentage

Widening Participation Target Groups	Frequency	Percentage
Disabled students	127	98%
Black and minority ethnic groups (BME)	109	84%
Gifted and talented	101	78%
Part-time or flexible learning	92	71%
Young people NS-SEC 4-7*	88	68%
Vocational progression	87	67%
From state schools	85	66%
From a care background	80	62%
Gender	70	54%
Mature learners (e.g., from the community)	69	53%
Work-based learners	56	43%
E-learning or distance learning	53	41%
Primary school-aged children	49	38%
First generation entrants	42	33%
Low participation neighbourhoods	33	26%
Apprentices	31	24%
Special educational needs	29	22%
Index of Multiple Deprivation	20	16%
Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transsexual	16	12%
Traveller communities	3	2%

*It should be noted that institutions are using a range of terms and associated definitions to target students from lower socio-economic groups, including state schools, National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) 4-7, first generation entrants, low participation neighbourhoods and the Index of Multiple Deprivation.

Institutions are targeting a wide range of groups for their widening participation activity. It is encouraging to note that almost all institutions identified disabled students as a target group, and 109 institutions target BME¹¹ groups, both of which are subject to equality and diversity legislation. People from 'lower socio-economic groups' defined by NS-SEC 4-7 appear to be comparatively low on the list. A detailed search of the WPSAs found that 88 HEIs (68%) make reference to the NS-SEC categories being used to inform their widening participation work, while 80 institutions (62%) explicitly target students from lower socio-economic groups for their outreach activity. Most WPSAs broadly state their aims as increasing the participation of under-represented or disadvantaged groups, though institutions are using a broad range of associated terms and definitions in addition to NS-SEC (or lower socio-economic status): state schools; low income; first generation entrants; low participation neighbourhoods; Index of Multiple Deprivation; and free school meals. This might suggest the need for clearer targeting requirements for institutions in relation to the use of NS-SEC. It should be noted however that there is evidence that the HEFCE 2007/12 targeting guidelines¹² have informed the work of institutions as well as Aimhigher; and this may be an area for increased collaboration within some institutions. It is also encouraging to note the concern regarding vocational learners, and significant to note the growing importance of part-time and flexible learners.

With regard to gender, the majority of the references relate to the access of males to HE, including white working-class boys and specific BME groups, particularly in subjects such as primary teaching, dance, health and social care and other female-dominated subjects. Indeed, 44 HEIs refer to specific activities designed to recruit males into particular subjects, or into HE more generally. The level of activity here varies, with some institutions not only targeting males, but also tracking the progress and achievement of these groups. In particular, some institutions are concerned about the retention of male students, particularly from ethnic minorities. It should be noted that males are under-represented in HE and have poorer rates of retention and achievement. However class (rather than gender per se or ethnicity) is the most influential factor with regard to all of these aspects of participation. Other gender issues relate to the access of women to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM subjects).

We have selected two specific target groups for further discussion in this section – apprentices and care leavers – as we feel these may be areas of practice that other institutions may be interested in learning about and benchmarking their own activities against.

Apprentices

Just 31 institutions reference apprentices, suggesting overall that the work is at an early stage. This is perhaps surprising because, although the WPSAs were written before the Higher Ambitions and Skills for Growth white papers (November 2009), the progression of apprentices to HE had received more attention in 2008 and 2009, through the skills agenda as a consequence of diploma development, and through the work of Aimhigher partnerships and Lifelong Learning Networks.

Apprentices are a distinct group, but in a significant number of institutions they are referred to as part of an overall ambition to engage with vocational learners. A typical target group statement is: "Students progressing from vocational courses, apprenticeships and others displaying academic potential." Some institutions clearly recognise that raising awareness of progression opportunities

¹¹ BME groups as a whole are over-represented in HE, while some specific groups are under-represented. It is not always clear whether all BME groups are being targeted for access, or just under-represented ones. Section 4.4 of this report discusses the differential retention, achievement and progression into employment of BME students.

¹² HEFCE circular 2007/12, Higher education outreach: targeting disadvantaged learners.
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2007/07_12/

for apprentices requires the development of different partnerships, for example, working with local work-based learning groups.

Lifelong Learning Networks feature prominently as the catalyst for the development of progression for apprentices and particularly through the creation of progression agreements. For example:

“A number of progression agreements are now in place at [name of university] to enhance vocational and applied progression opportunities for apprentices and NVQ Level 3 Advanced, Advanced Apprenticeship and BTEC National.”

Apprenticeship progression to Foundation Degrees is a usual pathway. For example, one institution describes its four apprenticeship pathways to Foundation Degrees in IT, Engineering, Health and Social Care and Business.

Partnerships with FE colleges are also important in developing apprenticeship progression, for example:

“The University also participates actively in the [name of project], aimed at signposting clear pathways for vocational learners and creating progression agreements between HE programmes and FE partners to facilitate easier progression to HE for vocational learners. A linked development is the [name of project] programme developed by the University with 3 partner FE colleges to provide HE credit-bearing study to Modern Apprentices while undertaking their Apprenticeship studies.”

There are some innovative examples of work with apprentices, including a Compact and fast-track progression scheme which raises awareness of flexible and part-time HE with Year 10 students.

Apprenticeship progression is moving up the political agenda and such work is likely to have increased since the WPSAs were written. The picture from the WPSAs suggests that many institutions are at a very early stage in targeting this group of learners and, whilst some institutions recognise them as a distinct sub-group of ‘vocational’ learners, others have not fully explored their needs. Recently the National Apprenticeship Service has estimated that 50% of Advanced Apprentices are interested in undertaking a degree level equivalent course. The potential for developing progression pathways and programmes for this group is therefore great.¹³

Care Leavers

The numbers of known care leavers in HE is small: 420 aged 19 in 2009, which was 7% of care leavers in the 18+ cohort. A significant majority of institutions reported they had developed or were developing strategies for increasing applications from this group and for support once enrolled. The frequency of references (80) to care leavers (or looked-after children) in the WPSAs reflects both the fact that care leavers are a specific target group in the national targeting guidelines for Aimhigher partnerships and HEIs and the prominence of the work of the Frank Buttle Trust which introduced a Quality Mark for HEIs which sign up to a commitment to care leavers. By April 2010, some 66 institutions had obtained the Quality Mark and a further 48 were in discussion with the Frank Buttle Trust about receiving the Quality Mark. This suggests a significant increase in activity targeted at this group of learners since the WPSAs were submitted.

¹³ Lifelong Learning Networks Forum, Developing Higher Apprenticeships in England, May 2010. <http://www.lifelonglearningnetworks.org.uk/key-documents/lln-reports/>

Links with and Benefits of Aimhigher

The amount of detail in HEIs' references to Aimhigher is very variable and, based on our wider knowledge of Aimhigher, we know that this does not always reflect the amount of involvement an HEI has with Aimhigher. Nearly all the lead HEIs mention that they are banker and host for Aimhigher and chair the Area Partnership Committee (APC), and a fair number refer to multiple links with Aimhigher; HEIs can be engaged with up to four partnerships. This suggests that the funding and infrastructure developed by Aimhigher in target schools makes outreach through Aimhigher an attractive proposition as they have engaged with more than one partnership. However, as noted above, many institutions do not maximise the benefits they gain from Aimhigher expertise or best practice.

Some HEIs state that they work within Aimhigher's targeting strategy, thereby conforming to the HEFCE 2007/12 guidance¹⁴ on targeting but also focusing on Aimhigher target schools. This would seem to be a real positive in the relationship since it removes the need for every individual HEI to work out their own targeting strategy with schools (some of which have multiple relationships) and precludes duplication of effort. However, some HEIs do target their own schools in addition and see this as complementing the local Aimhigher plan.

The brokering role of Aimhigher is explicitly praised since it clarifies and provides a framework for joint work with other HEIs, schools and colleges. The collaborative opportunities with other HEIs are a major advantage as is the fact that Aimhigher provides a forum for partnership working which is planned and transparent. Planning, monitoring and evaluation are shared activities which enable HEIs to take an overview of outreach provided via a range of partners. Identifying target learners and schools, providing data sources, and promoting economies of scale are all benefits cited by HEIs. One HEI states that their outreach work "sits within the context of collaboration and partnership", while another focuses on the way Aimhigher is important to partnership working and "continues to be a local success." Interestingly one institution has determined to co-ordinate and integrate its outreach interventions via a Learning Progression Framework approach.

4.2 Admissions

Institutions were required to make a high level admissions statement in their WPSA and the majority of institutions (115, 89%) make an explicit link to their undergraduate admissions process. With the exceptions of the postgraduate-only institutions, only three make explicit reference to postgraduate admissions. Implicit in the majority of statements is a focus on 'widening participation students'. Specific groups mentioned include: vocational learners and students with other non-traditional entry qualifications, including 14-19 diplomas, and disabled learners. There are very few references to the admission of part-time learners (see SPA's (Supporting Professionalism in Admissions) guidance on part-time admissions: <http://www.spa.ac.uk/good-practice/part-time.html>). Most institutions appear to operate a hybrid of the 'centralised' versus 'dispersed' model of organising admissions. Frequently there is a centralised department which implements standard offers set by academic programmes, and then some decisions are referred back to the faculties, schools or departments, although the balance between the central and dispersed roles does vary. It is noticeable that a significant number of institutions are producing or have very recently produced admissions policy for use in the 2009-10 admission cycle or later.

Institutions are concerned to ensure fair access, which includes access to the institution that best meets a student's needs, and they have a range of approaches to selecting students, training staff to support this process and monitoring their admissions processes. There are a number of implicit interpretations of the notion of fair access. One approach is to ensure that the admissions process

¹⁴ HEFCE circular 2007/12, Higher education outreach: targeting disadvantaged learners, http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2007/07_12/

is fair, consistent and transparent, which involves treating everyone in the same way “regardless of background.” This can be compared with approaches that recognise that some students may be disadvantaged by the selection process itself, or previously by personal or educational circumstances. For example, some institutions are looking at alternatives to interviews, auditions and testing to overcome concerns about bias in these processes. In the WPSAs there is little evidence of proactive action to help ensure that disabled students are not disadvantaged by the admissions process. A further dimension of fair access is a concern to recognise the different circumstances in which students gained their pre-entry qualifications, and thus to seek to level the playing field in this respect. Institutions can take account of school and college contextual data or personal contextual data (extenuating circumstances). Institutions can also make use of formal assessments and statements from schools, colleges and Connexions about disabled students to help inform the admissions process. Some WPSAs explicitly seek to ensure parity for students with vocational and alternative entry qualifications. In the context of fair access it is also pertinent to note the lack of references to the clearing process, and the implications this may have for students from widening participation and equality groups.

Approaches to Selection

There are two admissions discourses that underpin approaches to selection within the context of widening participation: a concern to maintain academic standards and/or a concern that students will be successful in the HE programme they are admitted to. The extent to which either or both of these views are embraced, and whether they are viewed to be compatible or not is likely to inform the approaches to selection that are used.

Use of Contextual Information

Institutions are using or plan to use school and college and/or personal contextual data. This trend is particularly noticeable in the selecting institutions. For example, a Russell Group university states that it is committed to the use of contextual data in creating “genuinely fair admissions policies and practices and providing access for all those capable of benefiting from higher education irrespective of their personal or familial circumstances or capacity to pay.” School and college contextual data allows institutions to take account of the educational environment in which the student has studied to date (e.g., school or college performance and annual percentage progressing to HE). Personal contextual data or extenuating circumstances allow institutions to take into account a wider set of variables. One institution notes that it is proactively using personal contextual data, whereas another notes that it only uses this information if explicitly asked to do so. These are significantly different approaches that would result in diverse outcomes if applied to the same pool of applicants.

Interviews

A number of institutions, particularly in the field of the arts, make use of interviews to inform the admissions process. Interviews may be used as a way of identifying students with potential to succeed. However, it is acknowledged that attending an interview may be challenging for some applicants in particular circumstances. Institutions are developing innovative responses, such as a “network of regional audition/interviews, with the co-operation of regional FE partners”, and vouchers to cover travel costs. Relatively little is said however about the consistency, transparency and fairness of interview processes, and the potential for bias and discrimination. One institution notes that it uses a standard template to develop lines of questioning and record answers to “ensure that interviews are conducted fairly and consistently”, and some institutions do provide support for students to develop their skills in interviews, etc., (see the Compacts and Supplementary Programme paragraph below).

Admissions Tests

Some of the more competitive institutions are using additional testing to support the admissions process:

“A possible institution-wide entrance exam is also under consideration and is being piloted. A key consideration of the pilot is to ensure that performance cannot be improved through coaching and that the exam is unbiased towards any nationality, race, culture, gender, background or disability.”

There is shared concern to “ensure that performance cannot be improved through coaching and that the exam is unbiased towards any nationality, race, culture, gender, background or disability”, and one institution monitors the outcomes from the tests annually “to ensure that any issues around potential bias are identified and corrected”, and a full review is carried out every five years. There is however a lack of detail and evidence regarding both of these issues.

Parity for Students with Vocational Qualifications

A significant number of institutions state that they are committed to providing parity for students with vocational qualifications. There are relatively few examples of how institutions are achieving this, or how they are measuring their success in this area. Examples of good practice tend to be linked to progression agreements or compacts. Other examples of good practice include the provision of information to students to inform their choices, and training staff to ensure understanding of vocational qualifications.

Given the expressed commitment to admitting students with vocational qualifications, it is perhaps surprising that only 16 HEIs have vocational progression targets or milestones.

Alternative Evidence of Ability

A number of institutions consider alternative sources of evidence of ability (e.g., credit accumulated elsewhere, essay, interview or other experience). For example: “Admissions procedures for part-time courses allow sympathetic consideration of non-traditional qualifications, work and life experience and credit may also be given for prior learning and open studies work.”

