Widening participation: a review

Report to the Minister of State for Higher Education and Lifelong Learning by the Higher Education Funding Council for England

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Widening participation: a review

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Executive summary

1. This report has its origins in concerns that progress in widening participation (WP) to higher education (HE) may have stalled. These concerns followed publication of the provisional higher education initial participation rate (HEIPR) for 2004-05 in April 2006, and the HE performance indicators for 2004-05 in July. Its purpose is to survey the field of WP, to provide a work-in-progress report to help inform the discussion about what more needs to be done.

2. By WP, we are referring to all those activities undertaken by HEIs and further education colleges, both individually and in partnership, to widen access to HE for those from under-represented and disadvantaged groups, including those on vocational programmes. We include measures to encourage all students to consider the full range of HE opportunities and to apply to a course and institution which best meets their needs (fair access). WP also refers to the measures to support learners when in HE.

3. There are two main messages. The first is that there is evidence of real progress in embedding WP as part of the core mission of all higher education institutions (HEIs) and that this commitment should be carefully reinforced and nurtured. The second is about how WP practice and the evidence base (what works and why) can be improved. There are lessons about the way WP activity is organised and delivered and, in particular, how it is targeted. And there are lessons from the pattern of engagement – summer schools, local recruitment, relationship building with schools and colleges – that suggest relatively simple steps that can be taken to improve substantially both effectiveness and the evidence for success.

4. A questionnaire was issued to HEIs at the end of August 2006 and returned at the end of September. The questionnaire is the main new source of information for this report, but we have taken the opportunity of reviewing the whole commitment to WP to provide as full a picture as possible. We therefore asked colleagues in the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to contribute an update, and we have included a section on Aimhigher and a discussion of new and existing work to encourage access and progression for vocational learners. This covers Lifelong Learning Networks, the development of higher education in further education colleges (FECs), and support for linking HE with curriculum development for 14-19 year-olds.

5. We begin with a brief restatement of the background to WP and breakdown of the funding devoted to it since 1997. The investment in WP is significant. In 2005-06, funding totalled £386 million for Aimhigher and to HEIs for widening access, improving retention, and meeting the needs of disabled students. £153 million of this (or 40 per cent) is for widening access (both through Aimhigher and funding for institutional widening access). Of the remainder, £221 million is for improving retention and £12 million for the mainstream institutional disability allocation. We then ask whether the overall investment is broadly at the right level and, in light of what is reported for Aimhigher and WP in institutions, whether the balance of spending across different priorities is about right.
6. The first point to note is that it remains difficult to distinguish the ‘costs’ of WP from a host of related activities, particularly where WP is closely integrated with the institution’s wider mission. Better data should be generated through the use of the Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) as applied to teaching as part of HEFCE’s review of its funding method for teaching. For the present, and on the basis of the current evidence, the existing investment seems justified by results. There are weaknesses in the evidence base which we discuss in the main report. However it is possible to identify positive changes in institutional culture and behaviour and an impressive range of WP interventions of the kind that will be required to narrow the differences in attainment and participation for different social classes.

7. Aimhigher is the vehicle for collaborative efforts to widen participation. We outline the principal commitments of the programme, the organisational infrastructure established to deliver it, and the evidence for the impact of the programme to date. Much of this is already familiar. There is good evidence that Aimhigher is raising aspirations and has contributed to raising attainment. Questionnaire responses underline the importance of Aimhigher as a facilitator and ‘enabler’ as well as an agency for delivering WP activity in its own right. Some of an institution’s own activity is dependent on Aimhigher targeting of areas and schools; and institutions and Aimhigher share staffing, funding, and projects. We believe that there is a strong case for restoring the cut of £19 million to Aimhigher funding, though we recognise that this is not a matter for this review and will depend on the availability of funds. Going forward, the priority for Aimhigher (and for institutions) is to move progressively beyond isolated WP interventions to a planned programme, integrated with the activities of the wider learning community of schools and colleges. The contribution of Aimhigher to school improvement plans and consequently to progression to further and higher education will be key. An early decision on the continuation of the programme after 2008 would be helpful.

8. The extensive evaluation of Aimhigher that has already been carried out makes this relatively familiar territory. The central concern of this report is how HEIs are engaging with WP. We consider first the evidence for institutional commitment before turning our attention to HEIs’ WP activity and the evidence of impact on aspirations, attainment and access.

9. We discuss the limitations of questionnaire evidence in the note on sources and in each of the sections that rely on these returns. We do not wish to place too much weight on the questionnaires. We do however believe that they demonstrate that WP is taking hold, becoming a key part of the way institutions see their purpose. Interestingly Russell Group institutions are more likely than others to rate the place of WP in their marketing strategy as strong or very strong. Overwhelming majorities rate institutional commitment and the commitment of senior managers, as strong/very strong and believe their institution has made significant progress compared with four years ago. Commitment is weaker at department/faculty level; and other evidence discussed subsequently indicates that the progress we identify is in some senses ‘fragile’. We conclude that the commitment to WP in
the culture, mission, and management of institutions is growing and should be carefully reinforced and nurtured.

10. An update by colleagues from OFFA summarises the provision of bursaries and additional investment in outreach work set out in HEIs' access agreements. OFFA believes that access agreements show a clear commitment to fair access and will have a positive impact on WP.

11. The pattern of WP activity that institutions offer is set out next. There are few surprises. Summer schools (broadly defined), mentoring, and campus visits figure most prominently in what HEIs do, and in what people think are most effective. The theme underpinning much of this is as important as the activity itself. HEIs act effectively when they work in a sustained way, in partnership with schools and colleges, and with other HEIs where appropriate. There is an emphasis on partnership and relationship-building with schools and colleges. Sheffield Hallam University (one of two institutions that offered additional information and help with the review) aims to have 118 non-exclusive ‘associate school and college’ partnership agreements in place at the end of 2006-07. We note above in respect of Aimhigher the importance of moving progressively beyond WP interventions to a planned programme, integrated with the work of the wider learning community. This applies to the work that institutions are doing too; it is already under way and could be given greater support.

12. It is encouraging therefore that about 40 per cent of institutions indicated in questionnaire responses that their relationships with schools and colleges had moved beyond the offer of participation in HEI activities to more regular liaison and contact with senior staff. A third of institutions rated their relationships with training providers and employers in the same way. While it is possible that the questionnaire responses overstate progress, there is nevertheless a good deal of confidence to build on.

13. The ways in which HEIs target different areas, schools, colleges and individuals raise more difficult issues. There are some clear weaknesses in the data that HEIs collect about participants in the ‘main WP activities’. About half of the institutions responding do not collect data about the ‘chief wage earner’ and cannot therefore make any estimation of the effectiveness of activities in reaching the group that is at the heart of concerns with widening access. There are well-known difficulties in getting sensible answers to questions about ‘chief wage earner’, and in coding responses. But without some attempt at establishing the degree to which this community has been involved it is difficult to see how practice can be improved.

14. Targeting of areas, schools, and individuals relies heavily on Aimhigher, and on data concerning relative deprivation, attainment, and participation; 46 per cent of institutions report that they distinguish areas on this basis. This is almost certainly an understatement since some institutions confined their answers on this point to comment on geographical space. Others, however, appear to work in their local patch (large or small), and to work with
all schools and colleges within that area regardless of their status. Some institutions do this on the grounds of practicality, others because they believe disadvantaged individuals can be found in any school or college.

15. Nearly all institutions apply some criteria to distinguish the schools and colleges they will target. Most simply 'list' the categories already mentioned (deprivation, attainment, participation) but two groups of institutions go further. The first group applies selected criteria in a more systematic fashion to produce a relatively simple hierarchy of target schools and colleges. The second goes further still and constructs an 'intervention model' that is used to ensure that schools/colleges meet the key criteria incorporated in the model. There is merit in both approaches (and in the practice adopted in Staffordshire which sits between the two); we recommend that this is explored further with a view to developing advice for institutions and Aimhigher partnerships.

16. Manchester University is one of the institutions with an intervention model but notes that it is still necessary to work closely with teachers to identify the individuals who would benefit from involvement with WP. However, the criteria reported for targeting individuals suggest a number of unresolved difficulties. Criteria include the familiar categories of socio-economic disadvantage, but in a great many cases have been stretched to include almost anyone e.g. 'students who have particular barriers to overcome'. A second difficulty is the balance that must be struck between targeting according to strict criteria and the social circumstance of individuals e.g. school friends in a mixed community. The University of Kent recommends a review of the issue and we concur.

17. Evidence for the impact of WP activity on aspirations is overwhelming, and overwhelmingly positive. We discuss the difficulties associated with evidence of this kind but suggest it should be taken seriously and used to develop a better understanding of what happens 'downstream'.

18. Evidence for the impact of WP interventions on raising attainment and on access to institutions is weak. Just under a third of responses offered no evidence on attainment, in 57 per cent of cases the evidence is relatively weak, and in only 14 per cent of responses was the evidence more convincing. For 'access' 40 per cent offered no evidence, and in roughly a third of responses the evidence was relatively weak, and in only 26 per cent was it more convincing. This sounds worse than it probably is. The basis for judgements about what is 'relatively weak' is set out in the report. There is very little hard data, and judgements are a way of reading the evidence based on how institutions link their activity with outcomes.

19. The difficulties are well known of establishing firm connections (let alone unambiguously causal connections) between WP interventions and the way learners subsequently develop and the choices they make. Institutions point these out in an honest and convincing way, and some declined to offer evidence because they could not do so in a way that they felt would stand up to scrutiny. This may be part of the problem. If the
‘evidence bar’ is set too high we run the risk of discouraging any attempt to estimate the effectiveness of interventions.

20. In fact, as the report shows, there is a good deal to build on. Many interventions to raise attainment are carefully focused on SATs at Key Stage 3, at GCSE, and post-16 achievement, as well as enriching and enthusing learning. Initiatives that bear more directly on improving access are centred on a relatively limited number of key interventions and processes: summer schools and other specific events, local recruitment and recruitment from targeted schools and colleges, and special access and compact schemes. It should be possible to build on what the report sets out, to work with institutions and Aimhigher to develop a better evidence base. We propose one or more pilots to facilitate evaluation of impact, providing practical research support for institutions (and Aimhigher partnerships) to collect appropriate data and make a better estimation of the effects of WP activity.

21. The report then turns to the evidence on ‘supporting student success’ and work to extend higher education opportunities to new learners. We review data on retention rates and show that despite recent falls the record is encouraging overall. The sector almost doubled in size between 1984-85 and 1993-94 yet non-completion rates only rose modestly, from 14 per cent to between 17 and 18 per cent. Since then completion rates have been stable.\footnote{From 1996-97 a new, more accurate method of calculating completion rates was employed as part of the performance indicators. These later figures cannot be directly compared with the earlier figures.} This is not a reason for complacency; we have not achieved a year-on-year improvement in the indicators of success and there is uneven practice across the sector.

22. Subject to the limitations of the questionnaire format, and the way funding for improving retention is treated as part of the resource for learning and teaching in general, we report some of the uses of funding for improving retention by institutions. These include strengthening central student support services, and the use of data on retention to help departments and faculties set appropriate targets and improve practice. There are a number of outstanding issues to address, including how institutions evaluate what they do to improve retention, to understand better the costs of doing so, and to make better links between targeted recruitment and ensuring an appropriate learning experience. Some institutions are thinking about the implications for the higher education curriculum. We note that the proposed study of retention by the National Audit Office (NAO) will surface some of these issues.

23. Finally, we set out what HEFCE and others are doing to broaden the opportunities to enter higher education. We outline the aims and objectives of Lifelong Learning Networks and offer a summary of the position to date. We set out the steps we are taking to develop the provision of higher education in colleges of further education, and initial efforts to ensure the engagement of HE with the new 14-19 curriculum. This area covers relatively recent
work. It did not form part of the questionnaire and does not bear directly on the funding distributed for specific WP purposes. On the other hand it seems reasonable to suggest that new opportunities for learners in schools and colleges, and for mature learners in the workplace, will create new opportunities to widen access. We have included a summary of this work to ensure that we set out the whole WP picture.

24. This report is principally for information so we have not developed an extensive set of recommendations. Rather we have drawn attention to the ways in which, on the basis of this review, WP practice and the evidence base for its impact could be improved. These include:

   a. Sustaining the investment in WP, particularly in funding devoted to widening access.
   b. Extending Aimhigher beyond 2008 and, should funding become available, restoring the funding to its former level.
   c. Recognising that the commitment of institutions to WP, and the embedding of WP in the culture, mission and management of institutions are high priority objectives, and finding ways to develop and nurture the commitment that has begun to take root.
   d. Setting as an objective the development of WP practice for Aimhigher and HEIs as a move away from discrete interventions towards sustained, planned, predictable, and integrated contributions to work with the wider learning community.
   e. Establishing a working group to identify good practice in targeting WP activity and to produce a dissemination report for institutions and Aimhigher by the end of April 2007.
   f. Working with the NAO in its forthcoming study on retention and following this through by working with the sector to identify good practice that the sector itself takes responsibility for.
   g. Continuing support for initiatives to broaden WP opportunities, particularly for vocational learners through Lifelong Learning Networks, HE-FE partnerships and involvement of HE in the developing 14-19 curriculum.
Introduction

25. The origins of this review lie in concerns about lack of progress in widening participation (WP) following the publication of the provisional higher education initial participation rate (HEIPR) for 2004-05 in April 2006 and the HE performance indicators for 2004-05 in July. The HEIPR had fallen from 42.3 per cent in 2003-04 to 42 per cent in 2004-05; the performance indicators, which do not take account of changes in the population sizes, showed falls in the proportion of entrants from lower socio-economic groups and from low participation neighbourhoods of 0.3 per cent and 0.2 per cent respectively between 2003-04 and 2004-05. Learner success as measured by projected outcomes also faltered, as the proportion of students not expected to obtain an award or transfer to another institution rose from 13.9 per cent to 14.4 per cent (2003-04).

26. Although the falls are relatively small, and all the indicators of participation and success identified above show some improvement over the period since their introduction, the slight downturn is disappointing and runs counter to the ambition to achieve year-on-year progress. At best the most recent data suggest a ‘flattening out’ of slow progress towards increased and more equitable access to HE. HEFCE was therefore asked by the Minister of State for Higher Education and Lifelong Learning to carry out a review of current WP commitments.

27. By WP, we are referring to all those activities undertaken by higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs), both individually and in partnership, to widen access to HE for those from under-represented and disadvantaged groups, including those on vocational programmes. We include measures to encourage all students to consider the full range of HE opportunities and to apply to a course and institution which best meets their needs (fair access). WP also refers to the measures to support learners when in HE.

28. The purposes of this review are to identify the principal forms of WP activity; to assess the impact of WP interventions across the sector; and to make appropriate recommendations.

29. The review is concerned with the funding and activity specifically devoted to WP. Participation in higher education is, of course, the outcome of a great variety of influences including a wide range of educational, economic and social policies initiated across a number of government departments. The wider context – and the contribution made elsewhere – is important, but this review will focus on:

   a. Outreach programmes such as Aimhigher that aim to raise aspirations and attainment and improve access to HE.
b. The commitments of higher education institutions to outreach as broadly defined for Aimhigher above, and to the success of students once they have entered HE.

c. Investment in widening opportunities to enter HE, for example by improving progression for vocational learners.

30. We have also asked colleagues from the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to provide us with an update so that we can present as full a picture of WP as possible.

31. The review begins with an overview of the development of WP since the publication of the Dearing Report in 1997, ‘Higher Education in the Learning Society’, and a breakdown of the funding currently devoted to it. There is a significant investment in WP and it is important to see specifically where the funding goes in order to make an assessment of what works, and why.

32. Each section of the report will set out what we know about what is being done (the type and scale of the WP interventions being made), and review the evidence of impact. A great deal is already known about Aimhigher from research and evaluation reports. This evidence will therefore be summarised rather than repeated in detail. Conversely, WP, by improving opportunities for vocational learners through Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) and support for the new Diplomas for 14-19 year-olds that will come on stream in 2008, is relatively new. The report will provide an outline of what is being done in these initiatives.

33. The commitments made by HEIs are analysed in more detail on the basis of information generated by a questionnaire distributed to them at the end of August, and by case studies of two institutions (Sheffield Hallam University and Manchester University). We discuss the status of this evidence and the methodology employed before setting out the findings.

34. One of the more important themes to emerge is the extent to which HEIs are fully engaged and committed to WP. This does not provide direct evidence of the impact of WP on learners and potential entrants to HE. However, the importance of institutional commitment should not be underestimated. In the long run the recruitment of students from disadvantaged communities depends on how institutions define their mission and manage their business. None of the sections is entirely self-contained. The questionnaires provide new evidence of the links between Aimhigher and the WP work of HEIs; WP is an aspect of projects designed to increase demand for the sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM subjects); and the work of the Disability Equality Partnership and support for vocational progression also cross a number of boundaries.