Personalised Approach

A number of institutions report that they take a personalised approach to the admissions process. These approaches take into account a range of factors, and decisions are made on a one-to-one basis. This however is unlikely to be standard practice in many institutions.

Priority or Special Attention to Widening Participation Students

A few institutions indicated that they pay particular attention to widening participation students, for example, by reviewing applications by students from specific target groups or by supporting applications from widening participation students through collaboration between staff working in widening participation, admissions and faculties. One selective institution has 40 places for “students who have the potential to succeed but who might not normally receive an offer due to their actual or predicted grades.”

Compacts and Supplementary Programmes

A number of institutions run compacts or supplementary support programmes for schools and colleges and/or students to assist them in the admissions process. These programmes, which can be targeted at individual students or specific schools/colleges, include: support with the admissions process; the opportunity to submit additional contextual information; the possibility of receiving an alternative lower offer; and participating in study skills training. Some of these schemes will make a lower offer if students undertake or demonstrate additional work or skills. 79 HEIs run programmes identified as compact schemes and many of these are in particular subject areas, and supported by Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs). For example:

“Through its involvement with the Lifelong Learning Networks, [name of HEI] has established Progression Agreements in three areas: Design, Social Work and Computing. All these agreements have been developed with our partner FE colleges. The Progression Agreements have provided opportunities for the HE and FE course teams to identify and address areas of curriculum mismatch, and a range of supporting activities has been developed to ensure that post-16 students are familiar with our entry requirements and programmes.”

Alternative Programmes for Less-Qualified Applicants with Potential

A couple of institutions provided details of alternative programmes for less-qualified students. This includes the Extended Medical Degree Programmes which admit students from under-represented groups with lower predicted grades and requires them to undertake an additional year of learning before being integrated into the mainstream student cohorts. Another institution has developed Foundation Programmes to enable students to reach the required level through additional studying.

Feedback to Applicants

While all institutions appear to be striving towards a transparent system, one institution notes that they provide feedback to all unsuccessful applicants, which will assist them to make improved applications in the future (if applicable).

Monitoring Fair Access

There is a high level of awareness in the WPSAs of the need to monitor admissions systems with respect to fair access. There is no explicit evidence about monitoring the number of disabled students entering via alternative entry routes. The majority of the statements refer to scrutiny by an overseeing committee within the institution's structure. A couple of institutions use Impact Assessments to review their admissions processes. There is little or no information about how processes are improved or deficiencies are overcome. One institution reports that they identified a mismatch between pre-entry work to raise aspirations and encourage entry to HE and admission processes, and therefore they are working to realign the work of different units within the institution.

Staff Development to Enhance the Admissions Process

Many institutions mention the role of staff development to ensure the quality and fairness of their admissions process. Some training is delivered internally, while other institutions rely on sector-wide bodies (e.g., UCAS and SPA) to deliver staff development and training. One institution reports that they have organised staff development to raise awareness of implicit bias in selection, particularly through the interview process. Another institution runs staff development relating to admissions and extending to learning, teaching and curriculum development (which will be a necessary response to a more diverse student population). A consortium of institutions has organised more than 20 staff development events to support the accreditation of prior experiential and certificated learning (APEL and APCL), including specific work on admissions.

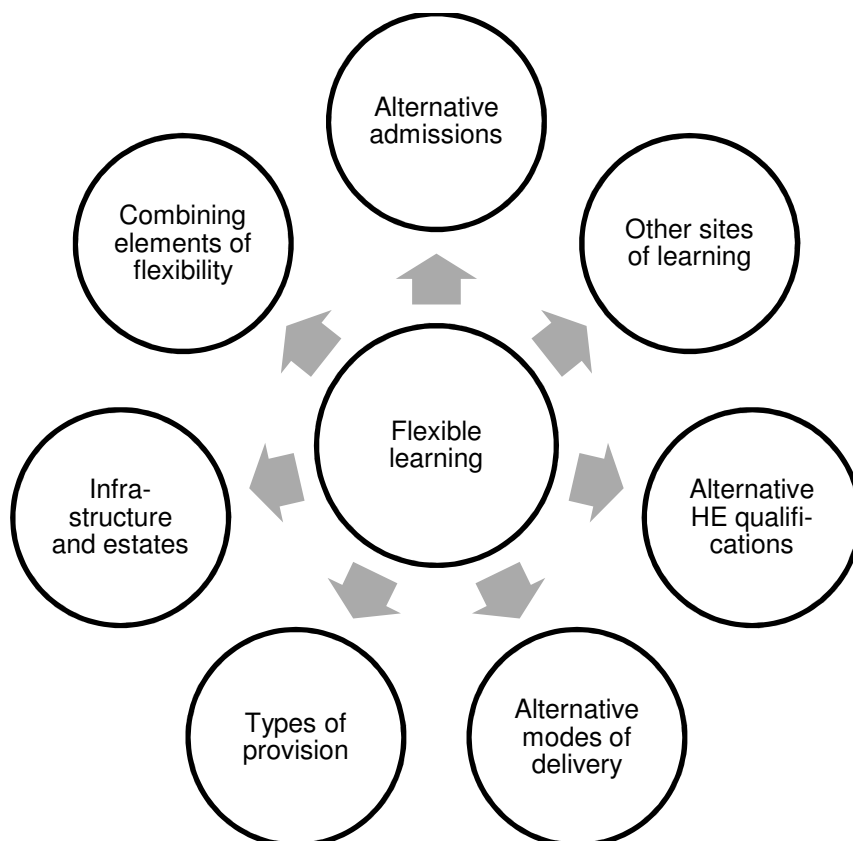
Admission of Disabled Students

The majority of institutions that refer to disabled students in relation to admissions do so as part of a statement about not discriminating against any applicant on the grounds of, amongst other things, disability. In the WPSAs there is little detailed information about the admission of disabled students.

4.3 Flexible Learning

It is not easy to define flexible learning, but it is widely recognised that greater flexibility in a range of aspects of the HE learning experience will enable more students from diverse backgrounds to participate successfully in HE. The key areas of flexibility which we have identified in the WPSAs and which are discussed below are: flexible admissions; other sites of learning; provision of alternative HE qualifications; alternative modes of delivery; alternative types of provision (e.g., accelerated or ‘bite-sized’ learning); flexible infrastructure and combining elements of flexibility.

Diagram 1: Aspects of Flexible Learning



Flexible Admissions

Some institutions have a growing awareness of the relationship between alternative entry qualifications, fair access and widening participation. For example, one institution states: “Our admissions policies and entry criteria are aimed at widening access to higher education”, and they go on to state that they accept a wide range of entry qualifications, including vocational qualifications, and for mature applicants who do not have an appropriate entry qualification: “We have policies that encourage assessment of relevant life/work experience and, most importantly, the desire and potential to succeed at HE level through application form, personal statement, interview and additional work submission.”

Interventions to support entry with alternative entry qualifications include transparency about equivalency of alternative entry qualifications for applicants, and awareness raising and training for admissions staff to ensure fairness of the admissions process.

There is relatively little information about how the 14-19 curriculum changes will impact on admissions as they are only mentioned in relation to admissions by twelve institutions (9%). Furthermore, only six institutions (5%) mention accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), and a few indicate their own special entry programmes for applicants without the required qualifications. This suggests students are largely required to gain admission to institutions through traditional routes. In addition, credit accumulation and transfer schemes that assist students to

move around the sector, particularly in a city or sub-region, do not appear to be well developed, with the odd exception in particular institutions.

Other Sites of Learning

Institutions demonstrate through their WPSAs that they have established more flexibility with regard to place by developing HE provision in additional sites of learning, over and above the institution's main campus(es). In particular, these include collaborative arrangements with FE partners and work-based learning.

Many institutions have links with FECs to support widening participation. Links are particularly well established between post-1992 institutions and FE partners, but there are some examples of selective institutions working collaboratively with FE partners to offer more flexible learning opportunities to local mature students. For example:

“The 2+2 Degree programme can provide a path for applicants to gain a Degree through two years' study at a local college and a further two years at the main campus. This full-time programme is specifically designed to enable adults who lack formal qualifications and who wish to return to education, to study locally for a university degree and enhance their career prospects. There is no access or foundation year; students on the 2+2 route have direct entry to a Degree and are registered as [name of university] students for all four years of the course.”

Collaborative provision is more often however either franchised or externally validated, and most takes the form of Foundation Degrees. Much of the collaborative provision is expansionary and thus underpinned by securing additional student numbers. A number of institutions indicate that they are likely to reduce their collaborative provision in the context of no additional student numbers.

The WPSAs describe a growing interest in developing links with employers to deliver work-based learning, especially in the post-1992 sector. A fair amount the work appears to be in early stages however, with some notable exceptions. Institutions are offering different types of learning, including learning from work and learning in work, and much of this is in the form of Foundation Degrees, both full- and part-time. For example:

“One of the most innovative developments is the delivery of full-time Foundation Degrees over two years, with students attending college on one day per week only and the other elements delivered and supported within the workplace. This enables students to continue working whilst achieving a Foundation Degree. Employers have been particularly supportive of this model with assignments linked directly to the student's experience in the workplace.”

Alternative HE Awards and Programmes

Alternative qualifications, in particular Foundation Degrees, are being developed to support the widening participation agenda – indeed 83 institutions make explicit reference to Foundation Degrees in their WPSAs. Some institutions have innovative Foundation Degrees to attract new learners: for example, one institution has developed a FdSc in Mortuary Science, a FdA in Muslim Youth Work and a FdA in Policing. At the same institution the FdSc in Healthcare Sciences involves flexible or blended delivery and attendance modes to accommodate part-time adult learners or those studying at a distance.

In the workplace, institutions are delivering provision from pre-entry to postgraduate/professional levels. For example:

“This framework offers learners (and employers) very flexible opportunities to access ‘bite-sized’ credits which are framed around the needs of the individual learner (or employer), whether in terms of content, mode of delivery or location. It will provide an important new avenue for credit recognition and transfer across the region and of the accreditation of continuing professional development activities. A variety of awards is available from certificate to MA with the generic title of Integrated Professional Development, should the individual wish to accumulate the required credits. The framework is about to be implemented through [name of university] and partner institutions in the region.”

Types of provision included: negotiated work-based learning (e.g., based on a learning framework); tailor-made programmes for individual employers; enterprise development and support; accreditation of training and other professional training; and continuing professional development.

Alternative Modes of Delivery

Clearly flexibility is enhanced through alternative modes of delivery, e.g., via information technology or other forms of distance and blended learning. 50 institutions refer to their electronic learning resources in their WPSAs, and 24 institutions refer to distance learning. Given that most HEIs have a virtual learning environment and use other technologies to deliver learning, there are fewer links between the use of technology in learning and widening participation than might be expected. There are however some interesting examples. One university notes the challenges of integrating part-time students and those studying at a distance, and how they have used technology to overcome this:

“One of the ways the University is addressing this is through the development of a blended approach with the use of webCT providing more flexibility and accessibility for part-time and distance-learning students. Flexibility for part-time students (and indeed for all students) is offered through VLE [virtual learning environment] through which they can access e-resources, online InfoSkills tutorials, Informs and other guides, and a limited number of supporting webcasts, all of which are available online and therefore remotely and 24/7.”

A second university “has also been active in developing a range of inclusive learning environments which provide inclusive contexts for diverse students to learn comfortably and effectively. These include technology enhanced learning initiatives.”

Alternative Provision

Institutions are looking at delivering courses over longer and shorter periods to increase the flexibility offered to students. For example, 81 (63%) institutions refer to their part-time provision in relation to widening participation. One institution that has a vibrant employer engagement programme offers a range of short programmes. Another university notes that it is planning to introduce accelerated degree programmes to deliver some courses flexibly and make them available to new cohorts.

Flexible Infrastructure and Estates

Some institutions provide evidence of how they are developing their estates to create more flexible infrastructure to support more flexible learning. This is often, but not restricted to, developing the delivery of provision through virtual learning environments and other technology.

Combining Different Elements of Flexibility

Institutions that are addressing widening participation through flexible learning are usually combining two or more elements of flexibility (as they have been defined and discussed above).

For example, one institution identifies a range of ways in which they are being more flexible to support wider engagement:

- Offering elements of learning which may be studied either without assessment or with an assessment leading to credit contributing to a qualification.
- Delivery through blended learning, supported through technology-enhanced learning, with occasional face-to-face sessions offering opportunities for group-based activities and feedback.
- Programmes designed in partnership with individual or groups of employers.
- Accreditation of continuing professional development, offered through in-house training, 'bite-sized' online learning elements and short courses.
- Opportunities to obtain credit through the assessment of work-based learning.
- The recently validated Shell framework¹⁵; this will allow students to achieve an award based upon the accumulation of credit from a number of HE providers and from work-based learning. It is expecting that awards within the Shell framework will initially be negotiated with employers, including small and medium-sized enterprises, to provide a recognised qualification for their employees.
- Allowing learners to design their own programmes to meet their requirements, 'gap filling' their existing knowledge and skills, through free choice of modules or 'bite-sized' elements of learning.
- Offering students the freedom to enrol on modules at times of their choice, and to select from a number of assessment opportunities.
- Delivery of learning at employers' premises or near the workplace.

4.4 Enhancing the Student Experience

This section will look at work identified by institutions as relating to improving student retention, achievement and progression. It includes: retention strategies and interventions; induction; learning; teaching and curriculum development; and the retention, progression and achievement of specific groups, including BME students.

Strategies and Interventions to Improve Student Retention

Within the WPSAs there is evidence of strong commitment not just to widening access but also to supporting students to be successful in HE. This widespread interest in student retention and success is demonstrated more generally across the HE sector by the levels of engagement in the 'What Works? Student Retention and Success' programme, which is co-funded by the HEFCE and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.¹⁶ 117 of the HEIs (91%) discussed their retention plans and interventions within the WPSAs, 19 (15%) referred to a formal, institution-wide strategy, and some institutions incorporate retention priorities into other institutional strategies (e.g., learning and teaching, student success, etc.). It can therefore be concluded that retention is a priority in relation to widening participation, and indeed some institutions presented evidence about either the need for a retention strategy or the impact on improved retention of introducing a strategy.

¹⁵ The Shell Award Framework is a scheme which offers a method for the accreditation of in-company training and other bite-sized learning, undertaken in the context of employment, voluntary activity or future career aspirations. The framework is intended to act as a 'shell' within which specific pieces of accredited higher learning from across the region can be accumulated, and lead to a defined HE award. The framework aims to facilitate the accumulation of credit from more than one HE provider into HE qualifications and to revolutionise the way that HE can be delivered to business.

¹⁶ Further details and outputs from the programme, including Briefings are available from www.actiononaccess.org/retention

A key question emerges however as to how retention (and student success) is defined. Many institutions do not define these terms in their WPSA, but definitions that are offered are varied, ranging from completing courses or progressing normally to reaching full potential. One institution commissioned an audit of its retention work and one recommendation was “a clearer definition of student retention be established and agreed to enable action to be undertaken.”

A vast number of specific groups are targeted across the sector in relation to improving retention. This is sometimes informed by institutional data, but this is not always transparent. There is a debate, which is explicitly raised by a few institutions, but unacknowledged by the majority, about the extent to which specific groups should be identified and targeted for retention support versus the ways in which developments to support retention and success are mainstreamed and of benefit to all students and enable them to maximise their success.

“Our Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2009-2012 sets out in detail our approach to supporting students in their learning and assessment. We take a holistic approach in so far as ensuring that ALL students receive the necessary guidance and support on course to ensure maximum success.”

“The Transitions Team targets applicants and new students who fall into ‘at risk’ categories to offer additional support to ensure they successfully engage with HE at [name of university], working in close liaison with the faculties to identify student groups where retention and progression falls below benchmarks. The Team also provides additional support for students progressing to [name of university] from partner colleges via one of our progression agreements. The work of the Transitions Team continues for up to 12 months post-enrolment to ensure that new students are offered additional pastoral support to help them succeed.”

Some institutions refer to the specific challenges of having a more diverse student population. Evidence is cited by a small number of institutions of no difference between the student population as a whole and specific target groups. It is not clear whether other institutions do experience differential rates of retention, or whether they have not interrogated their data in this way. For example:

“Students from low participation neighbourhoods and lower socio-economic groups do not perform significantly less well than our average performance in relation to retention or employability/further study.”

“There is no significant difference in withdrawal rates between students with a disability/SpLD [specific learning difficulty] than those with no known disability and that the proportion of each group passing the year is comparable. However, a higher proportion of disabled/SpLD students take intermission than students without.”

“There is no clear trend evidence to suggest that retention of students from NS-SEC 4-7 differs substantially from students from other NS-SEC backgrounds, and the numbers passing the year are broadly similar to students from other NS-SEC backgrounds.”

There is limited evidence of a strategic approach linking recruitment, admissions, retention and progression. One selective university recognises that if it is successful in widening participation this will result in a more diverse student body, and other aspects of the university experience will need to be developed to engage and support this cohort. This strategic need for change is not explicitly identified or acted on across the board. There are also fewer links between retention and

learning and teaching than might be anticipated. Some institutions have adopted a holistic approach to transition and student retention and success. For example:

“Action to improve the transition into university, through induction; improved practice in assessment, including through on-going work on formative assessment; the provision of academic skills tutors in each school; enhanced support for students, for example, through the co-location of key services in the Student Centre; and streamlined financial support arrangements.”

“The relationship between widening participation and learning and teaching at [name of university] has always been particularly strong and goes beyond sharing the formal reporting committee. The current Learning & Teaching Strategy 2008-11 stresses the importance of inclusive and flexible learning, and of embedding the considerations of sustainability, equality and diversity within the curriculum. Widening participation and learning and teaching frequently collaborate together on retention initiatives and student experience research.”

Some institutions are using institutional data to improve retention but this is not extensive; there is however a growing awareness of the need to use data better. Where an institutional approach is adopted, associate deans are emerging as a group with responsibility for retention at the school level (although some times this is other named individuals). This appears to be coupled with an increasing requirement for school retention plans and/or school committees to address retention issues. Schools and faculties are engaged in curriculum development and provision of academic support, and monitoring the success of specific target groups. Institutions are using widening participation allocations to fund retention interventions, and seeking to make teaching staff responsible for retention.

“We have put in place an annual monitoring cycle in relation to the analysis of progression data, at university, school and programme levels. The Assistant Deans for Teaching and Learning ensure that a comprehensive school action plan is implemented for each programme where appropriate, following the annual monitoring and review process. The implementation of this action plan forms the work of programme teams and Retention Officers. The University Retention Team provides a central overview and co-ordination.”

Although a wide range of retention interventions is identified, very few subject-specific references are made, with a couple of notable exceptions. Nursing and related courses are identified by a few institutions as subject areas where specific retention interventions are being developed. A couple of institutions have developed interventions to support students that have made poor course choices and who need support to move to a more appropriate HE programme, or to re-enter HE. For example:

“The ‘On the Right Path’ campaign includes a website with advice for students who are unsure about their course. The main vehicle for information is a website. Students are signposted to this via an extensive publicity campaign in October. [It includes] information for parents, friends and family about the student experience because research has shown that good support networks can aid student success.”

Another institution has an “initiative to re-engage students at risk of or having dropped out of university”:

“It aims to work pro-actively with students wishing to return to HE at [name of university]. The team offer advice and guidance and aid a smooth transition back into

education for many students. In excess of 1,300 students have returned to the University via [this scheme] since 2004.”

Induction

78 institutions (60%) make reference to induction and 58 institutions (45%) provide details about their induction arrangements. There is a strong recognition of the challenges of transition into HE for all students and students from non-traditional backgrounds in particular. This is accompanied by a commitment to the induction process to enhance the student experience, engagement, retention and success.

Some institutions are taking a strategic approach to the development of their induction programmes, including the establishment of university-wide groups, drafting minimum standards for implementation at faculty or school level, and evaluating the induction process and using the data to improve induction the following year: For example:

“The University recognises that induction is a key part of the transition to university life and for several years has been developing and evaluating its induction programme through the co-ordinated approach of an Induction Steering Group. Induction processes have been further embedded in 2008-09 through the appointment of a full-time Induction Project Manager to work with all departments on the preparation, delivery, evaluation and review of induction throughout the year. As a development in the pre-induction support, confirmed applicants were all given access to the University intranet and academic departments prepared introductory welcome messages and encouraged students to establish contact before arrival on campus. Meetings with personal academic tutors are held in induction week and this year there has been an increase in the availability of entry qualification information to individual tutors, providing them with individual profiles of their new students. The initial effectiveness of induction is measured at the end of the first week by surveying all new students and the responses indicate continued improvements to the process over the past four years. Issues raised in this survey are used to inform the following year’s planning.”

Institutions recognise that induction is a process not an event, and often this is reflected in the development of extended induction programmes, beginning pre-entry and extending beyond the traditional welcome week, although many institutions are still reliant on a one or two week process.

“The University has defined the different stages of welcome, induction and orientation and refined guidelines for departments to implement appropriate strategies to inform and support students. Central to this is an acceptance that induction is a process and not an event, and provision of information and support is therefore phased and presented at the time at which students need the information. This approach has been formalised within the University and guidelines on welcome, induction and orientation approved through the quality office. These guidelines are reviewed annually following feedback on semester one experiences.”

Most induction activities are aimed at all students, but very few institutions recognise that ideally induction should be inclusive, meeting the needs of all students, and preparing all students to work with each other. One institution reports that it will implement equality impact assessments to ensure that induction meets the needs of all its widening participation and equality groups:

“Key to this approach to transition has been to focus on understanding what students need to help them engage effectively and then provide appropriate steps to ensure this takes place. A new induction framework has been approved for students entering

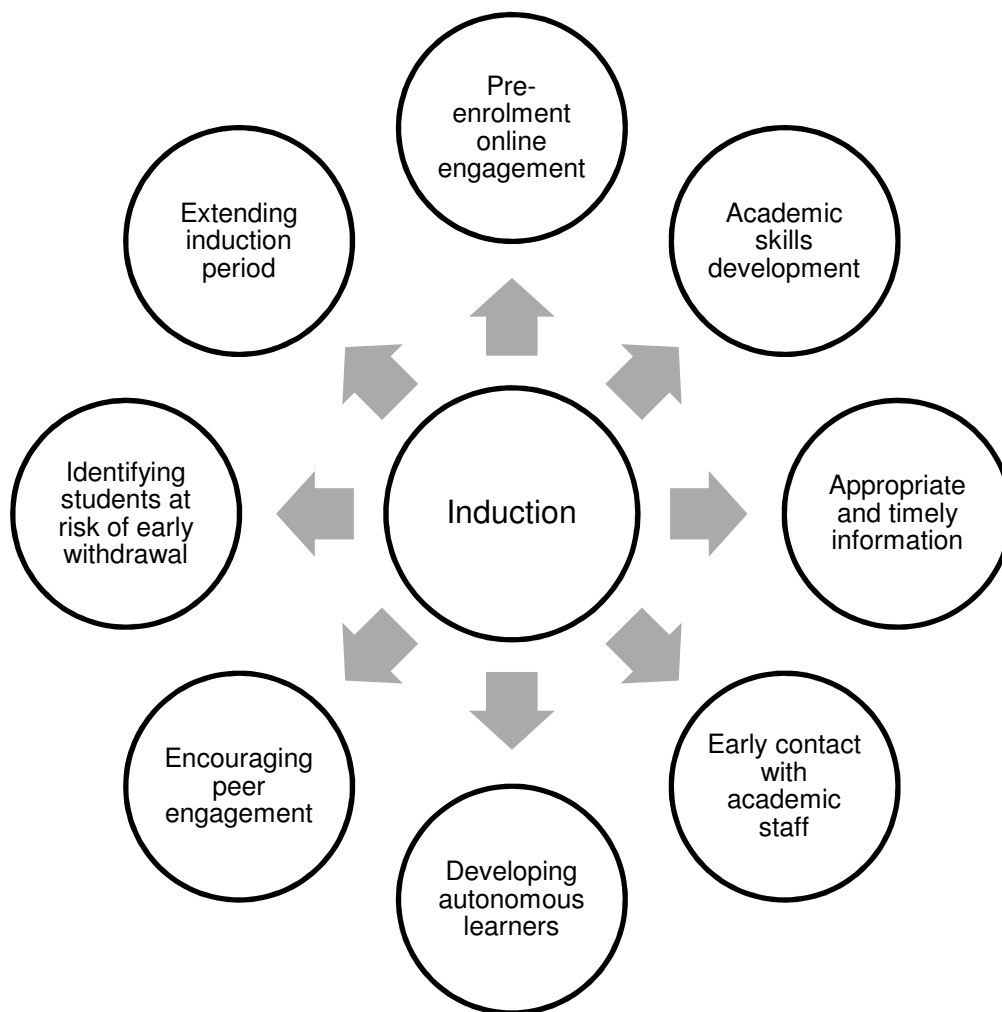
in September 2009 by the Learning and Teaching Committee. The key focus of this framework is inclusivity within a holistic framework and, in line with commitments within the Disability Equality Scheme, a comprehensive process of equality impact assessment will be undertaken to ensure that the needs of underrepresented groups are considered.”

There is however recognition that some students may be at greater risk than others of withdrawing early, and some institutions use the induction period to try to identify these students, although it is often not made explicit as to how these students are identified. Other institutions provide induction support or activities which are targeted towards specific groups of students that they believe are particularly vulnerable to leaving early. Examples include: specific induction activities for mature students, and in some cases their families; engaging commuter students who live in the family home; meeting with widening participation students; providing support for students progressing into HE from partner colleges mid-way through degree programmes; and targeting specific discipline areas. There are also plans to provide special inductions for care leavers.

In summary, comprehensive induction strategies include:

- Pre-enrolment online activities and email correspondence to promote early engagement
- Development of academic skills and attitudes towards study
- Provision of appropriate and timely information, advice and guidance
- Encouraging early contact with academic staff, often personal tutors
- Curriculum and assessment approaches to support students to become autonomous learners, including embedding course-based orientation and academic development in first semester or first year modules or courses
- Encouraging social engagement and peer interaction
- Integrating equality and inclusion into the induction process, and providing additional induction activities for specific student groups if necessary
- Identifying students at risk of early withdrawal
- Extending the induction period, including a ‘Refreshers’ Week’ in the middle of the first term, which offers renewed opportunities for students to engage with study advice, counselling, etc.
- Assessing the effectiveness and inclusivity of the induction process.

Diagram 2: Elements of an Induction Process



There is evidence of growing use of technology to support induction. Technology is being used to facilitate peer networking through message boards and social networking sites, to provide information via portals and to assist skills development and learning via learning modules and early assignments.