35. Finally, the review is a ‘snapshot’ of WP. It does not chart the changes in WP programmes over the last five years, nor does it present detailed evidence on the volume of activity i.e. the number of participants in different types of activity, nor assess value for money against WP expenditure. Detail of this kind is available for Aimhigher but there are no
reporting mechanisms for HEIs to generate information at this level of detail for other WP activities. In the interests of better regulation, HEFCE no longer requires institutions to provide WP strategies, or to report on how WP funding is used through annual monitoring statements.

36. The report provides an assessment of ‘the state of play’ for WP across Aimhigher partnerships and HEIs, drawing on the available evidence to offer a judgement about the impact of WP activity. It traces differences in the way institutions with a research or regionally-driven agenda tackle the issues; it identifies the main forms of WP activity and the interventions and processes that might be considered good practice. As with any research, the data gathered generate additional questions. As well as suggesting ways in which WP interventions can be strengthened, the report offers an opportunity to follow up questionnaire returns with a number of institutions to further develop good practice and improve performance across the sector.

Note on sources

37. This report draws on research and evaluation reports for Aimhigher, data gathered from an HEI Reference Group and information from a questionnaire distributed to HEIs at the end of August, supplemented by two case studies. We are also grateful to the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for sharing a draft report on ‘Outcomes from institutional audit (support for WP)’. It is important to say something about the nature of the evidence drawn from the questionnaires and case studies before setting out the findings.

38. First, the questionnaire was issued towards the end of August with a deadline for return by the third week in September. It will be apparent that we relied heavily on the goodwill of colleagues in institutions across the sector; apparent too that both the design of the questionnaire and the answers supplied would have benefited from more time for reflection. Nevertheless we think we have reason to be pleased with the results and would like to record here our gratitude to colleagues in HEIs for their heroic efforts in returning questionnaires.

39. We called a temporary halt when 90 questionnaires had been received and used these to analyse questions based on a numerical scale. In some sections of the report we include questionnaires that came in after the deadline, making over 100 in all. We make clear below the total that is referred to in any section. A hundred questionnaires gave us a 76 per cent response rate. This would be a remarkable return for any survey but is all the more so given that it was launched in the summer vacation. We could not have asked for a more practical demonstration of the commitment to WP. Interestingly, similar testimony is contained in the QAA report which notes that institutions’ policies on WP are only reported in institutional reviews when ‘they are viewed by the institution in question as part of its mission. It is noteworthy, therefore, that they feature in more than 50 of the institutional reports published by November 2004’ (QAA 2006). There were 70 institutional reports in all.
40. We are careful not to make exaggerated claims about the status of the evidence presented here. These are returns from WP staff and must in part reflect their commitment and enthusiasm. We are confident however that the responses also represent their judgement. There are a number of returns that frankly acknowledge a range of problems including a weakness in the available evidence about impact: the difficulty for example of distinguishing the effects of WP interventions from other influences. The evidence presented here does not meet all the tests of research but having acknowledged its limitations we think it makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the current 'state of play'.

41. We acknowledge also that the evidence is partial in that we decided to survey only HEIs and not those FECs that deliver HE. We would have had to design a different questionnaire for them and the task of analysis would have been more complex: in the time available, this was simply not possible. We do not underestimate the important contribution that FECs make to WP, both on their own and in partnerships with HEIs, but felt it better to focus on the HE sector for which we are directly responsible.
The origins and development of the current commitment to WP

42. WP is about addressing social inequalities in access to higher education; it is essentially an issue of social class and associated socio-economic disadvantage. The participation rate in 2001 for those aged under 21 from non-manual backgrounds was 50 per cent compared with 19 per cent for those from manual backgrounds (this is as measured by the Age Participation Index, API, which is no longer used as a measure of participation in HE). This reflects differences in educational attainment that are already overwhelming at age 16. Differences in educational attainment are closely related to social position, something demonstrated by a number of studies over the past 40 years showing social differences in educational outcomes for children with equal measured ability. Promoting fair access addresses related inequalities. Young people from manual working class backgrounds with appropriate qualifications do not enter the most academically prestigious institutions in the numbers that might be expected.

43. HEFCE has been developing policy on WP since its formation, commissioning research and analysing the HESA record. Findings from this research and analysis fed into the Dearing review. This review subsequently made 10 recommendations concerning WP, the most relevant of which are outlined below:

   a. When allocating funds for expansion, priority should be given to HEIs which can demonstrate a commitment to WP; have in place a participation strategy, a mechanism for monitoring progress, and provision for reviewing achievement by the governing body. We implemented this as part of our processes for allocating additional student numbers (ASNs). HEFCE 20/97 provided an immediate response to Dearing from the funding year 1998-99; and HEFCE 99/56 further emphasised the importance of WP in the allocation of ASNs. This funding was conditional on strategic statements being submitted – see HEFCE 99/24.

   b. The FE and HE funding bodies should fund projects designed to address low expectations and achievement, and promote progression to HE. HEFCE 98/35 announced initial one year funding for 1998-99, subsequently extended in HEFCE 99/33 to the three years 1999-2000 to 2001-02, for a special initiative to widen participation through partnerships between HEIs and FECs.

   c. The HE funding bodies to consider financing pilot projects which allocate additional funds to HEIs which enroll students from particularly disadvantaged localities. HEFCE 98/39 proposed a funding supplement for under-represented groups, and this was confirmed in HEFCE 99/24.

   d. The funding bodies to provide funding for HEIs to provide learning support for students with disabilities. Funding for this purpose was announced in HEFCE circular letter 7/00.
44. Although the Dearing report was a major influence, there have been a number of other significant drivers of our WP policy and its impact on HEIs, which are described below.

45. In 2000, the Government announced a target to increase participation in HE\(^2\) towards 50 per cent of all 18 to 30 year-olds by the year 2010. The Government looked to the Council to achieve this target. In response to this, we issued a consultation to the sector which addressed the issue of supply and demand within the HE sector (HEFCE 01/62). This consultation report argued that the sector had reached saturation point with regard to traditional students, and that, to fulfill the Government's 50 per cent target, institutions would need to recruit and retain students from non-traditional backgrounds. As most of the student growth for this age group would be in the lower socio-economic groups, they would thereby not only increase participation in HE but also widen it.

46. An update to the study of supply and demand undertaken by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI, 2004) suggested that the target could be reached by an increase in the population of 17 year-olds achieving two or more A-levels, although this would be heavily dependent on schools achieving their targets for increased attainment. This might have meant that the sector could meet the 50 per cent target without engaging in any additional activities to widen participation. However, this would not be in keeping with the Dearing report's objective of 'reducing the disparities in participation in higher education between groups'.

47. In September 2002, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (SENDA) came into force, incorporating amendments to Part 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995. The legislation included not only the education provision but all of the administrative and support services provided by an HEI. It made it unlawful for an institution to discriminate against a disabled person on the grounds of their disability and it compelled institutions to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate students with disabilities.

48. In addition to the SENDA (2001), the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 came into force in September 2002 and this placed a general duty on public authorities to promote race equality. For the purposes of the legislation, HEIs were defined as public bodies and were therefore subject to its requirements. Under the new duty and through all relevant functions, HEIs were required to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and promote good relations between people of different racial groups.

\(^2\) 'Participation' to be measured as the sum of the percentages of young people living in England entering higher education for the first time at each age between seventeen and thirty years of age.
49. In January 2003 the Government published its White Paper presenting its vision of the future of higher education in England. This categorically stated that 'education must be a force for opportunity and social justice, not for the entrenchment of privilege. We must make certain that the opportunities that higher education brings are available to all those who have the potential to benefit from them, regardless of their background' (DfES 2003). This sentiment was echoed in HEFCE’s strategic plan for 2003-08 which had the stated aim to provide the opportunity of higher education to all those who could benefit from it.

50. Our grant letter from the Secretary of State, delivered to our Chairman in January 2006, identified a major priority for HEFCE as ‘widening participation in HE for people from low income backgrounds, where in spite of the recent progress we have made we do not perform well enough. Low rates of participation in HE among the lowest socio-economic groups represent entrenched inequality and in economic terms a waste of human capital.’

51. The letter confirmed the increase in funding of £20 million to support part-time students from non-traditional backgrounds. The Secretary of State stressed the importance she attached to this issue and asked the Council to work with institutions to ensure that any increase in WP allocations would be used in the most effective way, and to examine the relative weighting given to WP funding (though it was acknowledged that this last point would not be completed in time to affect 2006-07 funding allocations).

52. In April 2006, we published our strategic plan for 2006-11. WP remains one of the four core strategic aims and within this we have committed to making WP a core strategic issue for HEIs. We state that WP is a responsibility for the whole sector, which institutions will develop and deliver in ways that are consistent with their own mission. We will work with HEIs to ensure that a commitment to WP is reflected in their corporate plans and in the way that they engage with learners and the community.
Funding for widening participation

53. Widening access to higher education is a longstanding commitment for many HEIs and this has been given a boost by the present government’s policies and HEFCE funding made available since 1997. Access Funds are also made available to HEIs to meet exceptional need in cases of student hardship.

54. Access Funds contribute to widening access of course, and for some purposes it might be sensible to include all the related resources such as the costs of student support, and perhaps, a fraction of the costs in schools and colleges of preparing students for higher education (education maintenance allowances, for example). However, for other purposes a grand total of this kind is not very helpful. A line must be drawn somewhere and funding broken down into specific programmes so that an estimation of impact can be made against the purposes for which programmes have been funded. In this report, we consider funding and activity related to outreach programmes such as Aimhigher, and the WP allocation to higher education providers to improve access and retention and support disabled students.

55. Funding for WP is divided into three main elements: widening access, improving retention and improving support for disabled students. In 2005-06 HEFCE allocated a total of £51 million to HEIs for widening access. In addition, HEFCE and the DfES put £102 million into Aimhigher partnerships. It is important to be clear what ‘widening access’ means. Widening access means working with learners in schools, colleges and the workplace as well as those engaged in traditional forms of post-16 study. In addition WP funding includes the £12 million distributed to higher education providers in 2005-06 to meet the needs of disabled students, and £221 million for ‘improving retention’. This is a total of £386 million. From 2006-07 a further £40 million will be provided to support widening access for part-time learners and an additional £12 million will be allocated for improving retention of full-time students.

56. As noted above, the report will summarise the position for Aimhigher and address issues of improving retention. Funding to support disabled students enables institutions to improve services and meet legal obligations. They are supported in these activities through the work of Aimhigher and the Disability Equality Partnership. In order to provide a rounded picture of WP activity the report will also discuss new initiatives to support vocational progression through links between further and higher education institutions in Lifelong Learning Networks, even though funding for this has come from the HEFCE Strategic Development Fund rather than funding specifically for WP.

57. The principal focus of the report is on funding for widening access, and given the research and evaluation information already available for Aimhigher, on institutional commitments to widening access and the impact of the widening access allocation. It is important to note that in 2005-06, funding totalled £386 million for HEIs and Aimhigher for widening access, improving retention and meeting the needs of disabled students. Of this
£153 million (or 40 per cent) was for widening access (both through Aimhigher and funds for institutional widening access). Of the remainder, £221 million was for improving retention and £12 million for the mainstream institutional disability allocation. One of the questions to be considered is whether this is sufficient and whether the balance is broadly right.

58. Finally, although well known, it is worth underlining a key point about recurrent funding for WP: it is funding provided as part of the institution’s block grant and the institution is free to allocate that funding largely as it sees fit. It does not have to distribute funding internally on the same basis that funding is allocated by HEFCE. This has a number of important consequences, two of which are particularly important for this review. First, respondents returning questionnaires had great difficulty answering the question about the resource available for WP staffing and outreach activity. The ‘budget’ for WP was often difficult to disentangle from closely related activities such as marketing and external liaison functions that contribute more or less directly to widening access. Second and closely related to this, the institutions that felt most strongly that WP was an integral part of their mission hardly distinguished WP from mainstream institutional activity in marketing, recruitment and relationship-building with the wider learning community. This has advantages and disadvantages. The strengths of integration with the institutional mission mean that WP could be dissipated if lost in the mission. It also makes meaningful comparisons between different sorts of institution problematic. It is not always clear what is being compared, or rather, that we are comparing like-with-like.
Aimhigher

59. Aimhigher brought together Aimhigher Excellence Challenge and Aimhigher Partnerships for Progression in 2004. The history is as follows:

- 2001- Excellence Challenge launched with funding for learners in schools and colleges in areas of relative deprivation
- 2002 - Partnerships for Progression launched using HEFCE/Learning and Skills Council (LSC) funding for higher education providers to develop WP activities for learners from under-represented groups in partnership with state schools and colleges
- 2004 - integrated Aimhigher brand and programme established
- 2006 - plans submitted for the funding period 2006-08.

The Aimhigher target groups

60. Individuals who have benefited from the programme to date include those from groups currently under-represented in higher education, or who were otherwise identified as disadvantaged. They are, for example, young people with no immediate family history of participation in higher education, from socio-economic classes 4–7, from various black and minority ethnic groups, with specific learning needs or from backgrounds in social care. The programme is principally targeted at the 14-19 age range with a growing emphasis upon learners on vocational pathways. However, there is considerable activity in all key stages, with a growth in activity particularly at Key Stage 2. Mature learners – including apprentices, learners in community settings and young offenders – have also been targeted as partnerships develop in maturity and scope.

61. Aimhigher partnerships also work with parents, teachers and others who may influence a young person’s decision as to whether to engage in higher education at some point in the future. It is widely accepted that cultural change is an important aspect of WP activity and parents are therefore a key target group for Aimhigher. However, with a few notable exceptions, engaging parents has been limited to Aimhigher awareness-raising activity at school and college parents’ events.

62. Aimhigher partnerships provide a wide variety of staff development opportunities for personnel from all sectors who are directly or indirectly involved with the delivery of Aimhigher or, more broadly, with information, advice and guidance and the WP agenda. In addition, training is provided for students who act as student ambassadors or mentors for the Aimhigher target group.

What does Aimhigher do?
63. The Aimhigher brand provides a focus for national, regional and local area networking and brokerage for:

   a. The development of activities and coherent transition arrangements which span the various educational sectors.

   b. Learner access to a wide variety of aspiration and attainment raising activity.

   c. Individual providers to pursue institutional objectives in a collaborative setting.

   d. The promotion of national strategies, such as the Aimhigher Healthcare Strand, the developing 14-19 arrangements and Lifelong Learning Networks.

   e. The provision of support for institutions and learners through the WP national support group, Action on Access.

   f. A national communications strategy which influences and informs the transition decisions of individual learners and their carers as well as a networking facility for providers.

   g. Knowledge transfer and cultural exchange between educational sectors and the wider community.

The infrastructure provided for the Aimhigher programme

64. The Aimhigher programme is delivered through 45 Area and 9 Regional Partnerships. Area Partnerships are governed and managed by Area Steering Groups comprising representatives from all educational sectors. There is also representation from local authorities, LSCs, Connexions, training providers, trade unions, employers and other representatives drawn from the wider community.

65. In the recent survey of HEIs (HEFCE 2006) over 50 per cent of respondents stated that the local Aimhigher partnership provided a means to define, target and establish contact with the WP cohort. For example one HEI stated:

   “In relation to all the above (i.e. targeting) we simply work closely with Aimhigher locally who have invested much effort into prioritising the areas, institutions and individuals who would most benefit. The ‘formula’ can be accessed on the Aimhigher Greater Manchester website.”
66. Aimhigher is very important in terms of getting a number of institutions from different sectors together around the same table talking to each other and sharing good practice. There is sometimes a duplication of effort in terms of the outreach delivered through Aimhigher and that delivered by the HEIs. However, a unique feature of the Aimhigher programme is the degree to which its management is devolved to local stakeholders representing the interests of the client group. Area and regional partnerships have considerable autonomy in the way in which Aimhigher funding is used and this is articulated in the plans developed by each partnership. This has the benefit of developing ownership of the programme by local and regional partnerships and enables local strategic priorities to be negotiated and addressed.

67. The emphasis on local autonomy also means that there is considerable diversity in the way that Aimhigher is operated at a local level. For example, some partnerships operate a decentralised approach devolving funds to key interest groups, such as schools, to develop activity for the target group. Other partnerships have adopted a more centralised approach with higher education providers using Aimhigher funding to provide a menu of activities for the various target groups.

68. The evidence suggests that both centralised and devolved models have their benefits, indicating the effectiveness of the decision making process facilitated through the broad constituency of the Area Steering Groups (EKOS 2006). The high level of commitment by partnerships to the principles of Aimhigher has also been reflected in the positive response by HEIs to requests for Aimhigher plans in 2004 and again in 2006.

69. Regional Forums discuss the arrangements for Aimhigher and make recommendations for further developments in regional and area level partnerships. Regional partnerships are made up of area representatives and provide the following functions on behalf of partnerships:

- a regional strategic overview of Aimhigher and its links to other strategies and agencies
- advice and support to Area Aimhigher managers and their staff
- monitoring and evaluation
- staff development
- management of summer schools supported by Aimhigher/HEFCE/European Social Fund. (There have been 17,000 learner beneficiaries during the period 2004 to 2006).

70. Regional Partnership Boards oversee the production of both regional and area plans and ensure that monitoring, evaluation, governance and management procedures are robust. They also provide a focus for the dissemination of effective practice.
71. At a national level the governance and management of Aimhigher is the responsibility of the National Partnership Board which includes representatives from each of the educational sectors, the LSC, the University and Colleges Admissions Service, the NHS, the DfES and HEFCE. The national board is also responsible for the Aimhigher Evidence Strategy which has been developed to reflect the diversity of the programme at area, regional and national levels.

72. The management, governance and strategic arrangements provided by the Aimhigher infrastructure mean that there are a variety of opportunities for synergy:

- with school and college plans to extend curriculum opportunities and to raise attainment
- with HE provider WP strategies
- with other partnerships or strategies with a similar focus.

73. There is evidence that the emerging Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) and Aimhigher partnerships are aligning well to develop local and national progression pathways in vocational areas. In addition many Aimhigher Area Steering Groups have representation from local authority 14-19 partnerships. Links with 14-19 partnerships and LLNs mean that Aimhigher development is also connected with the work of the Sector Skills Councils and Regional Development Agencies. Schools, colleges and training providers being members of Aimhigher partnerships provide further opportunities for the promotion of the skills agenda.

74. The Aimhigher infrastructure has also provided a platform to launch or promote other priorities. For example:

a. The Aimhigher Healthcare Strand, in association with the Department of Health, gives young people from under-represented groups opportunities to explore a range of institutional and work-based higher education pathways related to careers in healthcare. This type of provision will link with specialised Diploma development.

b. Links with national projects in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. For example, the Aimhigher national pilot project 'Chemistry: the Next Generation' develops a strand of the wide-ranging 'Chemistry for our Future' project, funded through HEFCE's Strategic Development Fund. The Awards Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) Aimhigher national project will develop the Certificate of Personal Effectiveness and continues to use the Aimhigher infrastructure to take development forward.

c. The Aimhigher national communications strategy, which brings together all communication activity related to higher education progression into a single coherent strategy. The strategy includes developing a coherent web presence for young people and those considering higher education; establishing a national communications resource team to raise the national profile of Aimhigher and to support Aimhigher
partnerships in their communications activities; and co-ordinating the production of national materials and events. For example, the strategy has been responsible for the development of the Aimhigher student portal (www.aimhigher.ac.uk) and its associated websites and links with the Directgov site. The strategy also oversees the work of the Aimhigher Roadshow which in 2005-06 held over 750 events providing approximately 78,000 learners and, indirectly, their teachers and carers, with the Aimhigher message.

75. The national WP support team, Action on Access, provides support across all of these developments. Through its team of regional advisers, their publications and conferences, Action on Access disseminates effective practice and provides advice to the funders, Aimhigher partnerships and individual higher education providers. Action on Access also forms part of the Disability Equality Partnership, which is responsible for providing support and advice to higher education providers on equality of opportunity for disabled students.

76. Approximately 44 per cent of the Aimhigher budget is passed to local authorities for schools and this creates increased demand for WP activity. HEI partners in Aimhigher state that Aimhigher activity is heavily subsidised from the HEFCE WP allocation in order to meet the increased demand for transition activity created by the Aimhigher resource.

77. In the recent HEFCE survey of HEIs (HEFCE 2006) 56 per cent of respondents (51/90) said that they shared staff with Aimhigher; 84 per cent stated that their institution was involved in WP activity that was jointly funded with Aimhigher; and 76 per cent of respondents received Aimhigher funding to deliver a significant element of the local Aimhigher plan.

78. The Aimhigher infrastructure therefore enables HEIs to pursue their individual institutional objectives in a collaborative way. For example Keele University reported a health-related e-mentoring scheme delivered collaboratively by a group of HEIs, with each adopting a particular specialism in the occupational sector to avoid duplication and ensure value for money.

Outputs and outcomes of the Aimhigher programme

79. Three national research studies have been commissioned by the Aimhigher Evidence Strategy to assess what interventions can increase the propensity of under-represented groups to enter HE, particularly young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These are:

   a. A tracking study of young people between the ages of 16 and 19 who attended schools in former Excellence Challenge areas.

   b. A qualitative survey of HEIs, FECs and work-based training providers.
c. Aimhigher area studies consisting of qualitative interviews in seven area partnerships.

80. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER/DfES 2005) conducted annual surveys of young people from Excellence Challenge areas finding:

a. Higher than expected levels of attainment associated with being designated as a member of the WP cohort.

b. 4.6 percentage point improvement in the proportion of Year 9 pupils attaining Level 4, 5 or 6 in mathematics at Key Stage 3.

c. An average improvement of 2.5 points in GCSE total point scores.

d. A 3.9 percentage point increase in Year 11 pupils intending to progress to HE.

81. The survey of educational providers (Sheffield Hallam 2006) found that subject-related taster events, residential schools, mentoring of school or college learners, and campus visits/open days were the activities believed to be the most effective by HEIs. This was because these activities used a higher education environment to change learner attitudes, aspirations and misconceptions.

82. FECs gave similar responses about the activities they considered most effective in increasing progression to higher education (either their own, or other, higher education provision). Overall, the activities considered most effective were HEI campus visits or open days, followed by information, advice and guidance, mentoring and subject-related higher education taster events. The most common reason given was that the activities helped students to get used to the higher education environment or provided guidance on subject or finance related matters.

83. The survey of educational providers also found that:

a. Aimhigher has had a significant impact on WP activities with 90 per cent of HEIs reporting a good or reasonable fit between their institutional WP activities and Aimhigher.

b. 92 per cent of FECs stated that there was a good or reasonable fit between their college’s strategic priorities and Aimhigher activities.

c. 35 per cent of HEIs indicated that Aimhigher activities have had an impact in terms of increasing applications to their institutions from students on academic routes, but 65 per cent thought it had increased applications from students into higher education provision in general.
d. All work-based learning providers who responded thought that Aimhigher benefited learners.

84. The findings of the survey of educational providers is also supported by those of the area studies (EKOS 2006) where learners and their teachers found that residential visits to HEIs (including summer schools) had the most impact. Other interventions deemed most effective by the Aimhigher area studies included:

- university visits (single day)
- master classes away from school
- master classes at the school
- mentoring.

85. The area studies also noted that a number of partnerships are developing a systematic and progressive arrangement for the delivery of Aimhigher activity which moves learners from activities which raise awareness and aspiration through to those which raise attainment and prepare them for the next step into higher education.

86. The findings of provider and area surveys carried out as part of the Aimhigher national evidence strategy are further supported by responses to the recent survey of the use of the WP allocation (HEFCE 2006). In the survey, HEIs listed the most effective WP activities as follows:

- summer schools, both residential and non-residential
- HE campus visits by school and college learners
- HE student ambassadors
- HE student mentors and tutors in school/college settings
- master classes
- information, advice and guidance activity.

87. Some of the key findings from the evaluation of Aimhigher have been brought together in a paper titled ‘A topic paper on Aimhigher: Evidence from the evaluation’ produced by the DfES (2006). The paper usefully distils both the quantitative and qualitative evidence against four key questions:

- Has Aimhigher improved aspirations?
- Has Aimhigher improved attainment?
- Has Aimhigher improved participation?
- Does Aimhigher offer value for money?

88. Overall there is consensus about which Aimhigher activities are viewed as most effective in the short and medium term. There is also widespread agreement that the delivery of these activities should be undertaken in a progressive, sequential and differentiated
programme which reflects the needs of individual learners over a period of time. 'One-off' activities can have a short term impact upon an individual learner but this should be reinforced with further activity designed to reflect the maturity and changing needs of learners.
Higher education institutions and widening participation funding

89. When HEFCE first introduced the mainstream WP allocation in 1999, HEIs were required to submit a WP strategy, progress against which was monitored through their annual monitoring statement. With the passing of the HE Act in 2004 and the subsequent creation of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), the requirement for institutional WP strategies was lifted. However, our research has indicated that many HEIs have retained their WP strategies in order to guide and structure their commitment to WP. The majority of institutions that responded to our recent questionnaire have a WP strategy; of the nine who do not, only one did not provide information about other strategic documents that covered WP. Three indicated that WP is so embedded in every aspect of the HEI that a separate WP policy or strategy is not needed. For example, the University of Wolverhampton states: ‘WP is so central to the university’s mission, ethos and working practice that it does not have a separate WP policy or strategy’. Similarly, Coventry University states: ‘WP activity is embedded in all the university’s activities, strategic objectives and its core values’. Two of the HEIs take the view that their WP strategy is now embedded in their access agreements; the others maintain that WP is a cross-cutting priority that runs through a number of institutional strategies including learning and teaching.

Case Study: Sheffield Hallam

Sheffield Hallam continues to produce a statement setting out its strategic commitment to widening participation as a ‘core business activity’. Recruitment from lower socio-economic groups, from those on vocational pathways and programmes, and from families without experience of higher education, is identified as a key opportunity for the university as well as a commitment embedded in its mission. An operational plan for 2006-07 includes proposals:
- to put in place 118 agreements with schools and colleges to promote partnership and progression
- to develop clearly articulated faculty plans for access and diversity by September 2007
- to develop a framework of minimum entitlement for targeted pre-entry students.

90. We asked institutions to summarise their commitment to WP and, perhaps unsurprisingly, most portrayed themselves as seriously committed, with a number referring to sections from their strategic plans. There is no discernible pattern of commitment by institution type in these statements. For example, a research intensive, pre-1992 institution summarised its commitment to WP as follows:
'The University of Bristol is fully committed to widening participation for both moral and pragmatic reasons. Our approach is not about preferring one student to another; instead our policy on widening participation is aimed at maintaining the standards for which Bristol is known, behaving equitably and building a diverse community of scholarship.'

91. A post-1992 institution summed up its commitment to WP as follows:

‘Widening participation to education and employment is core business at London Met and an integrated key feature of all our work. Our commitment is evidenced through the diversity of the student profile, the substance and range of our curriculum offer, the research profile and our consultancy portfolio. The university provides core funding to support a pan-institutional Widening Participation and Community Learning Team who underpin delivery of this commitment through pro-active and strategic regional, national and international partnerships and collaborations with targeted agencies and organisations’.

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**Case Study: University of Manchester**

The University of Manchester positions itself as a liberal institution that seeks to develop humane values and moral responsibility throughout its functions. Therefore, WP fits within this broader value framework. Manchester’s strategic plan identifies nine strategic goals. Widening participation is the fifth strategic goal, with the aim: ‘To make the University of Manchester the UK’s most accessible research-intensive university by providing international students from educationally deprived backgrounds and home students from traditionally under-represented sections of society with a supportive learning environment in an inclusive and welcoming university community’. The WP allocation allows the university to articulate these values more effectively than it might otherwise be able to. For example, the links that the university had previously with schools would be primarily with its feeder institutions. Now, with the WP agenda very much a part of the university, the situation has changed dramatically. Much of the work undertaken with pre-16 children is done to raise aspirations to, and awareness of, HE generally – not to encourage recruitment to Manchester. As this type of activity represents between 70 and 80 per cent of outreach it is clear that much of the activity that the university engages in is altruistic in nature – it is not a recruitment exercise.

92. With regard to the cost of WP activity to institutions, this has been notoriously difficult for HEIs to unpick. As the study undertaken by JM Consulting for us in 2003 found: ‘Most of the participating large post-92 institutions found that the embedded nature of their provision,
and the large number of activities that they undertook, meant that they could not cost each activity specifically. In such institutions, senior managers were able to identify specific dedicated staff (WP units or equivalent, counsellors, etc) and non-staff costs that should be attributed to WP activities; and then made an estimate of academic staff time. Even where institutions could provide an activity-by-activity build up of costs, there was some degree of uncertainty of the whole scope of activities, with central units not generally aware of the full range of activities carried out by the academic departments. Because many of the activities are carried out for all students, not just WP students (e.g. outreach activities in institutions that recruit, as well as select, students) then institutions often did not identify these as WP activities’.

93. The difficulties inherent in trying to tease out the funds spent on WP are highlighted in the responses we received to the questionnaire. We asked respondents to identify the HEI’s approximate budget for WP staffing and outreach activity. By asking the question in this way we had hoped to establish the budget that the main WP function of the HEIs received. However, the question was interpreted in a number of different ways by the respondents. As a consequence, some responded with estimated spend of the HEI as a whole on WP-related activities with figures in the £millions; and others gave very exact breakdowns of budgets that were delivered to WP units for staffing etc. Consequently, it is very difficult to draw any conclusions from this information with regard to either budgets or costs. For example, one HEI gave the following response:

‘Difficult to assess without significant internal audit. All faculties have identified senior staff with WP brief and will define their own budgets to support WP. In addition, there are central budgets to support Head of WP, Compacts and partnership work, schools liaison, advice and guidance. The access agreement has supplemented previous central budgets by £250,000 p.a. from 2006-07. Work conducted in 2004 identified total WP costs as £3.75 million, including retention strategy funding. It is also fundamental to recognise that retention is a key part of our WP strategy being a key element of the student lifecycle as identified by HEFCE’.

94. Another indicated:

‘Whilst WP is embedded across the institution and funding flows to all parts of the institution, we also have a dedicated team of 24 staff. The budget for this dedicated team was £531,500 in 2005-06.’

95. We are aware of the need for better cost data with regard to WP. We are pursuing this with the sector through our programme of work to develop a national framework for costing teaching based on TRAC (Transparent Approach to Costing) principles. This will enable institutions to identify more effectively the full economic cost of their provision. One of the priority areas identified within the framework will be WP.
96. Having said that, about half of the respondents did attempt to provide approximate budgets for their central unit and outreach activity. These budgets ranged from £50,000 per annum to over £1 million in a few cases. The average budget appeared to be between £300,000 and £600,000 per annum for a dedicated team/unit and outreach activity.

97. The fact that so many of the respondents to our survey indicated that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle funding for WP activity from that dedicated to core business is testament to the way in which HEIs are incorporating WP into many aspects of their business. In this way, we can perhaps begin to see how the funding for WP has begun to have institution-wide effects. For example, an analysis of 2005-06 institutional learning and teaching strategies (Higher Education Consultancy Group and CHEMS, 2005) revealed a greater breadth of student-centred features compared with 2001-02. At that time, enhancement projects designed around student needs were primarily curriculum-centred, with some attention given to advice and developing key skills. By contrast, in the 2005-06 plans, projects reflect a broader focus on students' needs such as: developing more flexible modes of delivery in order to reduce barriers of time and place to gaining access to learning opportunities; giving attention to the creation of personal portfolios; and actively gathering feedback from students on their learning experiences.

98. The evaluation of the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) suggests that this broadening of the agenda has been stimulated by national priorities such as WP and the retention of the resulting cohort of recruits. The evaluation looked specifically at the extent to which WP was reflected in institutional learning and teaching strategies. It found that WP was mentioned in all 25 of the strategies that it reviewed. In some cases this was as part of an overall institutional commitment within which the learning and teaching strategy was being implemented, and in others as a major element in the strategy itself. However, TQEF funds were used for activities relating to WP in only five of the HEIs; in all other cases the planned activity was being funded from other sources. Although not identified in the evaluation, it would be reasonable to assume that one such source of funding would be the WP allocation. The evaluation highlights the way in which the WP agenda has been woven into the core activities of teaching and student support in HEIs.

99. At the same time, the JM Consulting report, already cited, points out that all students have benefited from WP spending. In one HEI, some faculties had instigated diagnostic assessment and a ‘best of’ system of coursework. This involved more staff time in terms of providing feedback and marking papers but it was becoming more widespread throughout the HEI as the benefits of the system were felt. Such innovations were of benefit to students across the board but it was felt that students from non-traditional backgrounds would find such systems particularly beneficial.

100. Further evidence of the way in which WP is being incorporated into the core business of institutions is the impact that it has had on institutional culture, mission and management. On a scale of 1-5 (where 1 represents ‘very strong’ impact) 59 per cent of respondents to our
survey believed that the impact on the stated institutional commitment to WP in policy statements or corporate plans was very strong. Ninety-two per cent rated institutional commitment strong or very strong (1 or 2); 82 per cent thought senior management involvement with WP was also strong or very strong. Only three institutions rated institutional commitment at 4 or 5; six respondents rated senior management commitment at this level. Seventy-three per cent of institutions thought WP had a strong (1/2) impact on teaching strategies.

**Case Study: University of Manchester**

Senior management at the university comprises the president of the university, four policy vice-presidents and four vice-presidents/deans. The vice-presidents/deans have executive responsibility for the faculties and are charged with producing faculty plans within which progress against the goals outlined in the strategic plans is reported. In this way WP, as one of the nine strategic goals, will become a normal part of the planning and reporting process. Of the policy vice-presidents, the VP for external relations and the VP for teaching and learning share responsibility for WP. In addition, the university has just appointed an associate vice-president for equality and diversity.