Learning, Teaching and Curriculum Development

68 institutions (53%) explicitly referred to their learning and teaching strategy in the WPSA and fewer than half of these submitted their learning and teaching strategy to the HEFCE, but there is no discernible pattern between institutional types. There were examples of good practice where institutions demonstrate how their learning and teaching strategy is related to their widening participation strategy and takes account of student diversity to enhance the student learning experience and improve retention and success across the student lifecycle. For example:

“The University’s Learning and Teaching Strategy takes full account of challenges and opportunities facing the University, one of which is widening participation. Priority is given to student support; student retention, progression and achievement; and also to diversity. Academic departments develop local level action plans that align with and ‘localise’ institutional strategy, with learning and teaching co-ordinators and representatives, along with programme leaders, having a particular role to play. Specific activities and targets are set that relate, directly or indirectly, to widening participation.”

Widening participation and learning and teaching are interacting in relation to:

- Increased organisational flexibility
- Embedding study skills
- Changes to assessment strategies
- More student-centred learning
- Curriculum development and review
- Renewed emphasis on personal tutoring, especially to identify and/or follow up students who are 'at risk' of failing and/or withdrawing.

Increased Organisational Flexibility

Examples of organisational flexibility include two year degrees, full- and part-time provision, Foundation Degrees, delivery through partner institutions, use of e-learning, and employee learning. (These issues are discussed in greater detail above in relation to flexible learning.)

Embedding Study Skills

Institutions are embedding study skills into specific modules and supporting staff to do this. Another approach is to use a virtual learning environment to deliver study skills support.

Assessment Issues

Changes to assessment practices include the use of more formative assessment and recognition of alternative approaches to assessment. For example, one institution writes:

“Assessment is an integral part of the learning process and has considerable influence upon what and how students learn. This is particularly important given the proportion of students entering with non-traditional entry qualifications. The University's approach is to place emphasis upon the use of assessment to promote effective student learning, the basic principles being:

- avoiding over-assessment
- effective use of assessment criteria in all assessed work
- the use of formative work and feedback both alongside, and separate from, summative assessment
- more effective assessment of work-related learning where appropriate.”

Student-Centred Learning

A small number of institutions talk about personalised and/or student-centred learning, or variants of these, as the examples below demonstrate. Although there are only a limited number of references to student-centred or personalised learning, these span all institutional types.

Curriculum Development

Curriculum development is seen as both a way of attracting more students and improving student retention and achievement and in some cases is related to student-centred learning. One institution makes the link between curriculum development and attracting more diverse learners explicitly:

“Our positive approach to widening participation is embodied not just in how we teach, but in what we teach. [The University] is now explicitly looking to take a more demand-led approach to curriculum development. By its nature this will be more responsive therefore to widening participation needs. And, as anticipated in our OFFA submission, we have found that in particular recent developments that by widening the appeal of the programmes, we are attracting a wider base of students.”

Only a limited number of specific examples of curriculum development are presented in the WPSAs, but those offered are interesting. For example, one institution demonstrates how curriculum development is linked to creating a more student-centred learning experience:

“The University has invested considerable, targeted, effort into developing a learner-focused curriculum, for example, problem-based learning in Medicine, Dentistry, Health and the Conceive, Design, Implement and Operate Initiative (CDIO) in Engineering. These approaches, by virtue of their student-centred focus, enhance student learning. It is clear also that when diversity is taken into account when planning the learning experience, all students benefit.

“Specifically, problem-based learning in medical education is designed to:

- help students to develop their own learning strategies
- give students a solid grounding in the various disciplines which will inform their future practice
- help students develop into independent, self-motivating, professionals.

“The CDIO in Engineering uses integrated active and experiential learning to develop deep learning of the disciplinary knowledge base and encompasses key skills and employability issues.”

Another institution has a curriculum innovation project:

“which seeks to challenge existing modes of curriculum development, design and validation which are essentially ‘producer-led’ and create a more flexible, partnership-based approach to curriculum design and development serving the interests of individuals and partner organizations.”

A couple of universities provide information about curriculum review. One university describes how it undertakes periodic curriculum review, involving a range of stakeholders (students, employers and professional bodies) to develop curricula in line with institutional priorities. Another university is undertaking a one-off, evidence-informed review of the curriculum, including identifying data “to be made available to departments prior to review, which could be used to analyse both the performance of different modules within a programme and the patterns of attainment of certain identified groups taking the programme.”

Another institution explains how student feedback on the curriculum is captured:

“Feedback to staff on students’ perceptions of the curriculum is through the module and course feedback questionnaires, the withdrawal and retention surveys and the Student Voice project, and active participation on the Student Experience project, and from 2009, the Student Experience Survey for all [name of university] students who were not eligible to take part in the National Student Survey.”

It is not always clear the extent to which these curriculum developments are informed by widening participation and equality, or are intended to support these student groups. Nevertheless, they do contribute to an inclusive approach to learning and teaching which will benefit all students, and particularly those from widening participation and equality groups. Furthermore, it is instructive that institutions are making these connections and including this information in their WPSAs.

Personal Tutoring

Personal tutoring is a specific aspect of learning and teaching which is mentioned in WPSAs by institutions of all types. It is seen as contributing to improve student transition, retention and satisfaction. The link between widening participation, personal tutoring and retention is discussed in Thomas and Hixenbaugh (2006)¹⁷ and the contribution and models of personal tutoring to retention are being evaluated as part of the 'What Works? Student Retention and Success' programme.¹⁸ In the WPSAs personal tutoring may be conceived of as a wholly academic activity, or both academic and support. It has a number of purposes:

- First point of contact for students, and offering structured contact throughout the year
- Academic skills development, especially autonomous learning and critical thinking
- Identifying students at risk and/or working with students at risk
- Integrating students into the wider university experience
- Provision of pastoral support, or sign posting students on for further support

What is particularly striking is how institutions are using personal tutoring as a method of identifying and/or following up students who are 'at risk' of failing and/or withdrawing. For example:

"Each student is assigned a personal tutor who is available to discuss both academic and non-academic issues with their tutees. A decision tree has been developed to identify students, at the earliest possible opportunity, who may be in need of additional support. This risk management based approach may be triggered by events such as poor attendance at college lectures or clinical placements, or poor grades. The personal tutor is the focal point of risk management activities for the student. Activities are aimed at assisting students in continuing their programme of study and at resolving the root cause of problems, such as family crises, financial problems, difficulty in completing academic work or clinical placement issues."

While personal tutoring tends to have a more purely academic focus now than in the past, it is worth noting that tutors are linked to other forms of support (such as central services and the students' union) and there are growing numbers of references to peer mentoring and other peer support schemes (which is one of the topics being evaluated at part of the 'What works?' programme¹⁹).

In summary the emerging features of personal tutoring seem to be:

- Based at school (or faculty) level
- Strong academic focus
- Early meetings to engage students
- Identifying students at risk and providing interventions
- Linked to student services, student union and peer mentoring or similar peer scheme to provide pastoral and social support.

Increased rates of retention and high levels of student satisfaction are both cited as evidence of the impact of personal tutoring. Furthermore, a significant number of institutions make commitments in their WPSA to enhance personal tutoring schemes.

¹⁷ Thomas, L. and Hixenbaugh, P. (Eds) (2006) *Personal Tutoring in Higher Education*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

¹⁸ See www.actiononaccess.org/retention

¹⁹ See www.actiononaccess.org/retention

It is encouraging that some institutions are now linking widening participation and learning and teaching, especially as this will improve student engagement and success. Furthermore, recognising the importance of learning and teaching in relation to widening participation is an important step towards developing a more inclusive culture where all students are fully engaged and able to achieve their aspirations

Retention, Achievement and Progression of Specific Groups

This section examines the extent to which institutions recognise and address differential rates of retention, achievement and progression into employment and further study by specific groups, with a particular focus on ethnicity (often described as Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups). The extent of the problem is detailed in a recent (2010) HEFCE publication²⁰ on the profile and progression of entrants to HE. This shows that black, and to a lesser extent Pakistani and Bangladeshi, students have lower rates of retention, completion and attainment rates. In 2007-8 the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) were commissioned by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, HEFCE and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) to examine differential degree attainment according to ethnicity and gender²¹. This raised awareness of differential rates of success in HE by specific groups, and the HEA and ECU have continued to work with institutions to try to address the issues. Researchers and institutions continue to be challenged by these problems, both in terms of establishing the cause and identifying effective interventions.

Issues arising in the WPSAs:

- Although almost all institutions (109, 84%) identify BME as a target group for access to HE (although most BME groups are not under-represented in HE), only about half of these institutions (57, 44%) are sensitive to the retention, achievement and progression of these groups.
- It is important to note in the context of the WPSAs that many of the institutional comments relating to BME retention, achievement and progression also note differential rates for other widening participation target groups (in relation to the student body as a whole or compared to other specific groups).
- Differences between BME students and white students appear to relate to both rate of retention/withdrawal and achievement, and affect different types of institution. One arts institution reports: “Final achievement of BME and NS-SEC 4-7 students is comparable and exceeds students from other NS-SEC groups.”
- Finally, much of this work is at an early stage (i.e., recognising that there is a problem rather than taking action). For example, one institution reports how an interrogation of their data has identified retention and achievement issues in relation to specific groups: “Lower progression rates for mature students, higher withdrawal rates amongst males, and lower degree classifications obtained by certain ethnic minority students and those from low participation neighbourhoods.” Another institution has examined its data, and subsequently has identified the following two objectives:
 1. “To ensure parity in degree attainment across all groups, with a specific emphasis on high level degree attainment of BME groups
 2. “Identify specific activities designed to support the academic under-performance of key groups including addressing differentials in BME degree attainment.”

²⁰ HEFE (2010) Student ethnicity profile and progression of entrants to full-time, first degree study. Bristol: HEFCE (2010/13). http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2010/10_13/

²¹ (ECU/HEA, 2008)

Institutions of all types seem to be identifying these trends in relation to BME students and other specific target groups, although in some institutions the absolute numbers of BME students are small.

Responses and Interventions

As noted above, much of the work in this area is in the early stages of development. In line with the ECU and HEA's recommendations (ECU/HEA 2008), actions include data analysis (establishing a baseline, setting targets and monitoring progress), learning and teaching and student support. The most popular type of intervention beyond data collection and analysis seems to be mentoring and the creation of role models.

Data Collection, Target Setting and Monitoring

Institutions are pledging to collect data and monitor the performance of particular groups, including BME students. In some cases this is about establishing a baseline against which to measure future performance, and others are setting targets and monitoring progress.

Learning and Teaching

Although the ECU and HEA's publication identified learning and teaching as an area in which institutions should take action, there is little evidence of ways in which institutions are changing learning and teaching to support BME student retention and attainment. The examples are limited both in number and detail.

“There is a clear need to ensure that teaching and learning is appropriate for an increasingly varied annual cohort. Curriculum review is important and the relatively new curriculum offered at [name of specialist institution] places great emphasis on reflective and independent learning. This may be a style which is unfamiliar to widening participation entrants and we shall monitor this carefully. We also need to monitor and survey the styles of teaching and learning which BME students find most suitable.”

One institution involved in the HEA's Summit Programme 'Improving the Degree Attainment of Black and Minority Ethnic Students' (March 2009 – February 2010) is “developing a toolkit for staff to enhance student-to-staff and student-to-student engagement and integration in the classroom.”

There is no evidence of work relating to assessment, with the exception of one institution which identified the development of an appropriate assessment strategy to “improve the performance and experience of a diverse student population”.

Student Engagement

One institution is exploring the level of engagement of students from specific groups across the institution, and not just in the academic domain:

“As an institution we are interested in developing our widening participation work to consider in more depth the experiences and outcomes of particular groups of students for whom it has been shown there is an unequal and less positive university experience at [name of university] (as in many other universities). These groups include BME groups, disabled students, care leavers, students from working-class backgrounds and students entering with vocational qualifications. We are interested in the extent to which these students engage in formal learning opportunities, extra-curricular activities and other forms of student engagement such as course representation. We will seek out the views of these students and analyse their outcomes as they move along the student lifecycle.”

Student Support: Mentors and Role Models

The most common specific intervention identified by institutions to improve the retention, achievement and progression of BME students is peer mentoring. One institution reports that they will have “15 level 2/3 black and minority ethnic students matched with business mentors.” Another institution is developing a programme to provide “mentoring opportunities for mature, disabled and BME students in local businesses and public sector organizations.” It is not always clear how mentors are expected to improve student retention, achievement and progression. However, one institution notes the importance of their staff as role models, and thus is working to improve the number of managers from diversity groups:

“Our staff provide strong role models for our student body. In 2007/08, 24% of our staff were from BME groups. We are actively working to increase the number of managers from these groupings through our Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Staff Development Scheme. We have achieved a number of quality marks for inclusion including Positive about Disabled People, Investors in People and Chartermark.”

Two institutions note the importance of role models earlier in the education system, and thus point to their work in relation to increasing the number of teachers and head teachers from BME backgrounds.

“The Graduate School of Education has a focus on encouraging men onto Primary PGCEs and black and ethnic minority students onto all its teaching courses. While these initiatives are not about recruitment into higher education as progression from Level 3, they do support transition to further study and then graduate level employment and will also help to address the lack of appropriate role models for future generations of school pupils.”

4.5 Progression beyond HE

This section explores the ways in which institutions are supporting students to progress beyond their undergraduate higher education experience; it focuses on employability and access to postgraduate programmes. It is recognised however that students may have other progression needs, including progression from Foundation Degrees to Honours Degrees.

Employability

There is widespread commitment to using the student life cycle approach to widening participation, and thus the majority of institutions (112, 87%) mention employability in their WPSAs. Employability can be understood as:

“A set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.”²²

76 HEIs (59%) provide detail about how they are addressing employability issues, which is drawn upon in the analysis below. A review of the work on employability identifies a number of approaches to enhancing the employability of graduates. These are not mutually exclusive, but may be combined to create a strategic approach to improving the employability of graduates, including widening participation target groups.