The university has streamlined its processes and abolished a number of committees. This has meant that executive responsibility has been devolved to the Director of WP, Student Recruitment and Admissions with the result that decisions can be made much quicker. In terms of external engagement, the vice-president for teaching and learning sits on the LLN Council as decisions and advice there are required at the strategic level. With regard to WP staffing, the WP central office has grown from a staff of three to nine and the faculties and cultural assets (museum, libraries) combined have a further 15 staff with WP as either all or part of their remit. It was acknowledged that within the institution there was a sense of caution about WP among some staff. Consequently, the WP office was working hard to get the message across that WP is about ‘lowering barriers not lowering standards’.

101. Engagement at faculty/school/departmental level is weaker. Fifty-four per cent scored departmental involvement at 1 or 2, and 44 per cent rated faculty support at 1 or 2. On the other hand relatively few institutions rated the impact on departments and faculties at 4/5 (11 and 9 respectively). Opinions about the place of WP in marketing strategies was more evenly divided, with 54 per cent rating the place of WP as strong (1/2), and 23 per cent as weak (4/5).

102. We asked institutions to tell us about ‘journey travelled’, to ‘rate … progress on WP compared with four years ago’. On the same scale (1–5) 89 per cent of institutions rated progress as strong (48 institutions) or very strong (32 institutions) with only three institutions signalling that no progress had been made over the period.
Case Study: Sheffield Hallam

At Sheffield Hallam there is a widening participation strategy group chaired by a pro vice-chancellor (PVC). It brings together representatives from Student and Academic Services (including pre-enrolment and relationship management, disabled students support, and the widening participation policy unit), marketing and the four faculty widening participation co-ordinators. The PVC is champion of widening participation and brings issues to the attention of the university’s most senior strategy group, made up of the four PVCs and the vice chancellor, and the university’s learning and teaching strategy group.

103. How reliable are returns of this sort? Questionnaires were completed by staff committed to WP. We do not know how many returns required approval at a more senior level (although we know that some did). WP remains a key commitment of government and public policy. We would expect institutions to present themselves in the best possible light. It might be reasonable to discount some part of the message of progress and commitment. At the same time some of the differences in institutional responses have the ring of authenticity. Commitment at departmental and faculty level is weaker, and we would expect that to be the case. Similarly, the much more differentiated response on the place of WP in marketing strategies might also be expected, although the distribution of responses was not so predictable.

104. Among 14 Russell Group institutions two rated the place of WP in the marketing strategy as very strong; only one institution described it as weak. Eight institutions described the place of WP as ‘strong’, making 10 institutions in all (71 per cent) describing the place of WP as strong or very strong. Among 19 institutions affiliated to the Campaigning for Mainstream Universities (CMU) group, five HEIs (26 per cent) rated the place of WP as very strong, and another five as ‘strong’, that is 51 per cent rating the place of WP as strong or very strong. Twenty-six per cent (another five institutions) described the place of WP as weak (with a rating of 4 or 5).

105. Results for 12 institutions in the 94 Group, 12 institutions in the Alliance of Non-Aligned Universities, and among the 33 institutions without any designation, where the place of WP in marketing is described as strong or very strong were 58 per cent, 50 per cent, and 58 per cent respectively. For the 94 Group there is a similar split between very strong and strong as for the Russell Group, while the non-aligned and unknowns mirror the even split of the CMU group. We do not want to place too much importance on results of a survey of this kind where numbers are small and the information supplied is limited. It is nevertheless of interest that a bigger proportion of the Russell Group rate the place of WP in marketing as strong or very strong, and fewer rate the position as weak, compared with any of the other three
groups. This might seem counter-intuitive at first but could be explained if Russell Group institutions have fewer inhibitions about ‘marketing WP’ to demonstrate openness, and a commitment to attracting the best students whatever their background. Whatever the reasons, the fact that responses are not obviously ‘predictable’ lends them some additional weight.

106. Evidence from the questionnaires is also consistent with the feedback we obtained from the ‘reference group’ of HEIs that HEFCE convened earlier this year to advise us on the use and impact of the WP allocation. The reference group confirmed that there are weaknesses in the evidence base about the impact of WP interventions, and this is discussed in more detail in this report. But the group was unequivocal that WP objectives are being incorporated in the mission statements and management arrangements of HEIs. One of the participants described the shift in HE culture as ‘fragile’ but was in no doubt that it was shifting.

107. The recent Universities UK report, ‘From the margins to the mainstream’, argued that embedding WP ‘is the main challenge now facing the sector as it moves away from a project based approach towards longer term sustainable processes and practices’ (UUK 2005). One of the key conclusions of this review is that the investment in WP over the last five years or so has put in place some of the people, practices, and procedures that any successful policy to widen access to higher education would require. The report argued that precisely because it is ‘fragile’ it is vulnerable. It would be helpful to know more about the infrastructure that supports WP – the staffing and institutional decision making that ensures WP becomes part of the fabric of the institution. The aim would be to ensure that progress to date is sustained and secured in an environment where further change is anticipated. We return to this in the conclusions of the report.
Widening participation practice

108. Institutions were asked to provide us with details of five key WP activities, and asked to list them in order of importance. They included a range of activities, such as student ambassador schemes, campus visits, programmes of activities in selected schools, and partnership agreements with local schools and FE colleges.

109. The three most frequently cited activities were:

- summer schools (included by 78.9 per cent of respondents)
- mentoring/student ambassador schemes (included by 68 per cent of respondents)
- campus visits (included by 50 per cent of respondents).

110. Although we asked institutions to provide us with five activities, many respondents provided more, grouping a range of activities together as one (for example the University of Central Lancashire included summer schools, student-facilitated activities, mentoring and campus visits as one WP activity). In all, 566 WP activities are mentioned by respondents.

Summer schools

111. Twelve institutions (13 per cent) rated summer schools as the most important WP activity. However, 71 respondents (79 per cent) included summer schools in their list of the five most important activities. Thirty-four of these placed summer schools in either third or fourth place in order of importance. The reason for this may be, as Liverpool John Moores University states in its response, that summer schools have ‘high impact, but relatively low numbers’. Edge Hill University placed summer schools as the second most important WP activity, behind an intensive 6 week ‘access to HE’ course for those outside of mainstream education for 3 years or more and without formal qualifications. Edge Hill points out that ‘the intensive nature of summer schools (delivered to individual schools, FECs and 6th Forms and Aimhigher) gives a considerable opportunity to change attitudes to study and progression to FE or HE and to encourage young people’s self belief and confidence. Over 1,000 students participate per annum and it is particularly pleasing to see at enrolment a range of young people who have participated in summer schools.’

Mentoring/student ambassador schemes

112. Sixty-one institutions included some form of mentoring within their key WP activities. Of these respondents, 18 per cent rated it as the most important WP activity, and just over half rated it as either third or fourth most important.

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3 Ninety institutions responded to our survey; three respondents felt it inappropriate to rate the activities in order of importance, as the activities are difficult to compare and judge in this way.
113. The types of mentoring described by respondents varied widely, including mentoring for school pupils, college students, peer mentoring for new undergraduates and e-mentoring. At the University of Durham, undergraduates work with school students on a small group or one-to-one basis. Current projects include academic mentoring in local schools, mentoring for disabled students, e-mentoring for potential medical students, and participation in the Aimhigher National Mentoring Scheme.

114. Keele University states that its mentoring programme is the most important WP activity it undertakes: 'The regular interaction between undergraduates and school-age children has the benefit of building relationships between the HEI and a relatively large number of non-traditional students. It also promotes shortage subjects and provides role models, particularly the study of science. The undergraduates involved in these schemes also benefit from developing their own skills and experiences, facilitating their transition into the graduate job market.'

115. At the University of Leeds, over 400 undergraduate students per year volunteer their free time in local schools and colleges to provide mentoring and tutoring support to raise the aspirations and achievement of young people.

Campus visits

116. Of the 45 respondents who included campus visits within their five key WP activities, 38 per cent put it as the most important activity. Overall, campus visits are most often cited as the number one activity, with 19 per cent of all respondents placing them at the top of their list.

117. The University of Loughborough states that visits to campus by potential students is a key activity in WP: 'Feedback always shows that actually being on campus is inspiring for the visitors, and meeting current university students in their own setting cannot be praised highly enough. This applies for all age ranges, from primary right through to mature students. The students are given the opportunity to visit a number of academic departments, and days focusing on the study of sport are also available for school groups.'

Other WP activities

118. A range of other activities were included by respondents. These ranged from activities run in local schools to encourage pupils into HE, partnership working and compacts, the development of progression routes and the provision of information and advice. The following section provides examples.

Activities in schools
119. Activities in schools are mentioned by a total of 42 institutions as one of their key WP activities. Activities are wide ranging and include: attainment-raising sessions, such as the Key Stage 3 Maths Booster sessions run by the University of Hull; and aspiration raising activities, such as the series of innovative and interactive sessions run in schools across London by trained student volunteers from St George’s, University of London, linking the science they learn in class with that used in medicine and healthcare.

120. The University of Bedfordshire has a 'lively and well-received' programme of liaison with schools and colleges. Each academic department has its own ‘education champion’ whose role it is to form links with student groups and staff in local schools and colleges where there is the greatest scope to increase progression (such as the lower socio-economic groups and some minority ethnic groups). The University of Liverpool runs a programme of activities for all Year 7 pupils in the 13 lowest achieving schools on Merseyside.

Taster sessions

121. About a third (34 per cent) of respondents felt that taster sessions for potential HE students are an important WP activity. At Edge Hill University, there are specific Teaching Taster courses designed specifically for members of the black and minority ethnic communities considering teaching as a career but who may have concerns or misconceptions about the profession. They are held in an informal environment to encourage participation and discussion, including of practical issues such as financial and lifestyle implications of teacher training and future career progression. Similar courses are held to address the issues facing men in primary education.

122. A number of other institutions hold subject-specific taster sessions or taster days, in order to encourage potential applicants.

Information and advice

123. Approximately one-third of respondents included an information and advice service within their key WP activities. The University of the West of England has introduced a Heading Higher Passport Scheme, which is targeted at students who would be the first in their family to go to HE. The scheme provides advice, guidance and practical support for prospective students and their parents. The University of Cambridge, in conjunction with Oxford, holds ‘Oxbridge Conferences’. These events provide potential applicants in Year 12 with guidance on subject choice and the application process.

Partnership

124. Partnership can be seen as underpinning many of the WP activities that institutions are engaged in – for example the development of a variety of non-traditional routes into HE, activities in schools to raise aspirations of pupils and to provide information and advice about
HE, and the establishment of flexible HE provision. Of the 26 institutions which explicitly included partnership working within their list of key WP activities, 65 per cent put it as the most important. For example, the University of Exeter places its Regional Partnership – a planned programme of activities with 50 schools and colleges including tutoring, visits onto campus, workshops and sessions in schools and subject taster sessions – as its most important WP activity.

125. Partnership is described by most respondents as strong links between the institution, schools and further education colleges; some include partnerships with employers, the community and other organisations. The Open University works with a variety of locally based community organisations in order to target the most disadvantaged communities. Additional resource has been invested during the past year in scaling up this work, through the appointment of a new assistant director in each of the North West, Yorkshire, West Midlands and London regions. The university also works closely with employers and unions to develop employer-sponsored, work-based professional programmes; works with Aimhigher in the provision of outreach work and information and guidance; and with regional LLNs in the development of bridging provision from FE to HE.

126. The University of Bedfordshire has developed a strategic partnership with FE colleges and is involved in reshaping the secondary curriculum. A particularly strong example of this is the ‘Campus Luton’ initiative, which brings together all the providers of education post-11 to build an innovative, collaborative curriculum designed to maximise opportunity and to raise standards of attainment. The partnership has well-established structures which sustain its collaboration, for example through the Bedfordshire Federation for Further and Higher Education, which brings together the university and the principals of the partner colleges and the FHE liaison committee. The university has established a partnership office, under the leadership of a senior manager, to support the partnership. A significant proportion of the university’s part-time and mature students are following programmes within the wider partnership, which is vital therefore to meeting the university’s WP objectives.

Case study: Sheffield Hallam University

The University offers a ‘non-exclusive’ associate school and college partnership for the ‘planning, delivery and monitoring’ of activities that will enhance the student learning experience and facilitate progression.

Compacts

127. Eighteen institutions stated that they have compact schemes in place (although this almost certainly understates the extent of compact arrangements across the sector), with a third citing these as their most important WP activity. The University College for the Creative
Arts at Canterbury, Epsom, Farnham, Maidstone and Rochester has worked to establish compact schemes and progression accords with schools and with its own FE provision.

128. The University of Winchester has established a compact for care leavers with Hampshire Children’s Services.

Routes into HE

129. There is much work being done to improve and develop routes into HE, particularly for those who do not hold traditional qualifications, or who have been outside mainstream education for a considerable time. Twelve institutions mentioned the development or provision of a foundation course as part of their key WP activity.

130. The University of East London has developed an intensive access programme called NB2, designed for those returning to education and for non-traditional HE learners. The 14-week programme delivers the skills and knowledge required to choose and successfully apply for a degree programme and can act as a bridging programme for learners. Underpinning this programme is a network of services called Skillzone, which acknowledges the different support needs of non-traditional learners and those from under-represented groups.

131. Leeds Metropolitan University supports the delivery of a progression module in schools and colleges in West Yorkshire and beyond. The institution recognises the module with a value of 30 UCAS points, as do three other HEIs.

132. The University of Salford has established a curriculum and progression network in collaboration with local colleges: 12 per cent of its intake is now through access courses provided through the network.

133. The University of Bedfordshire has developed extended degrees for mature students and foundation degrees which provide vocational progression routes, of particular benefit to young people following vocational programmes at Level 3 in FECs.

134. Other institutions have concentrated on adapting their entry criteria to encourage applicants from a diverse range of backgrounds. For example, the University of Derby has in place a guaranteed access scheme for applicants over the age of 21.

135. Partnership working is a thread that runs through this section: partnership between Aimhigher and institutions, and between institutions, schools, colleges, and communities. As with Aimhigher, the priority for the next period is to ensure that HEI outreach becomes a systematic, integrated aspect of learning in schools, a planned and predictable contribution from higher education to wider access rather than ‘one-off’ events – however inspirational.
136. Relatively few of the activities described by respondents in the section above are targeted at specific groups. Only 11 of the 566 activities are described as specifically addressing the needs of disabled students, 30 activities specifically addressing the needs of mature learners, 14 activities specifically addressing the needs of students from minority ethnic groups, and seven activities specifically addressing the needs of part-time learners. For mentoring, however, targeting was more common. One strand of the mentoring work at the University of Teesside supports national shortage subject areas such as mathematics, science, engineering and modern foreign languages. First year black and minority ethnic students at the University of Portsmouth are currently being mentored by external business people, a scheme run in partnership with Southampton Solent University. We discuss the issues associated with targeting below, in the analysis of responses to questions about local links and the targeting of areas, schools, and individuals.

137. We asked institutions to tell us about their links with local schools, colleges, communities, and training providers; to tell us about the data they collected and the uses to which it is put; and to tell us about the criteria used to target activities in areas, for schools and colleges, and for individuals.

138. As a means of assessing the relationship between HEIs and schools, colleges, and others we asked institutions to choose the statement that most nearly described their relationship. The statements for ‘schools’ are reproduced below (statements for colleges, community groups, and training providers/employers were similar):

a. Local schools are invited to participate in a range of WP activities e.g. campus visits, Aiming for a College Education (ACE) days.

b. There is regular liaison with local schools involving a number of visits and conversations with senior staff in the school.

c. The HEI contributes to broader learning in the school and this has become part of the planned provision of the school.

139. The aim was to bring out differences in the degree of engagement – from an invitation to participate, to regular liaison and conversations with senior staff, to a relationship close enough to be described as part of ‘planned provision’. Institutions tended to plump for the middle (always a risk with questionnaires that provide a refuge in the middle ground). ‘Regular liaison’ best described the relationship with schools, colleges, and communities for 44 per cent, 43 per cent and 46 per cent of responses respectively. Links that had become part of planned provision were claimed by 23 per cent, 28 per cent, and 12 per cent. These are very substantial claims and may overstate the extent to which HEIs are integrated with the wider learning community. A third (33 per cent) of respondents described their links with
training providers and employers as ‘regular liaison’, and 23 per cent plumped for ‘have become part of their regular activities’. These are unexpectedly high given the known difficulties of effective liaison with training providers and employers. The fact that between 12 per cent and 14 per cent of respondents failed to complete the question properly (many ticking all three boxes) suggests variable understanding of what the question implied. It may have been better if the questionnaire had been more explicit in asking HEIs to rate their links with others. Nevertheless, notwithstanding these qualifications, the responses indicate a high degree of confidence in the external links that WP activity in HEIs has been able to establish.

**Case Study: Sheffield Hallam University**

Sheffield Hallam targets schools for a minimum three year period to work with teachers and pupils to raise awareness of higher education and improve attainment.