²² Yorke, M. (2004, reissued 2006) *Employability in higher education: what it is – what it is not*. York: The Higher Education Academy.

www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record7section=generic&id=336

Separate Provision

A number of institutions refer primarily to their careers services as the providers of support for employability. This can be regarded as separate provision as it is delivered in isolation from the curriculum as a professional service, which students can opt to access. These services are more traditional in terms of offering information, training, support, networking and job-finding services. Institutions tend to emphasise that the services are available to all students “regardless of background.”

Targeted Provision

In recognition of the fact that some graduates do less well in the labour market than others²³ some institutions are providing targeted provision for specific widening participation cohorts. The groups targeted include: students with disabilities and mental health issues; BME students; low income students; first generation entrants and students with no family experience of graduate employment; and students over the age of 30 on commencing a degree. By far the most common form of support is coaching and mentoring of these specific students, sometimes making use of institutional alumni. For example: “Twelve disabled students on course were supported through an Employer Mentoring Programme whereby they were paired with employers for advice and support.” Other interventions include raising awareness of employer requirements, internships and work placements. One institution targets pre-entry support on widening participation cohorts. A second institution targets institutional departments with low rates of success.

Partnership Approach

To move beyond separate and targeted approaches, some institutions have developed a partnership approach between careers professionals and staff and students in the institution. This promotes a more integrated and proactive approach to employability. This rationale is described by one HEI:

“This approach reflected the institutional importance given to providing improved employment prospects and life chances to our students, a large proportion of whom come from under-represented equality groups. There was a clear recognition that employability was not just the responsibility of the individual student and the careers service, but was a collaborative venture between our students and the institution. This involved students as individuals, and in groups, staff from faculties and services, alumni and employers.”

The partnership approach is realised in different ways, including: through the negotiating of partnership agreements with schools/faculties/colleges; analysis of data about discipline areas and student groups; the provision of training for academic staff; the co-development of learning materials; the co-delivery of sessions; and the embedding of careers-related learning into the core curriculum.

“In 2008/09 the Careers and Employability Centre created Partnership Agreements at college level that articulate how employability provision will be delivered. Employability Action Plans at school level provide greater detail on specific services and activities. They include an analysis of the destinations of widening participation graduates, supporting more targeted provision of employability services and distribution of resource to where need is greatest.”

²³ Thomas, L. and Jones, R. (2007) *Embedding employability in the context of widening participation*. York: Higher Education Academy

Co-curricular Provision

Institutions have developed a range of co-curricular programmes to engage students in activities to develop their CVs and enhance their employability. A common approach is the development of an institutional award which provides recognition and credit for students who participate in these types of activities, which may be organised through a Personal Development Planning framework, and which assist with the introduction of Higher Education Achievement Records. One institution notes the value to existing students of contributing to widening participation activities, and is formalising this for students:

“Our own students and graduates play a vital role at all stages in the delivery of our Widening Participation Strategy. We have developed our programmes to formalise this involvement, which includes rigorous selection and training and, for many, the opportunity to acquire important employability skills and to receive accreditation and academic credit for their involvement.”

A second institution is providing opportunities for students to engage in enterprise-related activities, and to have these accredited.

Several institutions are supporting students, particularly from widening participation groups, to engage in employment whilst studying, and to use this to enhance their employability. For example:

“There are specific ‘earn and learn’ opportunities available for widening participation profile students on course, which help them to finance study and to access enhanced support to develop their employability skills and experiences whilst in HE. There are opportunities, particularly targeted to widening participation profile students, to work as a student ambassador, mentor, lead student ambassador or lead mentor, project leader, residential helper, student enabler, etc. All posts have formalised recruitment/selection processes and training programmes with sessions to explicitly link the student experience to careers analysis, confidence building and employability when completed.”

Integrated Curriculum Approach

The WPSAs provide some positive examples of how employability is embedded into the core curriculum to enable all students to develop their skills and their awareness of their capabilities.

“Employability is key on all courses. This is delivered through a coherent programme of transferable and employability skills through all three years of an Honours Degree course, with identified outcomes. In addition, each course runs an Industry Liaison Group, containing significant regional and national employers within the discipline area, to discuss enhancements to the curriculum, and the expectations of employer groups.”

“Graduate employability has an extremely high priority in [our] strategic plans and all academic provision at undergraduate level, whether full-time or sandwich, provides employability pathways for all students. These enable students to acquire knowledge, personal and professional skills and to encourage attitudes that will support their future development and employment. Additionally the school is committed to providing all students with opportunities to engage in real and relevant work experience whether that is placement, work-based learning or work-related learning. Both the pathways and the work experience opportunities provided are monitored to assess their effectiveness for both widening participation and non-widening participation students and enhanced as necessary.”

A couple of institutions are also proactively encouraging and supporting all students to participate in accredited work placements, including placements in small and medium enterprises or in self-employment.

The rationale for an integrated curriculum approach is presented by one institution:

“This mainstreaming approach to supporting employability for those most disadvantaged in the labour market has been developed to help avoid the danger that support services in the field of careers and employability often focus on the most able and motivated rather than those most in need. By embedding activities in the curriculum it is easier to reach those with significant part-time and vacation employment commitments, who are often those from under-represented groups. All students are embraced by the faculty employability plans, and in the first year an estimated 2500 students engaged in explicit support activities.”

Strategic Approach

A number of institutions either refer to their employability (or similarly titled) strategy, or otherwise indicate how they are adopting a strategic approach to employability and widening participation. A strategic approach can entail:

- Linking together a range of interventions or approaches to ensure that all students are engaged to improve their employability (Example 1)
- Building employability across the student lifecycle, including pre-entry work (Example 2)
- Creating mechanisms to ensure that all faculties and programmes enhance the employability of their students (Example 3)
- Using data and other evidence to inform the work (Examples 4 and 5).

Example 1: “The development of employability skills is a key aim. The University is already planning to review the undergraduate programme with a view to incorporating more extensive vocational training; increase opportunities for student volunteering; introduce a system of personal development planning; develop a mechanism for supporting campus employment opportunities for students; and improve the range and quality of transferable skills developed by postgraduate students.”

Example 2: “Pre-entry HE careers guidance is available for all but ‘intensive’ resources (impartial face-to-face/one-to-one guidance) is targeted to widening participation profile populations.”

Example 3: “Ensure that all academic programmes focus on employability, including careers advice and skills development (e.g., interview techniques and CV development) within a clear strategy for personal development for graduates.”

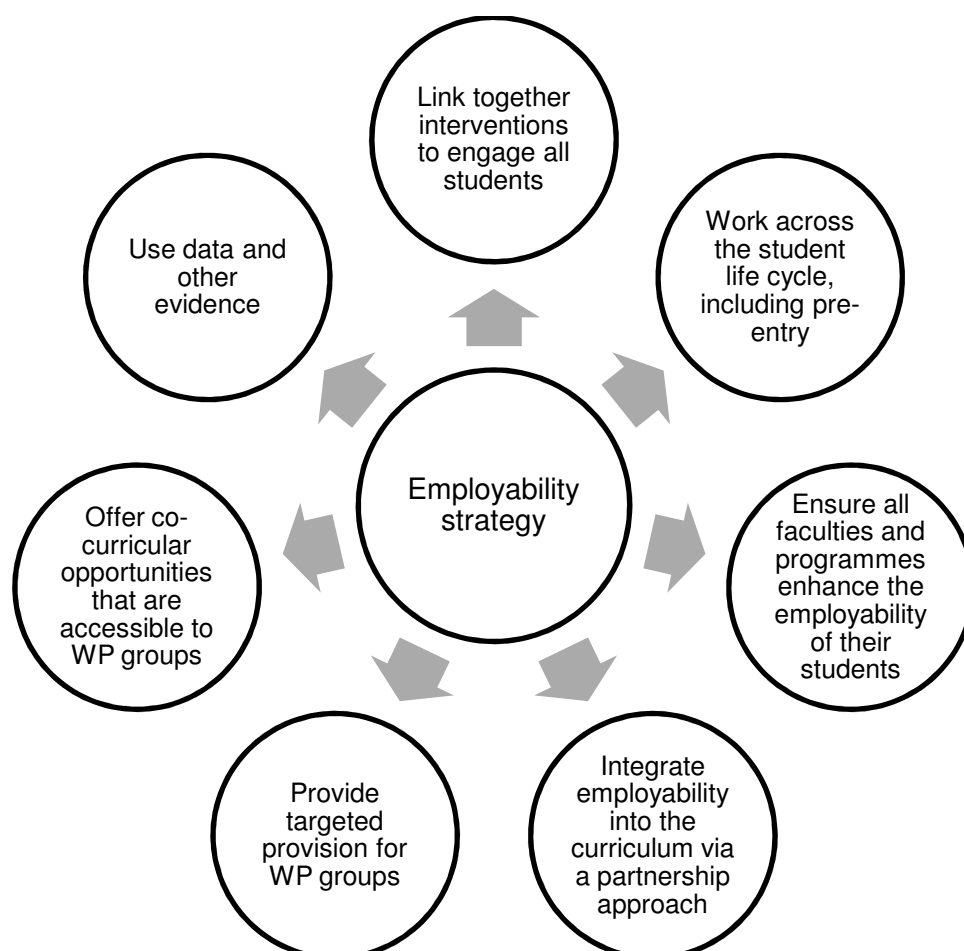
Example 4: “[We will] collect and analyse employability data of under-represented groups of students against comparable universities to inform the development of faculty and programme level action plans to improve the employability of all students.”

Example 5: “A new online events management system will allow the careers service to develop a clearer picture of who is attending specific events and where the gaps are in terms of courses where students are being less proactive in their career planning.”

Based on this analysis, the key features of a widening participation employability strategy would include:

- Linking together interventions to improve the employability of all students
- Addressing employability throughout the student lifecycle, including pre-entry
- Ensuring all faculties and programmes enhance the employability of their students
- Integrate employability into the core curriculum through a partnership approach to ensure that all students benefit from it
- Underpin intervention by analysis of data, for example, to understand differential experiences of graduates from widening participation target groups in the labour market and/or identify differential take-up and impact of services and interventions
- Provide additional interventions targeted at specific groups of students who experience challenges in the graduate labour market
- Ensure that co-curricular opportunities are accessible to widening participation target groups.

Diagram 3: A Strategic Approach to Widening Participation and Employability



Postgraduate Access

Widening participation is not restricted to undergraduate education, indeed postgraduate-only institutions were also required to submit a WPSA. Furthermore, the student life cycle includes progression beyond undergraduate education. However, it is noticeable that the majority of institutions (over 85%) do not refer to postgraduate access or the postgraduate learning experience in their WPSAs. 27 HEIs make reference to postgraduate activities, but only 18 of these references are specifically about widening participation to postgraduate study. This includes

all types of institution. Widening access to postgraduate study is in the early stages of development and institutions are often not explicit whether they are focusing on taught programmes or research programmes or both. At the moment a number of potential target groups have been mentioned, but there is a lack of evidence of robust targeting of these groups, and interventions are embryonic. This is however an important area for future widening participation activity.

Typology of Access to Postgraduate Provision

Access to Postgraduate Study in General

Some institutions are promoting access to postgraduate study in a generic way (i.e., to students from all backgrounds and not specifically access to their own institution). For example, an arts institution states that:

“The College seeks to enable students to access postgraduate education, either at the University College or through the National Arts Learning Network, noting that it is the successful postgraduate of today who is the inspiration of tomorrow, either as employer, teacher or in other ways as a role model.”

Progressing Our Own Undergraduates

The majority of institutions that discuss postgraduate access are focused on students entering their own institutions. This tends to be either progression of their undergraduates from under-represented groups to postgraduate programmes, or recruiting students from specific under-represented groups from any institution to postgraduate programmes. For example, one institution states:

“The University College will seek to improve the opportunities for student progression from undergraduate to postgraduate study for those groups currently under-represented in postgraduate education.”

Targeting Under-Represented Groups from Across the Sector

Some institutions, particularly those who have substantial postgraduate provision, are targeting specific groups beyond their own institutions. Some institutions talk in more general terms about targeting students that are under-represented in postgraduate education, while others identify specific groups. Groups identified include: low income students; older learners; disabled students; under-represented ethnic minorities; and people working in professions without undergraduate qualifications. One or two interventions that are described as contributing to widening participation at the postgraduate level are not specifically targeting students from under-represented groups.

Interventions

At the moment interventions are in the early stages of development and/or implementation. Specific examples from the WPSAs include the following:

Identifying Target Groups

“Initial work will involve identifying existing undergraduates or recent graduates from under-represented backgrounds, using their home postcode data on entry to undergraduate study as an initial identifier. Much work on this objective is yet to be refined and therefore the development of reliable methods of identification will be an early focus.”

Taster Sessions

“Taster and orientation sessions delivered by staff and postgraduate students to enhance progression from undergraduate to postgraduate levels and to improve postgraduate retention.”

Financial Support

“The introduction of Masters scholarships for 2009-10 will add to the fair access financial measures offered by [name of university], and provide an opportunity for students from low income backgrounds to undertake postgraduate taught study in the academic year immediately after their undergraduate degree at [name of university] or the following year.”

Development of New Courses

Some institutions are developing new programmes to encourage wider participation at postgraduate level. One postgraduate institution is setting up an access office to develop new programmes which will:

“Provide and manage learning opportunities beside, or in collaboration with, existing MA courses. The agenda for this office will include the design and delivery of: short courses; pre-sessional and post-sessional courses for postgraduate students; part-time courses, online and blended learning opportunities; and non-degree programmes. The point of these will be to give wider access to what we are best at, and to enrich the College community.”