140. We asked about the data that institutions collect about participants in WP activities; whether data is collected for some or all activities; and whether this – and other WP data – is analysed and shared with faculties and departments.

141. Between 80 per cent and 92 per cent of respondents collect data on postcode, gender, ethnicity, first in family to go to HE, and disability for participants in the main WP activities. Given the standard nature of this information it may be more surprising that there are cases where it is not collected, but a little over 10 per cent of respondents do not record information about disability and 16 per cent do not record the participants’ postcode. More surprising is the fact that only 47 per cent of respondents collect data on the ‘occupation of chief wage earner’; 48 per cent replied that this information is not collected (five institutions – 6 per cent – did not provide an answer). There is scepticism about the value of answers from many young participants to questions about ‘occupation of chief wage earner’ even when this phrase is explained. However, given the centrality of social class to under-representation in higher education it is a rather important piece of information. Given the geography of disadvantage (shown by HEFCE’s POLAR data) schools and areas can be an effective first line proxy for social class. Even so, data collected about social class for the main WP events would help inform institutions about the effectiveness of the proxy measures chosen.

142. Targeting was more directly addressed in questions about criteria for work with areas, schools/colleges, and individuals. The answers reveal a growing level of complexity and some difficult questions to address.
143. The most common source of information and criteria for targeting is Aimhigher. Twenty-three institutions referred to Aimhigher for targeting areas; 28 did so for targeting schools and colleges; and 16 for targeting individuals. What this means, however, is likely to be variable. In some cases HEIs and Aimhigher share a sophisticated ‘intervention model’; in other cases it is more hit-and-miss (‘comprehensive schools recognised by Aimhigher’).

144. For ‘areas’ the responses are intensely local. This may not be as obvious as it sounds. Although all institutions recruit nationally to some extent, only three institutions refer to a WP focus that is national, or wider than the region in which the institution is located. A variety and combination of characteristics are used to qualify criteria for selecting a local ‘area’. After Aimhigher, references to ‘deprivation’ are most common (15 institutions). Others refer to under-representation, POLAR data, the Index of Multiple Deprivation, or ‘low progression rates’. In all about 46 per cent of respondents make references of this kind. This is not as many as might be expected. The responses may under-state the extent to which criteria based on poverty and progression are used to discriminate between areas. For example, institutions in the south-west report their targeting/intervention model under ‘schools’ and ‘individuals’ and probably assume that criteria for areas refer only to the decision about the boundaries they will operate within. We will return to the limitations at the end of this section.

145. Seventeen institutions distinguish only on the basis that they work with ‘state schools’ but most apply criteria based on measures of disadvantage, participation, or attainment to identify the schools and colleges they propose to work with. However, it is unclear how the more complex and/or detailed criteria are actually applied. As noted above, 28 institutions rely on Aimhigher targeting, although this is often combined with other considerations. The University of Liverpool asks Aimhigher co-ordinators to select schools, but selection criteria include areas where progression is low and the number of free school meals is relatively high. Many institutions rely on a ‘list’ of factors that are taken into account. The schools that the University of Leeds works with ‘are determined on a variety of factors: low progression to higher education, high proportion of young people from low income backgrounds, high percentage of black and minority ethnic students, percentage of A*-C GCSE passes and the willingness and enthusiasm to work in partnership with the university’. Similarly Nottingham University takes ‘several factors into consideration. We have no hard and fast rules, but are seeking schools with disadvantaged individuals and the capacity and willingness to work with us.’

146. In some cases, however, more detail is provided about the way criteria are applied. We can identify two broad approaches: one that might be described as a more ‘systematic’ approach to targeting, and the second in which a number of factors are combined to create a ‘model’ that is deployed to determine target schools and colleges.

147. At the University of Brighton target schools are ranked by GCSE attainment (per cent gaining 5 A*-C), free school meal entitlement, and location within a low participation neighbourhood. The University of Hertfordshire uses OFSTED and other freely available
data to identify the 20 lowest performing secondary schools in Hertfordshire, and these receive greatly enhanced support in terms of the range and number of WP activities. Targeting of colleges is less common. These are large institutions and cover a wide geographical area. Hertfordshire is typical in working with all the FECs in the region. The University of Bristol categorises and targets local schools and FECs using the following criteria: progression rates of students entering higher education; percentage of students achieving 5 A*-Cs at GCSE; proportion of students on free school meals; and proportion of students living in low participation neighbourhoods. All are examples of what might be described as the systematic application of criteria to produce a classification or rank order of schools to work with. There is usually a decision to be made about which schools, and how many, the HEI will subsequently approach. Nottingham Trent University selects 25 schools to prioritise: ‘Nottinghamshire secondary schools are prioritised by the per cent of pupils receiving free school meals and by the school’s GCSE performance (with the lower performing schools taking priority). The priority schools (top 25) are targeted each year to ensure they have the first opportunity to book in for our secondary activities.’

148. Staffordshire provides an example of an institution moving from more-or-less systematic application of criteria relating to participation and progression to something approaching an intervention ‘model’. The university notes that ‘until recently, POLAR data have been used to identify schools and colleges in low participation wards and target WP work accordingly. More recently, first through Excellence Challenge, and subsequently Aimhigher, a methodology has been developed to identify numbers of WP students in schools. Pupils with home postcodes located in areas of deprivation, and with the academic potential to progress to HE (postcode areas are cross-matched against attainment data by local authority data teams), are included in the WP cohort. Schools confirm cohort numbers to take account of a range of issues such as family experience of HE or looked-after children. The university is now aligning its approach with this to ensure tighter targeting on those schools with larger WP cohorts.’

149. Other institutions, the Aimhigher partnership in the south-west, and the University of Manchester in the north-west, have taken this a step further. The University of the West of England explains: ‘The outreach centre at the university has prepared an intervention model to provide the Aimhigher West Partnership with a means of prioritising the needs of 141 partner schools and 17 FE colleges in relation to activity designed to raise aspirations, improve attainment and otherwise facilitate progression to HE. Partner schools and colleges have been placed in one of four bands (A to D) for activities and interventions using GCSE and equivalent results for young people aged 15, achievements of 16-18 year-olds studying towards GCE/VCE qualifications, and data on the percentage of students enrolled in each institution who come from low participation neighbourhoods. The intervention model can be downloaded from the web-site, www.aimhigherwest.org.uk. The Manchester model uses the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (or Education Maintenance Allowance for colleges), and the percentage from low participation neighbourhoods, to identify priority
schools, although the WP team stresses the continued necessity to work closely with teachers to identify the individual students who would benefit most from WP activities.’

150. Finally, we asked institutions to tell us about criteria for targeting individuals. Before setting this out it is worth noting the view from Southampton Solent University about ‘targeting’ schools and individuals. Solent is ‘moving away from targeting schools and colleges based on attainment levels as we exclude too many "WP students" who might benefit from engagement’. About individuals Solent remarks: ‘We focus on those for whom higher education is not an automatic life choice. This is chiefly determined by having no previous family member in higher education. This may not be a refined approach, but pragmatically it tends to be a simple criterion that schools and colleges recognise and can operate well’.

151. We have focused on the way that institutions target areas and schools but many institutions are reluctant to exclude any schools from consideration, on the grounds that most if not all will have some pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. For many HEIs with significant local recruitment and mission, and where WP is an extension of commitments in student liaison and marketing departments, targeting may be a secondary consideration or not relevant at all. This is broadly the position for Sheffield Hallam University for example. Solent’s pragmatic approach to targeting individuals is consistent with this.

152. The models being developed in Staffordshire, Manchester and the south-west involve an element of individual targeting, although individuals within the schools will still need to be identified for some activities. But in general there is little sign of anything resembling a standard approach. More than 90 per cent of institutions mention a variety of factors for targeting individuals but the list is often longer than that used to distinguish areas or schools and can be drawn very widely. Portsmouth takes account of ‘socio-economic background, low participation areas, non-traditional qualifications, age, special circumstances, and previous institution’. Reading University identifies those with ‘no tradition of HE in family, has disability, from group with low participation in region e.g. white working class boys, looked-after children, facing personal barrier e.g. carer etc’. In similar vein Exeter targets students who fulfill one or more of the following criteria: ‘first generation HE; having caring responsibilities; coming from public care; under-aspiring despite ability; under-achieving despite ability; having little or no parental support for progression; having a disability’. Sheffield includes ‘students who have particular barriers to overcome’.

153. Although the word is hardly used, the overwhelming rationale is ‘inclusion’. Almost every conceivable form of social disadvantage is addressed somewhere. There are good and self-evident reasons for inclusion; on the other hand WP cannot do everything. Focused work is much more likely to produce results. There are other difficulties inherent in targeting individuals – the University of Kent underlines some of them:
‘Targeting of individuals proves more problematic and is an area that is under ongoing review. For example, there is, quite rightly, an interest to target individuals that will most benefit from WP activity (and not merely add value to those individuals that would have participated and progressed without any intervention). However, there also seems to be evidence from our piloting of the Partner Schools Development, that where a university is attempting to have a positive impact on the entire school and raise aspirations, there has to be involvement of the 3 or 4 students that probably would have progressed to HE without intervention because then the scheme is perceived in aspirational rather than remedial terms by students and staff. However, this clearly needs fine tuning when we are working in schools where a much higher percentage progress (but this is still low by grammar school standards). In short, because of the complexities of this issue it is something we review and are mindful of as we develop each new strand of the programme, in comparison with institutional or area targeting which is driven in partnership with Aimhigher.’

154. Better targeting is required. One WP event reviewed below (review of evidence) attracted a majority of participants from grammar schools; 90 per cent already intended to enter HE and more than 80 per cent would not be the first in their family to do so. But for individuals there are the social and academic considerations that Kent draws attention to. It may be that some events/activities need to target individuals but not all; that as long as school or area targeting is rigorous (e.g. the Staffordshire approach) whole cohorts could more typically be involved. These are questions that this review has opened up and in the recommendations of this report we propose to adopt Kent’s invitation to further consider practice in this area.
The Office for Fair Access (OFFA): an update

Access agreements

155. Access agreements have been approved for 124 HEIs and 40 FECs for 2006-07. A further nine FECs have submitted access agreements to start in 2007-08.

156. All agreements set out what bursary provision the institution intends to make for students from lower income groups and other under-represented groups. Generally speaking most institutions are offering cash awards based on parental income, but there are some schemes that link more specifically with partner schools and outreach activities or that target a specific group.

157. Most agreements (85 per cent) also include a commitment to invest additional funds in outreach work, although there is limited detail about what activity this might involve. In many cases the additional investment will ensure the continuation or expansion of current outreach activities.

158. Around 24 per cent of institutions also provided details about their retention activities or pastoral support, some of which are new measures being funded through additional income.

159. OFFA will be monitoring the commitments set out in agreements on an annual basis. Such monitoring will provide a report on the ongoing investment in bursaries and outreach and the progress with institutions’ own milestones.

Investment

160. Estimates by institutions included in their access agreements put the additional income at about £1.4 billion p.a. from 2010-11.

161. Institutions also estimate that financial support for students from lower income and other under-represented groups will be over £350 million p.a. from 2010-11, which is 26 per cent of the additional income in the sector. The average investment from all institutions in financial support is 27 per cent.

162. Investment in additional outreach work is estimated to be £37 million by 2010 which is 3 per cent of the additional fee income. The average investment in outreach from institutions is 4 per cent.

163. The amount of estimated investment is more generous than OFFA anticipated and illustrates a commitment from the sector to supporting students from lower income and other under-represented groups and underpinning existing outreach capacity.
Impact

164. Bursaries are intended to ensure that students from lower income groups are not deterred from applying to and entering higher education because of the introduction of higher tuition fees. It is too early to say whether they have been successful in this aim; however application data from UCAS, broken down by social class, indicates that although overall applications have dropped, the proportion coming from socio-economic classification (SEC) 4-7 has remained the same as in 2005-06.

165. OFFA will investigate whether there is any evidence of bursaries influencing students’ choices, with a basic analysis of UCAS data across institutions, grouped according to the amount of bursary they offer. OFFA will also look at Student Loans Company data on the number of lower income students across the sector. This will help to monitor progress and feed in to a wider programme of research and good practice.

Research and good practice

166. A major component of OFFA’s strategic plan is to work with the sector to identify good practice in bursary delivery and impact, and on the provision of financial information to students. OFFA has already commissioned some work to produce good practice for institutions on the financial information they provide on their websites.

167. OFFA intends to consult the sector on a research strategy where the major theme will be the impact and effectiveness of bursaries as well as producing good practice on the delivery of bursary schemes. Hopefully this will produce evidence of whether bursaries encourage participation, and their role in improving the financial situation for students once in higher education. Even if evidence shows that there is no positive effect on applications and participation, there may be a positive effect on retention.

168. Access agreements last for five years but OFFA expects that institutions will look to adapt their plans and policies to the developing market. In responding to the market and taking on board good practice, advice and guidance that OFFA provides, it is anticipated that institutions will be able to improve their targeting and bursary provision.

Conclusions

169. Access agreements show a clear commitment to fair access. Although it is too early to tell what impact the new regime of fees and bursaries might have, the early signs are that there is no underlying downward trend in applications to HE.

170. The aim of access agreements is to ensure that there is no detrimental effect on WP, but OFFA’s strategic aims go beyond this. OFFA will work with the sector to gather evidence
and develop good practice to ensure that bursary delivery and policies are as targeted and effective as possible. OFFA is optimistic that access agreements will have a positive impact and assist with increasing applications and improving retention.
The evidence of impact: aspirations, attainment and access

171. In this section we are concerned with the impact of institution-based activity on aspirations and attainment among under-represented communities, and the evidence that this leads to an improvement in access to higher education. But, as we have already noted in the discussion of Aimhigher, in many institutions little distinction is made between the WP activity initiated and funded by the institution and similar activity funded and commissioned through Aimhigher. Twenty-two per cent of institutions rely on Aimhigher evidence in their questionnaire returns, most frequently in connection with evidence for raising attainment. Under the heading 'raising aspirations' the University of Brighton notes that 'the university does not hold comparable data on its own WP activity'; the University of Kent (and other partners within Aimhigher) have data on improved access by students from Aimhigher target schools. The benefits that flow from the inter-relationship between the collaborative work inspired by Aimhigher and institutional commitments to WP are significant. So long as there is good evidence that commitment to WP is becoming firmly established as part of the institution’s mission, the reliance on Aimhigher does not give cause for concern. Nevertheless we return to the issue of better evidence for the impact of institutional activity below.

172. Of the 100 questionnaire returns analysed in this section, 92 per cent offered evidence about impact on aspirations, 71 per cent on attainment, and 86 per cent on improved access. There are limitations in the evidence as a whole but attainment clearly presents particular difficulties. Much of the evidence relies on feedback from learners, and their teachers and parents/carers. This is overwhelmingly true of evidence for ‘raising aspirations’ but is a factor in relation to raising attainment and improved access as well.

The impact on raising aspirations

173. The evidence here is overwhelmingly positive and consistent. All of those offering evidence of the impact on learners’ aspirations report surveys of learner responses before and after significant WP interventions (e.g. summer schools). The returns register changed attitudes and increased interest in entering higher education, with positive responses typically accounting for more than four-fifths of participants. Brunel University’s claim is representative: ‘We have not run a single visit or activity over the past four years where the vast majority of participants have not recorded that the visit/activity has had a positive impact on their decision to go to university’. Imperial is representative too in noting that the school visits programme generates ‘countless thank you cards, emails, letters from teachers and students [and that] repeat bookings are so numerous that it is almost too much work for the WP Manager’.

174. Testimony comes from pupils, parents, and teachers. A Year 9 pupil at London Metropolitan University’s Saturday School wrote: ‘I enjoy them (subjects) so much because it is something different you wouldn’t do at school and you learn different things about it.’ A
participant in a summer school for Muslim girls at Loughborough University said: ‘I really loved today’s lessons. It was great, I’m so happy I came here. I would love to come here everyday, not just the few days we have got left.’ Rose Bruford College had ‘just admitted [a] student who was part of the first partnership in 2003, and who has been badgering us ever since’.

175. There is written feedback from parents and teachers. At Essex ‘feedback demonstrated that after a one night residential experience parents/carers felt more comfortable with the idea of their son/daughter or the person in their care going to university and they believed it was something they were capable of achieving. They also commented that staff were a lot more friendly and approachable than they would have anticipated.’ In Nottingham a parent wrote of campus visits: ‘I never thought my daughter would get so involved – she can’t wait to get back next week’. Teachers said: ‘My students came back buzzing’. An LEA co-ordinator wrote to the Head of WP at Birmingham University: ‘I think I have also told you that on many occasions when interviewing 6th formers they have reported that the residential visit to Birmingham in Year 9 was the single most important event in raising their aspirations to progress to HE.’

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**Case study: Sheffield Hallam University**

**Students**

‘At first I wasn’t really bothered about going to university, but now I’m really interested.’