A London institution has a collaborative approach to providing a range of professional and vocational postgraduate programmes:

“We have developed a range of specialist, mostly postgraduate, programmes with partner institutions in London to support adult participation in higher education in specialist areas.”

Skills Development for Non-Traditional Students

One institution is offering research training and employability skills training to postgraduate students flexibly to support participation by non-traditional students. In addition to attending training at their own institution, they can attend at a partner institution which may be closer to where they live, or they can access an online version of the training. Another institution is offering access to e-learning resources prior to entry to develop their skills for postgraduate study before they begin their course.

Developing Learning and Teaching

One predominantly postgraduate and post-experience institution is focusing on:

“Developing inclusive structures, cultures and practices to enable those from backgrounds not traditionally represented in our student body to access and fully participate in our courses and programmes.”

One arts institution notes the contribution of e-learning initiatives to dyslexic students and others who are less experienced in critical thinking.

Early Days

It is noticeable that plans are very vague and often in the early stages of development. Often it is not explicit whether they relate to taught or research degrees, or both. Furthermore, issues about targeting and identifying students are embryonic and strategies to engage these students in postgraduate study are thin. One research intensive university has developed an admissions policy and will go on to think about implementation:

“The current admissions principles and procedures relate only to undergraduate admissions. A similar policy framework to support admissions to postgraduate taught programmes has recently been approved. Once this has been implemented, further consideration will be given to the most appropriate framework to underpin admission to postgraduate research programmes.”

One of their objectives is to:

“Identify the needs of widening participation students and any barriers they may face in progressing to postgraduate study or accessing specific areas of employment.”

There is however an emerging recognition of the need for institutions to engage with the issue of widening access to postgraduate provision.

5. Measures

In general, the sector is planning considerable activity designed to address widening participation issues across the student life cycle. No institution is planning a significant degree of cultural shift in relation to its widening participation strategy, but rather change is generally incremental. HEIs describe their plans frequently as a list of infrastructural changes relating to: information, advice and guidance; outreach; admissions; induction; curriculum; learning; teaching and assessment; careers and employability issues; and management information systems. They also describe a range of external activities with partner colleges and schools. These plans, which incorporate the HEI's Access Agreements where appropriate, are accompanied in the main by references to annual processes of monitoring and review, whereby HEIs scrutinise institutional performance across outreach and partnership activity, admissions processes and intake profiles, retention and achievement, and post-graduation destinations.

Some HEIs refer to internal committee structures, responsible post-holders and processes which reach into departments, faculties and schools to ensure a 'whole institution' approach. Some describe developments in their management systems to capture relevant student data. In general monitoring and review processes and intentions to improve them appear to be robust and well embedded.

However, our review has thrown up some concerns about the evaluation of the effectiveness of planned actions and the measurement of impact. In many cases the relationship between the plan and the outcome is largely unresolved, and evaluation measures have not been built in from the outset. One exception shows clearly an interaction between planned strategy and evaluation in order to assess impact and effectiveness:

“We plan to continue monitoring and evaluating success across all pre-entry widening participation activities, and to enhance the monitoring and evaluation of under-represented groups through admissions and progression. To that end we will:

- Use progression data from our attainment-raising schemes to assess success in helping students gain access to Russell Group universities.
- Use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data from participants of widening participation activities to assess the value and efficacy of these schemes.
- Use quantitative data relating to applications and enrolments of students identified in our target groups and of student groups identified in the HESA

benchmarks, to measure the success of the widening participation strategy in attracting under-represented groups.

- Use quantitative data relating to undergraduates from under-represented groups to monitor their progress.”

That said it is of course difficult to identify discrete causal relationships at a more detailed operational level when many activities are designed to address simultaneously a particular institutional objective.

However, a general uncertainty about evaluation is demonstrated in the plethora of terms used to describe the relationship between intention, action, effectiveness and impact. The terminology of targets, performance indicators, milestones, benchmarks, outputs, outcomes and evidence is frequently cross-contaminated and there is no consistency in the ways in which it is used. One institution's targets may be another's aims or milestones. In only a minority of cases do institutions address outcomes, and in even less do they identify the kinds of evidence supporting them. In addition, baselines are variously set from 2004/5 onwards, percentage change is not always identified as actual numbers, and achievement is often seen in terms of initiatives undertaken, changes made and jobs done, rather in terms of the qualitative difference those actions have produced.

5.1 Volumes of Activity

HEIs have submitted a wealth of detail in respect of their widening participation programmes which encompass an impressive array of activities, and numbers of partners and participants mostly relating to 2008/9. Many HEIs quote high numbers of learners engaged. Some of these relate to large-scale events such as open days or student fairs; one cites 230,000 interactions from, for example, UCAS fairs and parents' events, while another quotes 3,984 students at open days and 15,317 attendees at 162 off-site events.

Most HEIs detail more focused activities. Typically one identifies 285 students on summer schools for learners from Years 9, 11 and 12. A second refers to 1400 students from 66 schools engaged in 93 audition/interview workshops, a third cites 1835 students on 33 master classes, while a fourth estimates 3,500 learners attended a range of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) events. Some HEIs identify other constituencies of learners such as the 1700 mature learners who participated across a number of activities such as taster courses and IAG sessions, 1500 parents at a welcome day event, and a programme of 13 community outreach events. However, while many HEIs go into extensive detail about the nature of the events there may not be sufficient detail overall to ensure appropriate categorisation at national level, nor of course is it always clear how many of the participants belong to target groups.

HEIs also cite numbers of partner schools and colleges, though again it is not always clear whether these are institutions in low participating neighbourhoods, targeted by Aimhigher, state schools, primary or secondary, local or national, and whether they are schools participating in PGCE placement schemes. Few institutions say why they select their schools though one university states that it selects 152 partner schools, 138 of which are in the public sector, on the basis of high conversion rates, and others refer to schools in targeted areas. Many HEIs cite links with over 50 schools, and many identify schemes for partnership such as the 'One Link' programme which encompasses 170 schools from Surrey to Lancashire, a compact scheme with 20 schools, a progression module with 12 schools and a progression accord with 26 schools and colleges. This is the area where recruitment and more general aspiration-raising outreach work shade into each other; it is difficult to disaggregate the number of partnerships which belong to each and therefore how much activity is related to the target cohort.

5.2 Performance Measures

While there is great variation in the vocabulary of metrics and the ways such terms are understood and used, the HESA benchmarks, especially state school, low participation neighbourhoods, NS-SEC, retention and completion indicators are by far the most significant group of measures for institutions. Over 85% of institutions make explicit reference to these indicators, and most use at least some of them in their strategies both to measure performance and to set targets for intakes, though the identification of the former is far less frequent than the latter. Most of the institutions which do not make reference to these HESA benchmarks are postgraduate or small subject-based institutions which set their own institutional performance measures. Only two institutions argue that the HESA performance indicators are not appropriate for their purposes. In general, where HEIs are performing under their benchmark, they aim to achieve or exceed it and where they have met or exceeded it they intend to maintain, or at least maintain and possibly increase, performance. At least one HEI was concerned about the cap on numbers in relation to increases. Given that the performance indicators represent sector averages, the aim to exceed benchmark may remain aspirational for some HEIs.

However, many HEIs have developed a range of institutional performance indicators in addition to the national measures and have tailored performance indicators to their own needs. The take-up of bursaries is a common performance indicator, but others are more individual. One institution has decided to benchmark its own performance data against national BME and looked-after children populations in the absence of HEFCE benchmarks for these constituencies, and another subject based institution measures against subject specific performance indicators. One university describes how performance measures have diversified and milestones have been set with regard to applications and acceptances from a range of student groups, including those from schools and colleges with an A Level average of less than 265 tariff points, minority ethnic students, students with disability, local students and those from NS-SEC 4-6. Another institution shows how the global performance indicators are interrogated at different institutional levels in order to improve performance:

“Nevertheless, the performance indicators are only a first measure and [we] believe it is important to get behind the figures to identify and select priority areas for improvement. ‘Success rates’ (applications to enrolment) are analysed and published in the annual academic statistics for school type, socio-economic class, ethnicity, age and geographical location, all by faculty.”

Some institutions use performance measures around progression and achievement in the local area, or access rates from their own compact schemes, to measure their contribution to widening participation. One, for instance, looks to use progression and achievement rates in local schools, another considers staying on rates and a third lists a range of measures, national, local and institutional, which are:

- The annual performance indicator results against benchmarks and against competitor HEIs
- Improvements in progression rates and achievement of young people from the region, as measured/monitored by Aimhigher
- Improvements in progression rates and achievements by those following vocational qualification routes in the region, as measured/monitored by Higher Futures
- Impact evaluation measuring qualitative, as well as quantitative, outcomes of different interventions, particularly the impact on changes in students’ capabilities, identities and behaviour.

The most extensive list of success measures by a single HEI includes amongst others: the take-up of outreach activities; the throughput of applicants from outreach; the number and spread of target schools; colleges and communities; the usage of university support services by students in

financial difficulty; students with mental health problems; vulnerable students; lone parents; evidence of increased provision for mature and part-time students through employer engagement and flexible delivery; and evidence of improved employability amongst target groups. Some of these measures are also used by other HEIs but not in such a rich combination.

5.3 Targets

While there is some flexibility in the use of the term, targets generally embrace specific increases in relation to intake and planned outputs around particular aims and objectives. Performance indicators (state schools, low participation neighbourhoods and NS-SEC) are often used as intake targets and expressed in terms of a small percentage change, for example, not untypically, one HEI will increase students from NS-SEC 4-8 by 3% on a 2005/5 baseline by 2012. The most dramatic increase in terms of percentage is an institution which plans a 15% increase in its students from NS-SEC 4-8 by 2011. Often the targets have already been negotiated in Access Agreements. One institution, for example, points to a 5% increase in the number of 2005 entrants from NS-SEC 4-8 which has already been agreed with OFFA, while another indicates that it has uplifted its OFFA targets in its WPSA.

Where numbers of students from widening participation sub-groups are likely to be low, identifiable targets tend to be clearer. This is particularly the case with students with disability and care leavers. For example, one institution plans to increase the intake of disabled students to 8% of the cohort, and another institution will increase care leavers by 5 entrants each year.

14 institutions (11%) make specific reference to targets relating to disabled students, which is low in light of the fact that almost all institutions identify disabled learners as a target group for their widening participation work. 53 institutions (41%) have the Frank Buttle Quality Mark, while others aim to achieve it. Other less frequent aspirations focus on increases in BME, postgraduate and part-time students, entrants to degree courses, entrants from a HEI's own access course, vocational learners (one institution seeks to increase employer co-funded numbers to around 40 annually), entrants to particular colleges or college groups, lifelong learning, mature and third age entrants. These largely reflect local conditions and gaps in the HEI's intake profile.

While all institutions express targets as increases to particular constituencies in the intake, many also adopt a range of other numerical and infrastructural targets, often associated with institutional aims and objectives around the student lifecycle, and annually reviewed against timescales. Explicit targets (some are implied in reference to the Access Agreement) around outreach often refer to increasing the numbers of schools and college partnerships, and progression agreements, sponsoring academies, and developing employer initiatives. Sometimes they refer to the provision of particular kinds of activity and in some cases there are associated and more detailed targets around the development of partnership networks and the improvement of outreach provision and IAG materials for learners and parents.

As HEIs move through the student life cycle and into support for their own intakes the focus sharpens on to targets around retention and, less insistently, achievement and employability. HESA performance indicators are again important features in identifying institutional position and most institutions are content to let retention targets conform to HESA performance indicators, although some institutions set their own targets in respect of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and learners with disabilities. Where HEIs look at the issue of achievement it is generally in relation to concerns about parity of performance between students, especially the differential performance of BME groups. Others identify those from disadvantaged backgrounds, care leavers and disabled learners as at risk.

In addition to internal targets around retention and achievement, institutions often set targets around infrastructural development aimed to improve support for students from disadvantaged

backgrounds. One institution identifies the development of social learning space, a student mentoring scheme, timely provision for students with dyslexia or other disabilities, and the development of inclusive curricula. Another seeks to provide a comprehensive infrastructure to support and deliver part-time learning.

5.4 Data and Monitoring

While all HEIs use HESA data, many use other national datasets to monitor performance. A few supplement their outreach targeting with POLAR, free school meals, Aimhigher/local authority and geo-demographic data. One institution uses a combination of Connexions and Aimhigher data on post-16 staying on rates, Education Maintenance Allowance data and university tracking projects. HEIs analyse their intakes, with particular reference to social class and educational background at least through HESA data, although a few point out the time lag in this information. Sometimes HEIs undertake their own postcode analysis. Nine mention the use of UCAS data in relation to the monitoring of target groups progressing through the admissions process, though one queries the levels of granularity in UCAS data on applicants who are rejected or who decline offers. One institution commissions work from UCAS on the application to acceptance conversion rate by applicant profile. 14 institutions (11%) refer to Disabled Student Allowance or other special educational needs or disability data. In addition, HEIs use national qualitative data, namely the National Student Satisfaction Survey and the Destinations of Leavers from HE Survey.

However, HEIs also supplement national data with their own internally generated data to focus on particular issues. Some use progression data from access schemes, attainment-raising programmes and compacts. Most use qualitative feedback from outreach events and canvass the views of learners, parents and teachers on the effectiveness of provision. A fair number also seek the views of their students in relation to provision through a selection of attitude and satisfaction surveys (in addition to the National Student Satisfaction Survey), monitoring questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups, with findings frequently analysed by a selection of criteria such as NS-SEC, looked-after child status, ethnicity, disability and gender. One institution manages student feedback through a Student Experience Group which co-ordinates an annual student survey, focus groups, informal communications with a representative set of students whose progress is being tracked and fed back from course, faculty and student union representatives. Another conducts an exit questionnaire for students withdrawing from their course. Sometimes HEIs aim for a comprehensive view of their provision and performance from a range of sources. A useful list of generic evidence is provided by one university as:

- Analysis of key performance indicators
- Using medium- and long-term impact data
- Tracking projects
- Short-term evaluations
- Annual appraisal of degree outcomes and employability data.

Another provides a range of detail, citing in addition to national performance indicators: Aimhigher progression rate analysis; qualitative feedback from outreach events and open days; internal enrolment, progression and retention data; new entrants survey; decliners survey; transitions activity take-up and feedback; relationships with schools, colleges, other partners and stakeholders; student focus groups; Frank Buttle Quality Mark reviews; and Progression Agreement evaluations.

Occasionally, in order to understand in depth particular aspects of widening participation, institutions undertake research projects. One institution has conducted a longitudinal research project with students from diverse backgrounds, another is looking into the barriers to entry for BME students, while another undertakes projects into teaching and learning such as student learning styles and self-sufficiency and the learning experience of students with a disability.

5.5 Management Information Systems (MIS), Student Records and Tracking

In discussing their own internal data many HEIs refer to student records and MIS data as a source of information on which to base annual reviews of performance in relation to key transitional stages in the student life cycle - applications and acceptances, intake profile, retention, progression and achievement. One institution has begun to use its student record system to record destinations of learners for the Destination of Leavers from HE survey thus enabling scrutiny of the full student life cycle. Clearly the sector has made some advances in the sophistication of its systems so that student records can provide appropriate information, and, especially important to understanding the performance of students from a diversity of backgrounds, tracking systems. Some institutions have developed their own programmes to track students and monitor achievement even to the level of subjects and sectors.

However, with a renewed focus on widening participation, some HEIs, especially the smaller institutions, have become aware that they do not have adequate tools to identify and monitor students from disadvantaged backgrounds within the institution; three HEIs specifically make reference to their deficiency in this respect. Some HEIs are developing databases in order to investigate particular cohorts more closely and others are monitoring applications from outreach students, identifying 'at risk' students (predicated on a range of criteria) who may be in danger of failure or withdrawal and tracking applicants with non-standard and vocational qualifications. One institution intends to initiate a three-year project to develop a trend analysis of its data.

5.6 Impact Evaluation

For the most part, institutions routinely monitor and demonstrate examples of good practice. Institutions are keen to understand and improve their practice in relation to widening participation learners. However, evaluation and the measuring of outcomes or impact is often mentioned (generally in association with monitoring) but not embedded as a stage in the planning process. While objectives, targets and milestones are frequently represented as a group of criteria, (given the inter-changeability of terms mentioned earlier) outcomes and evidence are much less frequent. This means that an institutional objective will conventionally be associated with a percentage increase in some aspect of performance or a programme of actions, and a set of interim outputs over a specific time period.

The relationship between the objective and the planned course of action to achieve it remains untested without outcomes and evidence. For example, one institution plans to raise aspirations in school children from primary onwards, encouraging them to apply to the appropriate university, and will therefore in a designated timeframe seek to expand its school visits programme to involve increased numbers of learners and schools. However, there is no proposed examination of the outcome of such an expansion to ensure that learners are encouraged to apply appropriately, and that an expanded programme is the effective approach to fulfilling the initial objective.

The issue of evidence and outcomes is not easily dealt with. Most institutions which tackle this dimension do so numerically and so the outcome of an action or strategy might be expressed as an increased intake of a particular widening participation group, improved retention rates or an increase in partner schools and colleges, while evidence of success is often seen as an improvement in the appropriate HEFCE benchmark. Occasionally success is seen more qualitatively and implies a different kind of measure. One institution which is working with partially-sighted students, identifies as a measure of success the recognition of its provision as a model of good practice by the Royal National Institute for the Blind and other disability organisations, while the development of its new Study Support and Employability Centre would be deemed successful when all categories of student feel supported by a flexible and fit-for-purpose student support system. Clearly, this kind of measure will necessitate some kind of qualitative investigation and some HEIs deal with this by indicating that the lines in the plan will be reviewed at the end of a

particular time frame. However, the better course would be to think through the measures to be used in a review at the outset and perhaps to think in terms of wider cultural outcomes or change for the institution and its local communities.

5.7 Future Intentions

This level of integrated, evidence-based planning has yet to evolve fully. Some institutions are, however, conscious of more work to be done in this respect and have incorporated such developments into their strategies. One institution states the necessity for a more robust evaluation framework which will see evidence of success becoming firmer as the framework evolves, and another has specific plans to improve its evaluation processes:

“During the course of the next year we will be reviewing current targets and milestones and identifying new approaches, methodologies and data sets to evaluate the impact of current engagement and to inform considerations of additional widening participation and outreach activities and targets in relation to, for example:

- the volume and spend on widening participation and outreach activity (which will be possible following the current institution-wide audit);
- numbers of students benefiting from widening participation and outreach activities (tracking students more systematically from initial contact/outreach activity, through to applications, offers, acceptances and registrations data, student retention and progression, student success in terms of degrees awarded and classifications);
- numbers of current students and staff involved in delivering widening participation and outreach activities; and
- identifying particular target groups (e.g., mature students, care leavers).”

These are by no means isolated examples and many institutions refer to aspects of their monitoring and evaluation processes in the future tense. A few institutions have only recently been included in the HESA exercise and are developing their data accordingly, but larger institutions are also conscious of the need for better analysis of internal data. One HEI intends to look at student demographics and retention rates of different groups by postcode, bursaries received, progression, statistics and degree classification in order to build a trend analysis, while another looks to incorporate benchmarking and an evidence-based approach into its monitoring frameworks.

From the WPSAs it is possible to see institutions dealing with a range of challenges, not only in the development of robust proposals to enhance widening participation but also to understand it in terms of targeting and measurement of effective action. There is a great diversity of approach on both counts but with the promise that more will be done. However, at the moment, many institutions give every indication of being at the stage of intelligent monitoring rather than evaluation. Constituencies are targeted, improvements identified and discrete actions put in place to achieve results, but evidence-based planning is some way off. Institutions are currently in a position to say what has and has not happened but not necessarily in a position to say why this may have been the case and how this will affect future strategy. Hopefully a debate about evidence-based planning will move this forwards.

6. Conclusions: Institutional Development to Mainstream and Sustain Widening Participation and Equality

By way of conclusion, this section of the report seeks to identify the ways in which, and the extent to which, institutions are developing in order to mainstream widening participation and equality, and to create more inclusive cultures. The first section provides an overview of the concepts and practices associated with institutional change to mainstream widening participation and equality. This section concludes by drawing up a ten-point framework of the kinds of changes that ought to be taking place, or that institutions should be aspiring to if they wish to create more inclusive cultures. The second section draws evidence from the WPSAs (most of which is cited elsewhere in this report) to consider the extent to which institutions are developing and changing themselves in response to diversity, and thus producing structures and cultures which are sustainable, and have the capacity to outlive funding and related policies oriented towards widening participation and increasing equality.

6.1 A Brief Overview of Mainstreaming Widening Participation and Equality

It is increasingly widely accepted that institutional change is necessary to engage a diverse student body, both to encourage students to enter HE and to enable them to be successful in HE. For example, Layer (2002), in response to the introduction of widening participation strategies, noted that:

“There is always a risk that single item approaches become marginalised within a university as being the responsibility of a particular interest group. This development [widening participation strategies] has been in response to government direction, [and] has the potential to shape and change institutions so that they become more inclusive.”²⁴

Thus, it is necessary for widening participation, equality and diversity to be moved “from the margins to the mainstream”²⁵, and for institutions to implement the “cultural change and the organisation, management and leadership changes that go with it.”²⁶

The concept of institutional change to promote widening participation and equality and diversity underpins much of the work of the Higher Education Academy’s Inclusion Team²⁷, and a related programme delivered by Action on Access.²⁸ Indeed, an inclusive approach:

“Necessitates a shift away from supporting specific student groups through a discrete set of policies or time bound interventions, towards equity considerations being embedded within all functions of the institution and treated as an ongoing process of quality enhancement.

²⁴ Layer, G. (2002) ‘Developing Inclusivity’. *International Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 21:1, 3-12.

²⁵ Thomas, L. and May, H. with Harrop, H., Houston. M., Knox. H., Lee. M. F., Osborne, M., Pudner, H. and Trotman, C. (2005) *From the margins to the mainstream: Embedding widening participation in higher education* London: Universities UK and Standing Conference of Principles.

²⁶ HEFCE (2006) Widening Participation: A review by HEFCE, p82. Available from <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/aimhigh/review.asp>

²⁷ Embedding inclusive policy and practice programme 2007-8; Inclusive learning and teaching programme 2009-10; and Developing inclusive cultures programme 2011-12.

²⁸ Mainstreaming and sustaining WP in institutions, 2008.

http://www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=11_2_3

Making a shift of such magnitude requires cultural and systemic change at both the policy and practice levels.”²⁹

One outcome of the Action on Access ‘Mainstreaming and Sustaining Widening Participation in Institutions’ programme was a reflective review checklist which was designed to help institutions to understand what mainstreaming widening participation entails, and thus to identify specific changes that they need to make.³⁰ The checklist covers the following topics:

- Institution-wide understanding and ownership of widening participation
- Visible commitment to widening participation which influences strategic decision-making
- Effective processes and structures to avoid reliance on committed individuals
- Inclusive culture reflecting staff engagement across the institution/student life cycle
- Inclusive learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum approaches
- Integrated outreach and admission processes
- Use of data, monitoring, evaluation and research to improve practice and inform decision-making
- Effective funding for widening participation.

In addition the Action on Access programme³¹ identified four process steps that institutions undertook when working towards implementing these specific changes:

1. Review the current situation
2. Develop the strategic framework (policies, procedures and structures)
3. Embed mechanisms to engage staff
4. Use data, evaluation and research to underpin the process.

May and Bridger (2010) drew on the Academy’s ‘Embedding Inclusive Policy and Practice’ programme and identified six key steps to be undertaken to bring about cultural change (listed below). They also stress the need for change to take place at the institutional level, in terms of policy, structures, processes and environmental issues, and at the individual level to attitudes, behaviour and practices.

1. Ensure a shared vision and inclusive philosophy
2. Provide leadership for inclusion
3. Be systematic, holistic and proactive
4. Build and tailor an evidence base
5. Engage stakeholders through a range of methods
6. Provide opportunities for dialogue and debate.

The review checklist headings, together with the process steps identified by Action on Access and the Higher Education Academy, and the learning gained from analysing the 2009 WPSAs can be combined to provide a framework to assess the extent to which institutions are working towards mainstreaming widening participation and equality through cultural change. The key issues are:

- Systematic approach to mainstreaming widening participation and equality
- Strategic and operational understanding of widening participation and equality, including target groups

²⁹ May, H. and Bridger, K. (2010) Developing and embedding inclusive policy and practice in higher education, York: Higher Education Academy, p 6

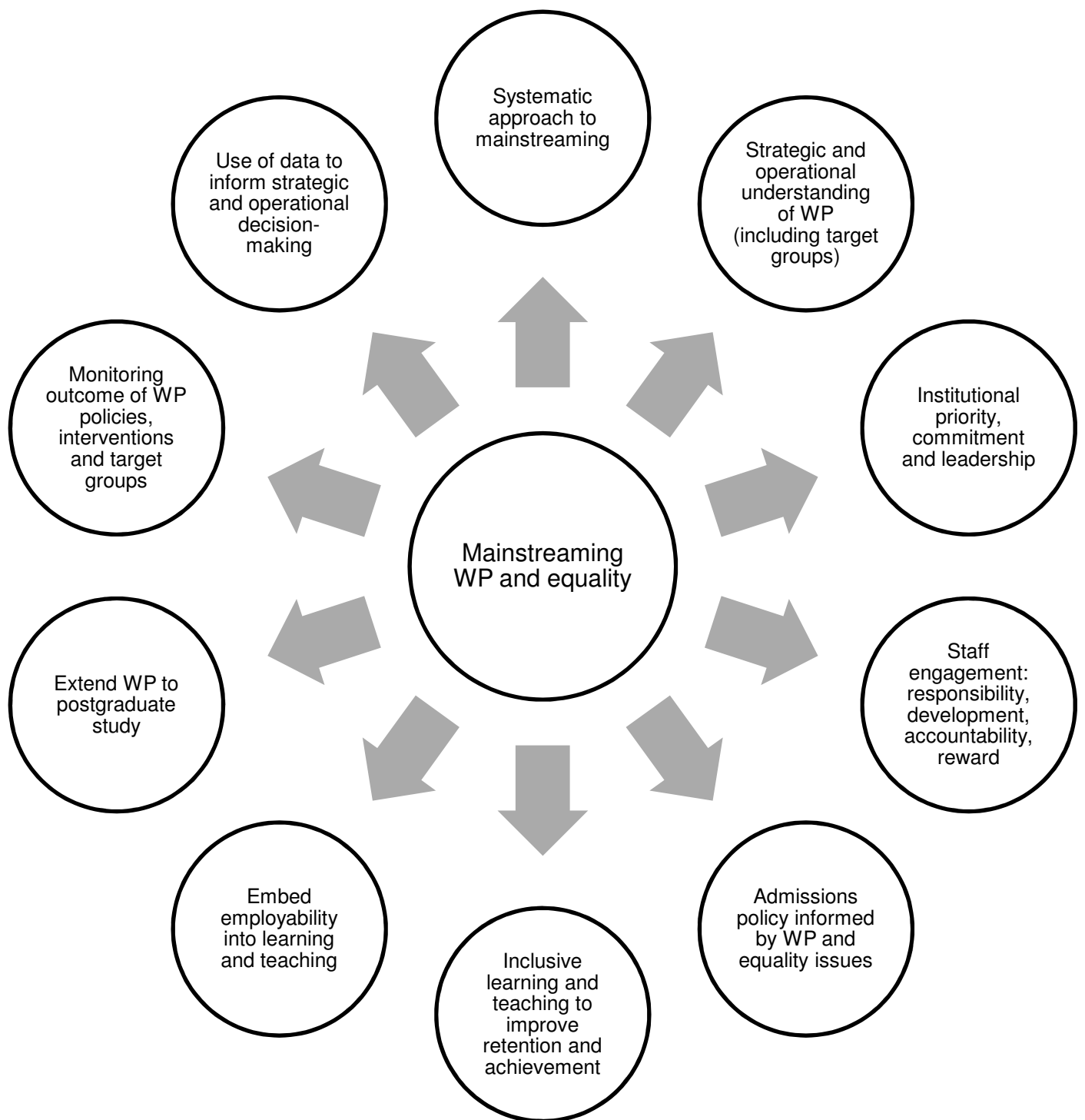
³⁰ Checklist is available from: http://www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=11_2_3

³¹ Checklist is available from: http://www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=11_2_3

- Institutional priority, commitment and leadership to promote widening participation and equality
- Staff engagement in widening participation and equality, including responsibility, development opportunities, accountability and reward
- Widening participation and equality inform admissions policy, processes and practices
- Inclusive learning and teaching, including induction and student support, to improve retention and achievement of all students
- Embed employability into learning and teaching to enhance progression into the graduate labour market for all students
- Widening participation to postgraduate study
- Monitoring the outcomes of widening participation and equality policies, interventions and target groups
- Use of data to inform strategic and operational decision-making

These are shown in Diagram 4 below, and the discussed in relation to the evidence presented in the WPSAs in the following section.