(Year 8 pupil, Get Ahead Aimhigher Roadshow)

**Parents**

‘My son is 14 years old – an excellent idea to begin thinking of the future now.’

(University Experience Evening)

**Teachers**

‘Very good and informative, I liked the fact that we discussed with other schools how they work with students.’ (Choices and Voices 2005: Minority Ethnic Student Conference)

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176. Evidence of this sort is extensive. The examples above could be multiplied many times over. How reliable is it, and what does it tell us?

177. It is possible that respondents are reporting selectively but this is unlikely. First the unanimity of response is telling. Secondly, some of the reports are painfully honest. At one event the numbers of pupils who would consider HE rose from 64 to 69. At another, 91 per cent of participants already intended to enter HE, leading the organisers to reflect in the evaluation on the need for better targeting. Some returns bring out interesting differences in
participant responses: 88 per cent of participants in a Leeds Metropolitan University summer school agreed with the statement, ‘the summer school has made me more likely to go to university’ (84 evaluation forms); a summer school working specifically with Black Caribbean and Black African men found 70 per cent of participants agreed with a similar statement (20 evaluation forms).

178. What does it tell us? There may be something akin to the ‘Hawthorne effect’ at work: positive responses are elicited simply by paying attention to people. On the other hand if the aim of the activity is to change the way people think and feel about higher education, evidence about what people think and feel in response to WP interventions is necessary and has some value. If HEIs (and Aimhigher) were getting it wrong it is highly unlikely that the evaluation would produce consistently positive results.

179. Evidence of this sort about ‘aspirations’ is clearly stronger where it is linked to changes in behaviour likely to lead to improved attainment and interest in HE. There is little research evidence available, although Cambridge University is able to point to a National Foundation for Educational Research study from 2004 comparing factors affecting applications to Oxford and Cambridge Universities. This showed that, compared with the position in 1998, ‘social factors such as the level of education attained by parents no longer made any difference to respondents’ willingness to apply’. St George’s medical school has set up an extensive longitudinal study of summer school participants which should be available in the autumn of 2007.

180. More readily available is feedback from teachers pointing to improved attitudes to study, better attendance, and increased motivation. University College London notice a change in the attitude of pupils coming to summer schools which they attribute to Aimhigher experience and teacher reports of a change in attitudes to study among their pupils. At the College of St Mark and St John teachers report positive improvement in attitude and interest in music from primary school pupils. A Thames Valley University mentoring scheme has drawn teacher comments on improved attendance, timekeeping, behaviour, and attainment. At Essex University there is similar evidence from mentoring programmes of improvement in attendance and commitment to course work.

181. Particularly interesting feedback comes from Bishop Grosseteste University College. Here the proportion of participants in WP activities who thought they had the ability to progress to HE rose from 30 per cent to 67 per cent. Changing expectations that contribute to the formation of more positive learner identities is important to both attainment and participation. The Meteor Programme at the University of Teesside focuses on raising pupil awareness of HE early during the key transition stage between age 10 and 14. City University reports WP students getting work experience and job offers from ‘industry days’. Connexions report three times the number of students attending a talk at the Berkshire HE Fair following student attendance at a Reading University Human Rights event.
182. Some reports make a direct link between raising aspirations and take-up of other study opportunities or access to HE. Half of e-mentoring/placement students on an Aimhigher Healthcare Strand project applied to study medicine at Keele. Edge Hill University links 95 per cent successful completion of its FastForward programme to further HE study, and has recorded a 90 per cent conversion rate of participants attending Teaching Taster Courses to applications for teacher training.

183. The evidence that WP interventions have an immediate positive impact on aspirations of learners is overwhelming. Of 100 respondents to the HEFCE survey, 92 institutions provided information about activity designed to raise aspirations and all were confident of success. There is some research evidence to suggest that this conclusion is well-founded. The Sutton Trust was surprised (and gratified) to find that two-thirds of 11-16 year-olds in schools in England and Wales questioned by MORI for research commissioned by the Trust said they expected to go into higher education when they were old enough (Sutton Trust 2002). Eighty-four per cent of professionals think it likely their children will go to university, but so too according to Wragg and Johnson, do 65 per cent of manual workers. ‘Despite the differences…. the very fact that nearly two-thirds of routine manual workers expect their children to go to university, it could be argued, is evidence of the success of policies encouraging all groups in society to aspire to higher education’ (Wragg and Johnson 2005, 96). There is strong evidence of endorsement by teachers, and although less common (because more difficult to reach) positive endorsement from parents and carers too. There are clearly questions about how lasting such an impact is, and what its ultimate influence on educational outcomes is likely to be, but its immediate impact is not really in doubt.

The impact on attainment

184. As the University of Central Lancashire remarks: ‘The evidence for longer term impact [on attainment] is trickier’. This is a judgement echoed by Southampton Solent University which found this ‘difficult to gauge’; Solent cannot yet show strong correlations and prefers at this stage to rely on qualitative evidence. Leeds Metropolitan University cites written feedback from mentors and tutors for increases in motivation and a small improvement in GCSE results, but adds the caveat that the impact of WP must be set alongside other school interventions.

185. Institutions were asked to provide examples of the impact of WP interventions rather than an assessment of the impact of their activity as a whole, although a number do refer to the links that teachers and others establish between WP and trends in attainment in local schools and colleges.

186. Responses are grouped into four broad categories: first, those where no examples are provided, or reference is made to work in progress in gathering evidence. There were 29 (29 per cent) institutions in this category. Second are those where a ‘relatively weak’ connection is established between WP interventions and improvements in attainment. Typically these
are institutions reporting general teacher feedback (‘teachers call to thank us; and say how much student work has improved’), or referring in general terms to Aimhigher evidence. There are 41 institutions in this category. Sixteen institutions provided somewhat stronger and/or more specific evidence though this too is based on feedback: for example, ‘maths tutoring – anecdotal evidence from teachers suggests standards rise by as much as two grades’; or ‘DfES school performance figures for GCSE in 27 Aimhigher schools compares favourably with others’. In 14 institutions the evidence is stronger, generally referring to attainment in specific target schools or for specific cohorts of pupils. For example, ‘evidence from two schools where pass rates in GCSE science have doubled since the Aimhigher programme began’; a particular target school where there is a 10 per cent increase in 5 GCSEs A*-C; or the claim by a Deputy Head that mentoring had resulted in about one grade higher in GCSE results for a specific school.

187. Another way of looking at the evidence is to consider the point at which the intervention is made. Unfortunately the only examples of primary school interventions refer to ‘work in progress’ in gathering evidence but interventions are recorded at all other points on the learning journey. At the University of Teesside higher level performance in SATs is confirmed by teachers in five pre-16 institutions; ‘in the pilot phase of the Brunel Urban Scholars programme all 20 pupils from St Thomas More RC School, Haringey, met or exceeded their Key Stage 3 SAT targets in contrast to the school’s Gifted and Talented cohort’; improvements in schools’ SAT results in Deptford were attributed to mentors from Imperial College.

188. The bulk of the evidence relates to performance at GCSE, although there are a number of references to interventions to improve attainment in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics, but mostly mathematics) that operate across the age range. The University of Hull links improvements in maths (along with other factors) to a ‘maths booster course’. In Portsmouth the local authority has incorporated the university’s ‘Up for Maths’ programme into its borough-wide Mathematics Action Plan. And Cambridge University’s STEP Easter school for state school pupils (for pupils taking the STEP maths papers), which is part funded by Sutton Trust, had 70 participants in 2005-06, 38 of whom successfully gained places at the university. At Greenwich University, STEM homework clubs improved GCSE performance, with 47 per cent of participants achieving a ‘C’ against expectations.

189. GCSE performance is the focus of a great deal of work to raise attainment because GCSE is the key to staying on and success post-16. Written feedback from the head of music at Crofton School claims GCSE standards improved from 10 per cent to 58 per cent in one year as a result of support from Goldsmiths College. Students participating in the ‘Making Progress’ scheme at Reading University have a 90 per cent achievement at 5 GCSE A*-C compared with much lower school averages. The experience at UCL where a Deputy Head thought WP improved GCSE performance by about a grade is probably more typical. Where HEIs do sustained and targeted work with schools over a longer period there are
usually results to show. Working intensively with three schools over a number of years Bath Spa University claims an improvement in attainment from Level 2 to Level 3. Nottingham and Bradford Universities run Saturday morning clubs that claim a measurable improvement in attainment, and Keele, Bedfordshire, and Nottingham Trent Universities all offer reasonable grounds for associating WP activity with improved performance at GCSE.

190. Bath University believes that WP has improved post-16 staying on rates in Swindon. Post-16 attainment is the focus of other reports. The University of the Arts (London) noted ‘dramatically improved portfolios’ among applicants, and Loughborough University believes it has contributed to a 17 per cent increase in pupils from Leicestershire with 300+ UCAS points. The Royal Veterinary College reports teacher feedback suggesting a link between WP interventions and improved performance of AVCE pupils, and Durham University notes that only 14.5 per cent of applicants to the university do better than the average tariff score for participants in WP master classes.

191. The mix of evidence from pre-92 and post-92 institutions suggests few differences in the way WP interventions work to raise attainment. It is often said that the WP interventions of the more academically prestigious institutions contribute to improved access across the sector rather than to recruitment to their own institutions. This is almost certainly true but not exclusively so. London Metropolitan University describes how a student now at Thames Valley University has kept in touch. From a predicted fail they had achieved a triple distinction in BTEC music technology following work with London Metropolitan student ambassadors.

192. On the whole, evidence for impact on attainment is relatively weak. Only 14 per cent of institutions offered strong/direct evidence of improved attainment. Many were cautious about making claims in this area. There is a great deal of ‘circumstantial evidence’, activity closely connected to the process of learning that could, and perhaps should, raise levels of attainment. But this is notoriously difficult to demonstrate in practice. It should be said that the resources at the disposal of institutions (and Aimhigher) to influence attainment are tiny compared to the resources available to schools and colleges. At some point it may be appropriate to define expectations more closely in respect of improving attainment. It may be that the critical question is how WP is integrated with and supports the more broadly based learning experience in schools and colleges, rather than attempting to track short-term changes in attainment and their links with WP interventions.

The impact on access

193. Recent concerns about access follow the slight fall in the proportion of young entrants from lower socio-economic groups in the performance indicators published for 2004-05. There is a similar fall in the proportion of entrants from state schools and from low participation neighbourhoods, although over the period as a whole from 1998 there is a small improvement in both these indicators. The measure of overall participation, the Higher
Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR), also shows a small fall in participation from 42.3 per cent in 2003-04 to 42 per cent in 2004-05.


**Table 1 Performance indicators 1998-99 to 2004-05**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Entrants from state schools and colleges (%)</th>
<th>NS-SEC 4-7 (National Statistics socio-economic classification) (%)</th>
<th>Low participation neighbourhoods (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998/99</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>(25)</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999/00</td>
<td>84.1</td>
<td>(25)</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000/01</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>(25)</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001/02</td>
<td>85.2</td>
<td>(26)</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002/03</td>
<td>86.4</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003/04</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004/05</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures for the socio-economic classification in brackets refer to performance indicators for skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers prior to the introduction of the new classification. The ‘increase’ from 2001-02 to 2002-03 is an effect of the changed classification.

195. It is important to note that the performance indicators are not a measure of participation. Without figures for the underlying population of 18-20 year-olds the performance indicators only tell us about the composition of the sector, not participation rates. The published participation rates by social class do not take account of changes in the populations since 1991 and therefore provide no additional information. Recent work by the DfES has shown that the proportion of people in the general population belonging to the lower socio-economic groups has probably fallen over the relevant period. This suggests that the proportion of people from lower socio-economic groups who are now going to HE has actually increased. We consider below some of the evidence that WP interventions do improve access to HE.

196. It is more difficult to offer even broad brush ‘categories’ for responses on evidence for impact on access. While many institutions refer to recruitment from summer schools or from
target schools and localities, few offer data on numbers (or a context in which those numbers would be more meaningful), and fewer still distinguish the socio-economic background of learners that join the institution.

197. Institutions are in effect identifying possible links between WP interventions and a range of outcomes relating to recruitment. As long as this is borne in mind we can place responses in one of four categories according to the ‘strength’ of the response i.e. the ways in which institutions establish a link between WP activity and entry to HE. Forty institutions (40 per cent) made no return or referred only to work in progress. Responses from 25 institutions have been categorised as ‘relatively weak’. In this group a link between increased recruitment from summer schools, or from the locality, is claimed but no data are provided. Nine institutions offered some data as evidence of improved access but in general terms (e.g. ‘increased applications and conversions from targeted schools and colleges’). Twenty-six institutions offered some data on improved access that was linked with specific WP interventions. We include in this category institutions running compact or special access schemes where there are numbers of entrants from the scheme.

198. It is worth repeating that this categorisation is a way of reading the responses: it makes no claim about causal connections (or the lack of a causal connection) between WP and recruitment. This is an area where institutions have been more than usually cautious, and with good reason. As Hertfordshire University points out, it believes it can establish a link between local recruitment driven by WP but is fully aware that this could reflect simple shifts in the pattern of applicants’ choices, with increased recruitment at Hertfordshire offset by reductions elsewhere. The University of York points out that it does not have evidence about entry into other HEIs. It is difficult to see how it could and this is the position for all HEIs. The recruitment outcomes of its WP interventions can only be partially known.

199. Even with all of these acknowledged limitations it is reasonable to ask whether there is any evidence of the impact of WP activity most directly concerned with entry to HE. In the responses from institutions a number of areas can be considered. The University of Cambridge, for example, addresses a particular issue about access for pupils from the state sector and is able to point to the fact that the proportion of entrants from the state sector is a little over 5 per cent higher in 2005 compared with 2001. University of the West of England points out that it is the seventh largest institution for entrants from access courses (although there are no numbers or proportions to back this up). Staffordshire University refers to entrants from its ‘Step Up to HE’ programme and in Northern Ireland there are 1,000 students on Access programmes validated by the University of Ulster. A number of institutions make particular reference to their performance indicators and we consider this separately below. Otherwise the main areas that institutions discuss in terms of access are:

- recruitment from summer schools and other targeted activities
- local recruitment, and recruitment from ‘target’ schools and colleges
- recruitment through compacts or special access schemes.
200. These are overlapping categories and we would expect to find most institutions with something to say about at least two of them, and some institutions, all three. It is nevertheless useful to distinguish them as a way of tracing the main outlines of WP interventions most closely connected with improving access.

201. A number of institutions emphasised recruitment from summer schools (e.g. Bournemouth, Teesside and Huddersfield Universities). King’s College London records nine applications from recent summer school participants, two of whom subsequently entered the university (two turned down the places offered). At University College London four out of 30 summer school participants accepted offered places. Eight out of 45 participants at the 2004 University of Birmingham Access to the Health Professions summer school subsequently applied to the University of Birmingham. Nottingham University attracted applicants from its own master classes and summer schools. On average 65 per cent of summer school participants in both the 2004 and 2005 summer schools applied to the University of Nottingham with about 40 per cent of them being successful. University College for the Creative Arts achieved 80 per cent progression from National Diploma and Foundation Diploma programmes compared with national rates closer to 40 per cent. Interestingly the institution attributes this to a ‘culture of expectation’. Summer schools are by all accounts one of the most significant and effective WP interventions but we still know far too little about the participants and whether they end up in higher education. HEFCE is talking to summer school programme managers about the data collected and how this can improved in order to track participants into HE. There are difficult data protection issues but significant progress on this should be made before the end of the year.

202. Local recruitment is universally regarded as critical for WP. Once again we need better data but it is likely that for research intensive institutions, for example, the social mix of local entrants will be the (reverse) mirror image of national entrants. For all institutions, local students will include those from the most disadvantaged circumstances for whom travelling and/or living away from home is much more difficult. Local recruitment often (though not always) involves targeting particular schools and colleges, building a relationship over time with learners and teachers that supports progression to higher education. More than 20 institutions emphasise local recruitment, and recruitment from target schools and colleges.

203. Thames Valley University, University of East London, and University of Northampton all note an ‘upward trend’ in applications from local schools. University College for the Creative Arts notes a ‘year on year increase in applications from non-selective schools in Medway which has the lowest progression rates in the south east’. At Reading University there was a 10 per cent increase in applications from local schools in 2005-06. A small increase in local applications for Durham University has been achieved against local recruitment trends. Many other institutions claim to have increased applications and entry from target schools and colleges (for example, Liverpool John Moores, Kingston, and Greenwich Universities). Bradford University increased applications from an Associate
School network and also increased adult learners from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. The University of Bedfordshire increased applications from target schools and colleges despite a fall in UCAS applications overall. The City of Bristol College, which responded as part of the Plymouth HE-FE partnership, increased applications from target schools and increased applications for HE programmes within the college from BTEC students.