Diagram 4: Developments to Mainstream Widening Participation and Equality



6.2 An Assessment of Progress towards Mainstreaming Widening Participation and Equality in English HEIs

Using the ten-point framework generated above and represented in Diagram 4 the following sub-sections examine the evidence presented in the WPSAs, and largely reviewed elsewhere in this report, to explore the extent to which the HEIs in England are mainstreaming widening participation and equality through institutional development and change.

Systematic Approach to Mainstreaming Widening Participation and Equality

In the WPSAs there is little explicit evidence of institutions taking a systematic approach to developing an inclusive institution, but the process of preparing the documents provided an opportunity to review the current situation and identify priorities for change, and hopefully this was done collaboratively with staff from across the institution to promote dialogue and debate. There is plenty of evidence that the WPSAs have been used to provide a descriptive review of the current situation, but it is less clear that they have been used to critically assess the current situation and to identify priorities for the future.

Strategic and Operational Understanding of Widening Participation and Equality

Many WPSAs do not provide an overt statement of their widening participation definition or institutional vision, although strong commitment to widening participation is expressed by reference to mission statements and other corporate policies, including equality and diversity in 53% of institutions. The evidence about targeting, especially of lower socio-economic groups (NS-SEC 4-7), shows that some institutions use a range of target groups and some have not fully aligned their work to national priorities. Furthermore, although 98% of institutions cite disabled students as a widening participation target group, only 11% set targets in relation to disabled students. It is thus possible that different parts of a single institution are working towards different widening participation visions, and data collection is not connected to strategic and operational planning.

Institutional Priority, Commitment and Leadership

Widening participation is increasingly being linked to other institutional policies, reflecting its increasing institutional priority. However, one might expect stronger links between widening participation and equality and diversity in the future given that the Equalities Act has come into force. Institutional commitment to widening participation can also be illustrated by an examination of the ways in which widening participation is organised (see Section 3.3 and in particular Table 2). From Section 3.3 it can be seen that 81 HEIs (63%) have an organisational model that promotes institutional commitment to widening participation across the institution, rather than keeping it within a single central unit. This has the added value of promoting the engagement of more staff across the institution in widening participation work. It is less clear the extent to which senior managers are involved in promoting widening participation and taking forward the work at a strategic level.

Staff Engagement

HEIs are engaging in a range of activities to engage staff and influence their attitudes and practices in relation to student diversity and institutional flexibility. 54 institutions (42%) identified staff training and development activities to support widening participation, and 22 institutions (17%) discussed sharing and promoting good practice across the institution. In addition, four institutions refer to participating in change management programmes, led by the Higher Education Academy, which are contributing to changing learning and teaching in institutions. There is less evidence of a systematic, institution-wide, approach to engaging staff through their policy infrastructure as only 9 (7%) institutions made a link between their WPSA and their human resources policy.

Widening Participation and Equality Informing Admissions Policy and Processes

There is scope for institutions to make stronger links between widening participation and equality and admissions. Although there are some examples of good practice, many admissions strategies only engage with widening participation in a limited way, such as identifying support for specific groups such as vocational learners. Despite the strong focus on outreach work with disabled students there is very little evidence of developing admissions policies that encourage and facilitate disabled students to apply, and that offer them equality of outcomes through the admissions process.

Inclusive Learning and Teaching

There is encouraging evidence about the ways in which some institutions are linking widening participation and equality to learning and teaching and implementing more inclusive practices to improve the student experience and promote student retention and success. This includes moving towards an extended induction process and providing opportunities for student engagement with staff and peers. There is growing awareness of the retention and achievement of specific equity groups, and institutions are developing interventions to address the differentials, in particular for BME students.

Progression to the Labour Market

There is a widespread commitment to ensuring that widening participation spans the full student life cycle and most institutions mention employability in their WPSA. The approaches used vary however, and many are not integrated into the core curriculum, although there are more examples of this than were identified in previous studies. This is accompanied by greater monitoring of differential experiences in the labour market by widening participation and equality groups, and this could be adopted more widely. Some institutions are responding to national or institutional data and providing additional activities for specific student groups.

Widening Participation to Postgraduate Study

There is currently very little recognition of the concept of widening participation with regard to postgraduate study, and where it is recognised policies and interventions are at an early stage of development.

Monitoring the Outcomes of Widening Participation and Equality Policies, Interventions and Target Groups

The WPSAs demonstrate that generally institutions have sufficient data about the volume of activity taking place, but that they are less clear about the expected outcomes of policies and interventions in relation to specific target groups, and also that they are poor at setting targets and identifying methods of measurement to gauge the success or otherwise of their work. There is very little evidence that evaluation is linked to the strategic planning process.

Use of Data to Inform Strategic and Operational Decision-Making

When institutions have data about the access, retention and achievement progression of widening participation target groups this information this is often not being used to inform decision-making at either a strategic or an operational level.

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Glossary

APC	Area Partnership Chair
APEL	Accreditation of prior experimental learning
APCL	Accreditation of prior certificated learning
BME	Black or minority ethnic
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
ECU	Equality Challenge Unit
FE	Further education
FEC	Further education college
HE	Higher education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEBSS	Higher Education Bursary and Scholarship Scheme
HEI	Higher education institution
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IMD	Index of Mass Deprivation
NS-SEC	National Statistics Socio-Economic Classifications
NSS	National Student Satisfaction Survey
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
POLAR	Participation of local areas
SPA	Supporting Professionalism in Admissions
SpLD	Specific learning difficulties
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
VLE	Virtual learning environment
WebCT	Web course tools
WP	Widening participation
WPSAs	Widening Participation Strategic Assessments

Appendix 1: Framework for Analysis

A. Strategy

1. Overarching Statement

- a. Definitions of widening participation
- b. Visible commitment to widening participation
- c. Institution-wide understanding of widening participation in institutional context

2. Institutional Position of Widening Participation

- a. Organisation
 - i. Central unit
 - ii. Dispersed/mainstreamed into academic and service functions
 - iii. Hybrid (e.g., shared responsibilities co-ordinated centrally)
 - iv. Unclear
- b. Links to other institutional policies
 - i. Mission/corporate plan
 - ii. Admissions
 - iii. Learning, teaching and assessment
 - iv. Equality and diversity
 - v. Fair access
 - vi. Human resources
 - vii. Estates
 - viii. Other
 - ix. Widening participation strategy
- c. Organisational culture
 - i. Leadership and management
 - ii. Staff development and support
 - iii. Evidence of staff engagement across the institution
 - iv. Informs strategic and operational decision-making

3. Widening Participation Aims and Objectives

- a. Motivation
 - i. Recruitment
 - ii. Tapping pool of talent/gifted and talented pupils
 - iii. New roles and markets
 - iv. Improving institutional diversity
 - v. Anti-discrimination and equality legislation
 - vi. Regeneration
 - vii. Social justice/corporate responsibility

B. Activities

1. STEM

2. Foundation Degrees

3. Retention

4. Partnerships

- i. Trade unions
- ii. Community organisations
- iii. Sector Skills Councils
- iv. National bodies
- v. Employers
- vi. Other regional
- vii. Regional 14-19
- viii. Schools and academies
- ix. Lifelong Learning Networks
- x. Partner FECs

5. Pre-entry

a. Types of activity

- i. Mentoring
- ii. Parental or familial involvement
- iii. Dyslexia testing
- iv. Open days, taster days, master classes, summer schools, etc.
- v. Awareness-raising
- vi. Improving achievement
- vii. Information, advice and guidance
- viii. Preparation for HE study
- ix. Progression framework

b. Target groups

- i. From state schools
- ii. Gifted and talented
- iii. Primary school-aged children
- iv. Vocational progression
- v. From a care background
- vi. Gender
- vii. BME
- viii. Traveller communities
- ix. E-learning or distance learning
- x. Part-time or flexible learning
- xi. Special educational needs
- xii. IMD target groups
- xiii. Low participation neighbourhoods
- xiv. Young people NS-SEC 4-7
- xv. Work-based learners
- xvi. Mature learners (e.g., from the community)
- xvii. Disabled students
- xviii. Use of targeting guidelines

- c. Links with Aimhigher
 - i. Extensive
 - ii. Some/mentioned
- d. Links to Access Agreements
 - i. Explicit
 - ii. Vague/mentioned

6. Admissions

7. Learning Experience, Student Success

- a. Induction
 - i. Pre-entry and post-entry activities
 - ii. Extended beyond one week
 - iii. Effort to demystify and clarify expectations
- b. Learning, Teaching and Assessment
 - i. Student centred
 - ii. Flexibility
 - iii. Formative assessment
 - iv. Virtual learning environments
- c. Curriculum Design
 - i. Student involvement
 - ii. CPD
 - iii. Employer input
 - iv. Review of existing curriculum
 - v. Process for developing new courses
 - vi. Integrating study skills
 - vii. Inclusive assessment strategy
- d. Student Development
 - i. Mentoring
 - ii. Community engagement
 - iii. Accessibility and disability
 - iv. Personal tutoring or academic advising
 - v. Provision of academic development
 - vi. Other student services
 - vii. Financial support including OFFA bursaries

8. Progression

- a. Employability
- b. Postgraduate study

9. In-reach and Institutional Development

- a. Systems
 - i. Data, monitoring and evaluation
 - ii. Policies
 - iii. Review and accountability processes
 - iv. Quality assurance and enhancement processes
 - v. Impact assessment
 - vi. Other

- b. Culture
 - i. Staff training and development
 - ii. Sharing practice across the institution
 - iii. Awareness-raising
 - iv. Other engagement activities

C. Measures (Evaluation)

1) Volumes of Activity

- i. Numbers of partner schools/academies/colleges
- ii. Number of events by category (summer school, taster day, mentoring/ambassador scheme, revision/master class, etc.)
- iii. Number of students attending:
 - (i) open days
 - (ii) masterclass
 - (iii) summer schools
 - (iv) taster days
 - (v) campus visits
 - (vi) etc.
- iv. Number of staff engaging

2) Project Achievement Factors

- i. Targets
- ii. Milestones: achievement of stages to completion (within time scale)
- iii. Baseline: institutional starting point, defined by key data sets

3) Evidence of Strategic Impact and Effectiveness

- a) Lack of Data Collection
- b) Use of quantitative data
 - i. UCAS
 - ii. HEFCE or POLAR
 - iii. OFFA or HEBSS
 - iv. Retention data
 - v. Employability data/destination data
 - vi. Gender
 - vii. BME
 - viii. Disability or SEN data
 - ix. Percentage of target cohort at events
 - x. Local authority data on learner attainment
 - xi. Management data tracking particular cohorts
 - xii. Trend analysis versus benchmarks
 - xiii. Learner tracking
 - xiv. NSS data about student satisfaction
 - xv. HESA/institutional retention data
 - xvi. Other institutional data and research
- c) Use of qualitative data
 - i. focus groups
 - ii. opinion surveys
 - iii. questionnaires
 - iv. interviews

- v. research with learners,
- vi. research with parents and carers
- vii. research with teachers
- viii. feedback from students over time
- ix. citations in School Improvement Plans, Regional Economic Strategies, Skills Action Plans, etc.

d) Data Sources

- i. Local/institutional data
- ii. National data
- iii. Institutional research and evaluation
- iv. National research and evaluation

Free Nodes:

- 14-19 Diploma
- Actual widening participation figures or percentages
- Also provide FE
- APL or APEL
- Creche provision
- Distance learning
- Education in closed religious orders
- Entrepreneurship activities
- Good example of how data sets are used
- Induction - all
- Innovative Practice
- International Delivery
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender
- Library involvement or initiatives
- Limitations of institution with widening participation
- Military
- Rural access
- Student Ambassador Schemes
- Student Associate schemes
- Student-staff ratio
- Students in prison or young offenders
- Study abroad programmes
- Technology innovation
- Work with refugees or asylum seekers
- Works with Student Union
- Widening participation financials