204. At the University of Brighton, the number of applicants from Aimhigher target schools rose by 16 per cent against 13 per cent from non-target schools between 2003 and 2005. Over the same period Aimhigher target schools increased VCE /GCE entries in Year 13 by 13 per cent while the non-target schools only increased VCE /GCE entries by 4 per cent. The University of Kent also relies on Aimhigher evidence to show a 4 per cent increase in applications from target schools compared to non-target schools. Brunel University saw applications from Hillingdon (where progression is low) increase by nearly 20 per cent from 2003 to 2006; entrants from six London boroughs rose by twice that over the same period. The University of Winchester saw an increase in applications from compact partner colleges and schools between 2002 and 2005 of more than 85 per cent.

205. Compacts and special access schemes are the third area to consider. ‘Compacts’ is a term that covers a wide variety of arrangements between HEIs and schools and colleges. Their aim is often to increase student motivation by assuring HE progression on the basis of performance against a range of targets. Gloucester University saw an 11 per cent increase in applications from compact schools from 2003 to 2005. Leeds Metropolitan University increased applications to HE from schools and colleges where students complete a ‘progression module’. Almost all compact students making an application to the University of the Arts succeed. Some of these schemes have grown significantly over time. Entrants through the Admission Compact Scheme at Nottingham Trent University grew six-fold from 1997 to 2005, from 46 to 277. Schemes take time to mature. The school students who formed the first cohort of the York St John Insight compact scheme will have their first opportunity to access higher education in 2007-08. Nineteen students out of the original cohort of 24 at the first compact school (in Rotherham) answered yes to the question about whether they would be going on to higher education after leaving school.

206. There is a group of special access schemes, many of them charted by the UUK series ‘From elitism to inclusion’, and often found in research intensive institutions. Applicants through the Access to Birmingham scheme grew from 276 in 2002-03 to 356 in 2005-06; offers grew from 161 to 213. Access to Leeds has seen an increase of 13 per cent in applications from partner schools. The Foundation for Medicine programme at St George’s medical school generated 452 mature student applications; 10 per cent of medical school entrants benefit from ‘adjusted entry criteria’ ensuring an interview. In three years, 76 candidates were called for interview and 50 offered places. Twenty-three students entered the BVetMed programme at the Royal Veterinary College in 2006, following successful completion of the Gateway programme. Pre- and post-92 institutions can work together. Ten
students achieving a mean grade of 60 per cent on the Lincoln Certificate in Health Science will join the first year medicine degree programme at Nottingham University with a further six students joining other health related courses at the university.

207. Evidence of this kind is fragmentary but suggestive. In some ways it raises more questions than it answers but it does suggest that local, targeted activity, with associate/partner/compact schools could be making a difference. If the overall proportion of students from lower socio-economic groups remains unchanged (though participation rates may have improved) the outcome may have been worse without interventions of this sort. This is not a firm conclusion. We would need more contextual information about applications and student choice; about the schools and colleges that HEIs are working with; and about the individuals that have been attracted to HE through work of this kind. Applications and acceptances through UCAS between 2001 and 2005 rose by almost 40 per cent, for example, although this may be a poor guide to the conditions of recruitment from a given locality or from compact schools in disadvantaged areas. What this evidence does do is help clarify what else we need to know. It would be possible to fill out the information that HEIs have provided about recruitment linked to WP interventions, local recruitment and recruitment through target schools and colleges. This would greatly improve the quality and reliability of information without asking WP practitioners to become full-time researchers. This is something to which we return in the conclusions to this report.

Performance indicators

208. Some institutions cited performance indicators as a measure of success. But of course performance indicators are more a measure of fair access than WP, based as they are on numbers entering an HEI rather than the underlying population of potential applicants.

209. There are three WP indicators for young entrants: measuring the percentage from state schools, the percentage from low social classes, and the percentage from neighbourhoods showing low participation rates. Nearly 40 institutions show comparatively large increases in at least one of these indicators over the past three or five years, although the starting point varies, whether above or below the benchmark. Very few show increases in all three. One or two show an increase in one indicator and a fall in another.

210. Benchmarks for these indicators are sector average values adjusted to take into account the entry qualifications of the students and their subject of study. They are designed to allow institutions to compare their performance with students across the sector that have a similar background to their own students. Movements in an institution’s indicator are best looked at in comparison to its own benchmark.

211. We have the performance indicators for each institution and for the sector as a whole. In the tables below we seek to identify where there is movement in the recent period for the key indicators of social class, state school, and entry from low participation neighbourhoods.
The tables show institutions whose WP indicators have changed (increased or decreased) by at least 3 percentage points over three years (for social class) or five years (for state school and low participation neighbourhood). The University of Manchester has been omitted due to the merger with UMIST. Only institutions with at least 200 entrants whose data is known for that particular indicator are included. The tables list institutions in order of size change, from largest to smallest for increases and from smallest (difference) to largest for decreases.

**Table 2: State school changes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutions showing increases of at least 3 per cent between 2000-01 and 2004-05</th>
<th>Performance indicator 2005</th>
<th>Benchmark 2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The School of Oriental and African Studies</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>79.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City University</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td>89.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Royal Veterinary College</td>
<td>66.9</td>
<td>69.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen Mary and Westfield College</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>82.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Bristol</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>76.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kingston University</td>
<td>94.8</td>
<td>92.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of the West of England, Bristol</td>
<td>87.0</td>
<td>90.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Exeter</td>
<td>72.8</td>
<td>80.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Bradford</td>
<td>94.8</td>
<td>91.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London South Bank University</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>94.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Cambridge</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Surrey</td>
<td>88.1</td>
<td>86.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Reading</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>82.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St George's Hospital Medical School, (under 200 students with known data) shows a similar increase.</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>76.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutions showing decreases of a similar amount</th>
<th>Performance indicator 2005</th>
<th>Benchmark 2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>London School of Economics and Political Science</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>76.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The London Institute</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>75.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford Brookes University</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>87.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB: For institutions showing decreases, for all three, the decrease is largely in the most recent year, so may be reversed.
Table 3: Social class changes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutions showing increases of at least 3 per cent between 2002-03 and 2004-05</th>
<th>Performance indicator 2005</th>
<th>Benchmark 2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Royal Veterinary College</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Martin's College</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The School of Oriental and African Studies</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Alfred's College, Winchester</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Surrey, Roehampton</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Mary's College</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Brighton</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Surrey Institute of Art and Design, University College</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Exeter</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Institutions showing decreases of a similar amount

| Queen Mary and Westfield College | 32.0 | 25.5 |
| The University of East London | 39.5 | 36.2 |
| Southampton Solent University | 27.0 | 34.7 |
| Kent Institute of Art & Design | 35.0 | 31.6 |
| London Metropolitan University | 40.1 | 35.3 |
| University of Derby | 35.9 | 35.1 |
| Thames Valley University | 35.2 | 35.2 |
| London South Bank University | 38.3 | 36.6 |
| The University of Sunderland | 39.5 | 35.2 |
| College of St Mark and St John | 34.3 | 35.3 |
| Newman College of HE | 39.5 | 34.2 |
| Oxford Brookes University | 25.6 | 29.7 |
Table 4: Changes to low participation neighbourhood indicator

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutions showing increases of at least 3 per cent between 2000-01 and 2004-05</th>
<th>Performance indicator 2005</th>
<th>Benchmark 2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The University of Sunderland</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinity and All Saints College</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newman College of HE</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Teesside</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Huddersfield</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London Metropolitan University</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of St Mark and St John</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coventry University</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chester College of HE</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Royal Veterinary College</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Derby</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staffordshire University</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Salford</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kingston University</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldsmiths College</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Greenwich</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglia Ruskin University</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Central Lancashire</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No (large) institutions show a decrease in this indicator.

Supporting student success

212. Supporting student success is a shared concern across the sector, facilitated through a combination of targeted support and increased flexibility and quality of provision. Ensuring student success within HEIs can therefore be the result of a whole raft of activities, many of which would not be labelled ‘improving retention/completion’ activities but may be more general enhancement activity.

213. Whilst more needs to be done, the key messages are:

a. The English sector is performing well. It almost doubled in size between 1984-85 and 1993-94 yet non-completion rates only rose modestly, from 14 per cent in 1984-85
to between 17 and 18 per cent in 1993-94. Since then completion rates have been stable.

b. For the vast majority of institutions their indicators are not significantly different from their benchmarks. Where HEIs are doing less well, they are not easily classifiable by institutional type.

c. There have been significant efforts to research issues that impact on retention. Generally, social class is not a major factor in determining the likelihood of a learner completing an HE course. Instead, research indicates that the main correlation would be with level of entry qualifications.

d. A commitment to integrate WP with the core strategic aims of an institution enhances activity to support student success.

Context: funding, data and research

214. HEFCE’s support is intrinsically linked with the total investment made to support core teaching and learning (£4,004 million 2005-06). Over the next few years, £525 million will also be made available through the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) to support the development and implementation of learning and teaching strategies, Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) and the Higher Education Academy.

215. As part of the teaching grant, a specific allocation is made to improve retention (£220 million in 2005-06). This is distributed to reflect the proportion of students entering institutions with relatively weaker qualifications and who are consequently at greater risk of non-completion. It is not based on any measure of disadvantage and it is used to improve the learning and teaching experience of all students, not only those who may have been targeted as part of the WP agenda. It is not suggested, of course, that the improving retention allocation is solely responsible for the relatively strong performance on retention, but in the recent WP review questionnaire, most institutions argued the allocation was ‘critical’ to a number of key services. Since the establishment of OFFA, and in the interests of reducing burden, annual monitoring information is no longer collected on the use of this allocation.

216. In the interests of public accountability, and following on from previous years, the 2006 DfES grant letter to HEFCE stated that we ‘should work with institutions to ensure that any increases in the WP allocations are used on the most effective interventions, including those that bear down on non-completion rates’. The non-completion rates are discussed below. Whilst it is unlikely that we would ever be able to ascertain a direct causal relationship between the allocation and retention rates, this review will try to ascertain where the allocation (and other funding) is most effectively used.

217. HEFCE is working towards meeting a key performance target to ensure that ‘the continuation rate for students in English HEIs across the planning period is the same as, or
better than, the benchmark value calculated from the start year 2002-03’ (HEFCE strategic plan 2006-11). Non-completion is higher in some institutions (and subjects) than others, and there are differences between institutions with much the same entry profile. But it certainly appears as if the transition to mass HE is being accomplished without the sharp increase in non-completion that some had feared.

218. The annual performance indicators show:

a. The proportion of students who do not continue beyond the first year at an institution (known as the non-continuation rate). Data are available for both young students (split by type of neighbourhood) and mature students (split by whether or not they possess a previous HE qualification). The 2003-04 performance indicators show that the figures for non-continuation vary little from year to year but rose slightly in 2003-04.

b. Projected completion rates based on current movement of students between years of study. Projected outcomes remain slightly better than they were in 1998 despite the slight worsening between 2001-02 and 2003-04.

219. Information on part-time completion is less easy to interpret. Whilst HESA data are available for part-time students it is not as complete which, in general, makes tracking through the system less robust. In addition, while it is reasonable to assume that most full-time students intend to gain a qualification, this assumption can not be made for part-time students, who may only be interested in taking part of a programme.

220. The key message here is that the vast majority of institutions are not significantly different from their benchmarks. Indeed, the National Audit Office (2002) found that achievement rates in the majority of institutions were ‘very impressive’ and that nearly all were performing well in line with their benchmarks. This is echoed by Action on Access research (2003). Where HEIs are doing less well, they are not easily classifiable by institutional type.

221. Whilst the HESA data provide the key information, evidence for this review has been gathered from a wider range of sources including:

- the WP review questionnaire
- the HEFCE WP reference group
- case studies
- published data and research (HEFCE and non HEFCE based).

222. OFFA collects access agreements but these focus primarily on pre-entry support and are therefore not relevant to this section.
223. There is a vast array of research on retention, and where appropriate this review will cite more detailed examples. The review of barriers to WP published earlier this year (HEFCE, 2006) reviewed much of the literature on causes, consequences and interventions. The team collected over 1200 pieces of work, which are listed on the University of York website. Other research studies are held by the Higher Education Academy and Action on Access. HEFCE is currently proposing a study on the comprehensive picture of issues affecting non-completion. There are two aspects to this: a description of what happens when students break their study and return over different time frames; and more focused analysis of the factors involved in a limited number of events such as discontinuing after the first year. We are also looking to support the National Audit Office in a larger scale value-for-money study on student retention, which will critically analyse the available data, evidence and activity in this area.

224. The scale and main determining factors of retention for full-time students, at least for those registered at an HEI, are well established (e.g. HEFCE 2002 and 1997, National Audit Office 2002). There are no simple reasons why students might not complete but likely explanations include: wrong choice of field of study; unsatisfactory experience of the programme of study; inability to cope with the demands of the programme; problems associated with finance; dissatisfaction with the institution’s provision of facilities; unhappiness with the locality of the institution; a lack of flexible provision and so on. In recent years, the focus has increasingly been on the impact of the institution, moving away from a focus on problems with the student.

225. In terms of which students are likely to complete, the key message for WP is that social class is not a major factor in determining the likelihood of a learner completing an HE course. Instead, research indicates that the main correlation would be with level of entry qualifications (HEFCE 2002). However, a higher proportion of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds have lower entry qualifications. In addition, HEFCE (2005) shows clear evidence of an independent and negative association between achievement and term-time working (which students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to engage in).

226. Within HE, learners may transfer or withdraw for a wide variety of reasons, sometimes out of personal choice and the offer of other opportunities, others for reasons that could have been addressed. However, supporting learners in making appropriate choices, and enhancing levels of achievement is critical.

Institutional activity and impact

227. Whilst the access agenda has a specific, national special initiative programme, and Aimhigher has highly visible activities which are monitored and evaluated, this is not the case.

4 Unpublished work within HEFCE has shown an independent association between social class and non-completion – but it is much smaller after taking account of prior qualifications.
with regard to retention. Interventions may include induction and first year activities; academic skills support; student services; pastoral support; social integration; learning, teaching and curriculum development; data and monitoring procedures, research; mechanisms to identify at-risk students; equalities work and strategic development.

228. The WP review questionnaire focused primarily on pre-entry, and asked for only basic information on data analysis and use of the retention allocation. A number of institutions supplied additional documentation such as retention strategies. The following table shows how important they considered the WP funding allocation for improving retention for a number of activities.

**Table 5: Responses to WP review questionnaire**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Critical for this provision</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Provides general support</th>
<th>No such provision</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centralised student support structures (e.g. guidance, child care, library, learning support provided centrally)</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-in centres</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional learning support at faculty or departmental level</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification of at-risk students</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastoral support</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>See below</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Sample of 90 institutional responses.

229. The primary use for the funds for improving retention would seem to be supporting central student support services. This is not unexpected and reflects much of the literature referred to in later sections. Other uses given included links with the student union; mentoring; supporting links between academic and support departments; collegiate activity; online support and blended learning; enrolment and transition; good practice in FE; research and policy development; and supporting retention officers in schools/departments. The table
was, perhaps, overly simple. Drop-in centres and additional learning support may have been better grouped together, and it may have been useful to list other categories, particularly curriculum development, or strategic improvement.

230. However, comments and additional documents provided suggest a more sophisticated understanding than the table would suggest. The following provides details of current work in a number of critical areas. This is not all inclusive and we are not attempting to produce a guide to good practice. Rather, we work with our partners, particularly Action on Access and the Higher Education Academy to spread good practice so that other institutions can benefit.

Institutional use of data

231. The questionnaire indicates that approximately three-quarters of institutions currently analyse and share HESA data on non-completion with their departments.\(^5\) This is then used to make changes to institutional processes and practice. The University of Chester indicates that it has undertaken more detailed analysis of retention data at department, subject and programme level, using the performance indicators and HEFCE funding criteria which will be embedded in the business planning and school annual review process. At Loughborough University, as part of its strategy, the university monitors the retention and achievement of students from under-represented groups. Where data show that retention rates are lower in some departments compared to others, further research is undertaken to determine possible causes and recommendations for action. Academic projects will be overseen by the programme development and quality team and the learning and teaching committee; non-academic projects will be overseen by the student services committee.

232. However, it is often the case that data interrogation alone can not explain different levels of completion. The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI 2005) conducted an interesting case study investigating what could be learned about the different non-completion rates of two merging institutions. Importantly, the characteristics of the two student populations were similar. Although previous qualifications on entry are known to be the factor most closely correlated to non-completion, these did not account for the variation in first year non-completion rates. The analysis so far confirms that differences existed between the two universities, suggesting that induction processes and institutional culture have a significant effect on performance, other things being similar.

233. Many institutions carry out research into student withdrawal. A number of the HEIs that took part in the HEFCE ‘reference group’ provided examples. One HEI used part of its WP allocation (now mainstreamed) to fund a researcher to investigate the factors which may have been influencing the relatively high withdrawal rates in one of its departments. The researcher was able to identify particular issues with mature students and establish the most likely reasons for withdrawal. Based on the evidence collected during the research, the

\(^5\) Questionnaires were completed by the Head of WP and so it is likely that this figure may indeed be higher when considering the institution as a whole.
department put a number of measures in place and reduced the non-continuation rate from 24 per cent in 2002-03 to 10 per cent in 2003-04.

Supporting a diverse student body

234. A number of respondents to the questionnaire suggested that it is important to continue to work towards a better understanding of how to support a diverse student body. JM Consulting (2004) details how most of the HEIs ran a range of study skills initiatives and these were invariably seen as highly effective. Other schemes that the respondents felt had been particularly effective in this area included: building increased tutor support into the preparation of written assignments in a specialist HEI; the development and provision of personal planners in a post-92 HEI; and running a non-compulsory summer school at the end of the first year for at-risk students.

235. In terms of current research supported by HEFCE and the Economic and Social Research Council, Hockings and Bowl are exploring ways of enhancing the learning and teaching environment to improve the academic engagement and participation of a diverse range of students, particularly in relation to differences in class and academic background, age, gender and ethnicity. Crozier and Ray will explore working class students' experiences of HE, once at university, the impact on their learner and cultural identities, and the implications of these for their progress and retention. Results will be published in 2007.

Tracking, learner engagement and identification of at-risk students

236. The School of Social Sciences at the University of Manchester is tracking the degree performance of non-traditional students. While the sample is small, most are achieving a 2.1 classification or better. The WP Task Group at Aston University has instituted a peer mentoring system and employs a ‘WP data officer’ to monitor retention, progression, and graduate employment for under-represented groups. Again, these data will build over time. The Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at the University of Wolverhampton presented the results of its work on retaining students to the HEFCE conference in April 2006. A system of tracking student attendance and performance enables the university to identify those who are at risk of withdrawing and put measures in place to support them.

Centralised support services

237. Thomas et al (2002) showed that student services generally and student services departments specifically have much to contribute to maintaining and improving student retention within institutions. It includes many examples of good practice in which student services have improved retention. The researchers concluded that these functions, however they are operationalised in particular institutions, should be given a level of priority equal to other key institutional activities, such as teaching and learning and research. This is further backed up by many of the questionnaire responses (see above) and the HEIs interviewed by
JM Consulting (2004). However, better collaboration between support and academic staff is needed to prevent students from ‘slipping through the net’, especially because it is arguable that those most at risk are least likely to use such services.

**Reshaping curriculum, pedagogical and assessment approaches**

238. The review of barriers to WP (HEFCE, 2006) indicates that there is little evidence that teaching approaches or assessment practices are being adapted for diverse learners, although there is a tendency for non-traditional students to be perceived by teachers from a ‘deficit’ perspective, for which compensatory approaches have been offered. There is, however, some indication that this aspect of supporting student success is being addressed. Respondents to the questionnaire provided details of flexible award schemes and different learning methods. Indeed, the University of Bedfordshire suggested that curriculum development was the second most important aspect of WP (behind strategic partnership with FECs).

239. Approaches include developing programmes which enable the participation of those who might not otherwise be able to fulfil their potential, including students who are potentially excluded by their economic or social circumstances. Key examples are the development of extended degrees for mature students, and foundation degrees which provide vocational progression routes, of particular benefit to young people following vocational programmes at Level 3 in FE colleges. This vocational ethos permeates the whole of the university’s curriculum and is a key element in its education strategy.

240. Whilst De Montfort University’s retention plan has a focus on attendance monitoring and data analysis aimed at identifying at-risk students, extended induction systems and diagnostic assessment teaching are clearly intended to minimise the chances that such difficulties will occur. As well as ensuring an appropriate balance between formative and summative assessment, and recommending that first-year students receive personal feedback on their coursework, the new strategy will endorse the central role played by the personal tutoring system, and will promote the adoption of teaching styles and methods that facilitate the development of learner independence, especially during the first year of study.

241. Similarly, the TQEF evaluation highlights the way in which the WP agenda has been woven into the core activities of teaching and student support in HEIs. Of the 13 case studies undertaken as part of the evaluation, one post-92 university focused on the improvement of teaching and learning as a route to tackling poor retention. However, the evaluation concluded that any impact on progression and retention, due to changes in learning and teaching, could not be reliably isolated.

242. The Higher Education Academy supports institutions in their strategies and leads the development of research and evaluation to improve the quality of the student learning
experience. Many of the subject centres are actively involved in a variety of work on retention. For example, the engineering centre holds a number of resources on its database that academics may use. The subject dimension will consider how the curriculum and teaching and learning methods impact upon student success. A number of CETLs also have a particular focus on retention: an example is the Higher Education Learning Partnerships (HELP) CETL at the University of Plymouth.

Culture and mission

243. The influence of funding on institutional culture, mission, management and commitment is particularly significant. Many institutions have objectives 'to attract and retain' students, and look to support a diverse student body. Both the Universities UK report (2005) and Action on Access (2003) argue that embedding WP across institutional practice and policy is the key to supporting student success. The evidence from the reference group and the questionnaire is that WP funding is leading to the incorporation of WP objectives in the mission statements and management arrangements of HEIs. Some institutions now expect faculties and departments to justify their portion of the retention allocation as part of their reporting processes and business planning cycles. De Montfort University argues that WP is 'further enhanced through strategies targeting recruitment and retention, comprehensive student support and more flexible learning'. The University of Wolverhampton in its questionnaire response states that the strategic integration of WP and teaching and learning is the most important example of good practice it would recommend to others. The responses also suggest that this aspect of WP has been more influential in recent years (see University of Derby case study at the conclusion of this section). The University of Huddersfield stresses that it is important for institutions not to be complacent, and that more needs to be done on retention.

Outstanding issues

244. There are a number of key outstanding issues that need to be addressed.

Evaluation

245. Whilst the improving retention allocation only plays a small role in the larger investment in learning and teaching, funding of this sort appears to be sensible and seems to be working if we take the measure of effectiveness as student success. Indeed, examples of good practice interventions on retention could be multiplied. What is less clear is whether

6 However, the Universities UK report is based on a small sample. A large proportion (64 per cent) of the WP interventions examined are aimed at pre-entry and nearly a quarter are focused on access. Very few examples centre on retention and success (6 per cent) or employability (7 per cent). Numerically, the retention and success activities represented the lowest category, with 16 examples submitted. Half of those examples focused on learning and teaching and/or curriculum developments.
institutions are fully evaluating their own activities and interventions, and where case study results offer wider benefits. In terms of responses to the review, most of the strategic documents focused primarily on intentions, values and mission. However, a few did supply us with detailed action plans, SMART targets and evaluation plans, e.g. the University of Derby. This is not to say that other institutions do not have these, but a judgement can not be made on information currently held. The future NAO study may address this.

Costs

246. There are a number of related issues on costs not addressed above. The HEFCE review of its teaching funding method is addressing how the funding formula can better support student success through funding by credit (whether awarded or completed). This review is ongoing and it would be fair to say opinion across the sector is divided. Secondly, as part of its response to the review, one HEI suggested it was important to re-investigate WP costs, particularly costs of providing pedagogical and pastoral support to students, and to investigate whether the burden is higher where there is greater intake of non-traditional students. It is acknowledged that the full cost of supporting WP is not yet clear. Phase 2 of HEFCE’s TRAC for teaching exercise intends to focus on ascertaining the true costs of such activities.

Student success and the relationship with widening participation

247. The second point above raises a further outstanding issue – the relationship of WP targeting and student success activities. The evidence on who is most likely to withdraw shows an indirect link with socio-economic class, as explained earlier. However, the improving retention allocation is often used for activities which support the whole student body. In many cases such innovations are of benefit to students across the board, but it may be that students from non-traditional backgrounds would find such systems particularly beneficial. Similarly, the review of barriers to WP reports that some HEIs separate students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds to provide generic skills instruction to bring them up to the standard of others, but found no evidence of whether this is the most appropriate thing to do.

248. In addition, it may be desirable to further investigate whether, and to what extent, a range of attributes are associated with completion. As highlighted, the difficulty is that many of the things we are interested in, such as social class, parental income, entry through clearing, etc, are associated with prior qualifications, which themselves have a very strong association with completion. In order to be confident of really isolating these factors we need a full and accurate characterisation of entry qualifications which HESA data do not currently provide. However, many institutions do analyse the data by WP groupings (socio-economic groups, disability, ethnicity etc) and often target activities likewise. The risk of this approach is that retention continues to be seen as a WP problem, and there are clearly issues left to resolve.
Variable fees

249. There is a discussion to be had about the impact of the new student contribution and support arrangements which were introduced in 2006-07. This subject is expected to be taken up as part of the Government’s review in 2009.

Case Study: University of Derby

The University of Derby retention strategy has been in place since December 2003. The initial focus was on improving retention for programmes from which withdrawal was greatest, but the approach has become increasingly strategic and focused on supporting student achievement. This has been strengthened further in 2006-07 at faculty and university levels by combining TQEF and the retention allocation to maximise resources and impact. The anticipated outcomes are to:

- over five years, achieve a 1 per cent per annum reduction in the number of students withdrawing from the university. This represents 300 retained students in 2006-07
- have a coherent university strategy with commitment from faculties and student services. An established retention team provides a network for developing expertise, and retention strategies and investment plans are developed by each faculty
- have developed a framework for identifying students at risk of withdrawal, supported by appropriate technical infrastructure and a network of advice and guidance to support such students
- have effective means to target initiatives and evaluate performance, including statistics, performance indicators and benchmarks; improved understanding of the reasons for student withdrawal
- support a network of good practice and staff development programmes in each faculty
- provide extended support for students, including self-help systems, student mentoring and student advisers for finance, welfare and overseas students
- monitor and evaluate the retention strategy.

Strategic objectives for 2006-07:

- supporting students’ learning to increase student success whilst at the university and in their future career
- creating a sense of belonging to the university community
- establishing a student entitlement to holistic advice and guidance services for academic and personal matters
- monitoring the student experience and the impact of the retention strategy
- the development of staff, sharing good practice and communicating achievements in retention
- demonstrating value for money in the investment of funds for retention.
Progress and targets

The Retention Strategy Group has reviewed the early statistics which indicate that a greater emphasis on strategic, cross-faculty factors has a more significant impact on retention than programme-specific project work. Development of statistics will continue and be extended to include postgraduate programmes.

The group will continually monitor targets and measure achievement against milestones for each of the strategic objectives throughout 2007. Performance targets are be detailed for each of the faculty investment plans and projects. Update reports will be presented to the executive, academic board and WP strategy group.

All student liaison officers are reporting a marked increase in the number of students presenting for advice and guidance and the logging of contacts is improving understanding of the risks of withdrawal. Web surveys will be structured to provide regular feedback and information. The early warning systems will continue to be developed.

Progress continues to be made in developing mechanisms to identify students at risk of withdrawal. Attendance monitoring continues to operate and letters elicit a good response and problems/queries are often identified and dealt with earlier as a result. Data are being collected about use of facilities, handing in assessments, registering for deferrals etc. Induction is a major event for faculties and student services. Events have also been used effectively at other times of the year when student morale is low and risk of withdrawal increased.

Focused skills workshops and master classes continue to be successful in giving students the confidence to persevere and to refine the skills required to achieve. Student mentor schemes continue to be extended.

The staff ‘Retention & Achievement’ newsletter has prompted much positive feedback and provides a further mechanism for sharing good practice.
Widening opportunity: progression to HE for learners on ‘vocational’ pathways

Introduction

250. In this section we discuss new and ongoing commitments to widen opportunities in higher education and in particular to encourage progression for vocational learners. We discuss below work in progress on:

a. Lifelong Learning Networks.

b. Higher education provision in further education colleges.

c. 14-19 curriculum and Diplomas.

251. A priority for WP is the improvement of progression to HE of learners through ‘vocational’ routes. Such learners have a range of qualifications and work-based learning experiences which might include Levels 2 and 3 BTEC Diplomas and Certificates, AVCEs, NVQs and professional qualifications. However, they do not progress to HE at the same high rate as learners with A-level: 50 per cent of young people with vocational qualifications at Level 3 progress to higher education compared to a figure of around 90 per cent for those with traditional academic A-levels. Secondly, David Watson (2006) has drawn attention to how in the UK by comparison with EU countries we do less well in immediate post-compulsory education at engaging ‘the disengaged’. He identifies ‘the genuine WP challenge of getting more people to the matriculation starting gate’.

252. Progression to HE might be adversely affected because of a lack of opportunities – whether linked to geography, curriculum or mode of delivery within and among institutions, or lack of information about opportunities. Our policy to support Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) and HE delivered in further education colleges has the potential in the medium and longer term to make a difference. In addition, the approach we are taking to the developing 14-19 Diplomas has the potential to influence the response of the HE sector to these new qualifications, aimed at engaging young people who do not currently continue in education to 18 or 19.

Lifelong Learning Networks

253. LLNs were established in 2004 (see HEFCE Circular letter 12/2004). The focus of LLNs is on FE-HE partnership to improve progression for ‘vocational’ learners. In practice they are also concerned with issues of curriculum development, advice and guidance, learner support and re-engagement in the context of lifelong learning.

254. To date, £91 million (excluding additional student numbers, ASNs) has been allocated to fund 27 networks, spanning 113 HEIs and more than 260 FECs. Of these, 26 are fully funded and one has funding for a year. There are three LLNs with initial development
funding. Regional teams at HEFCE have worked closely with all LLNs to ensure that maximum opportunities are provided to engage learners in the (sub) regions or subjects areas of each network. There is at least one LLN in every region and by December 2006 we hope to have most geographical locations involved. If all the further proposals are developed into full business cases, this would increase national coverage to at least 30 networks, with 119 HEIs and over 285 FECs. A list of current LLNs is provided at the end of this section.

255. The process for the development of LLNs has been an innovative one. HEFCE presented the problem of vocational progression to the sector and invited proposals to address it. We had developed a set of core characteristics that we would expect to find in all LLNs (such as progression agreements), but there was no expectation that proposals would conform to a single model. LLNs were encouraged to enter into dialogue with HEFCE’s regional teams and the core LLN project team at an early stage to discuss the nature of the proposal and how it would seek to meet national and regional needs. Thus, LLNs will test different approaches to tackling the problems of both widening access to higher education and increasing the skill and knowledge levels of the population more broadly.

Progression agreements

256. One of the key tasks for LLNs will be to develop progression agreements (or accords) and to ensure that they operate effectively across the network. It is not anticipated that all progression agreements will be the same. However, we would expect LLNs to develop progression agreements that adhere to the following principles:

   a. They support learners’ legitimate expectation to progress from specific programmes or institutions to other programmes or institutions, and establish the commitment of institutions to meet those expectations.

   b. They are negotiated and make credit transfer a reality.

   c. They are developed on a network-wide basis (ratified by senior management), with all the institutions that form part of the LLN.

257. Achieving robust progression agreements will not be easy, and whilst we do not expect institutions to agree on common entry requirements in all respects, we do expect LLNs to move beyond broad support for new ‘pathways’ or ‘routes’ to specific commitments. We have emphasised guaranteed progression and this has been important in moving the debate beyond good intentions and ‘frameworks’ that involve no new commitment. We recognise that guaranteed progression does not mean that a specific individual is guaranteed a specific place on a specific programme. It means that the vocational learner is placed on the same footing as the learner with academic qualifications. Progression must be as certain and as predictable for one as for the other. LLNs are committed to putting the mechanisms in place that produce this outcome.
258. LLNs have been allocated ASN to help with this. For example, ASN may be used to create ‘head room’ on oversubscribed programmes so that applicants with HE level vocational learning can enter at level 4 or 5. Alternatively, they may be used to enable HEIs to develop new programmes more appropriate for learners wanting to enter HE with different skills and learning backgrounds.

Curriculum development

259. Curriculum development makes an important contribution to progression. A number of LLNs have identified barriers to progression in the differing demands made on learners in different sorts of learning programmes. They can be addressed in a number of ways, as evidenced by the different approaches taken by LLNs. The important task for LLNs is to put arrangements in place that enable learners to move around the system to engage in learning that best suits them.

260. This may be done through the development of new curricula, and through more effective curriculum alignment at the design stage. Another way would be through ‘bridging programmes’. Bridging provision is sometimes seen as placing new obstacles in the way of learners. It would not be necessary if there was better curriculum alignment at the design stage. However, gaps and curriculum mismatches may be a necessary price to pay for a curriculum that is genuinely diverse enough to meet different needs.

261. Some have adopted broad curriculum development initiatives, such as sharing a ‘bank’ of modules from which learners can construct complete qualifications. While the more ambitious schemes for a shared modular curriculum will be extremely difficult to realise, they may offer some lessons for the sector as a whole, and could create openings for a dialogue with employers about higher level learning that meets immediate employer needs while offering the learner an alternative route to HE qualifications.

262. Others have adopted more limited solutions, by developing Level 0 provision or stand-alone HE modules at Level 4 as a form of bridging. We argue that bridging provision should complement not substitute for provision at Level 3, and to this end networks have been encouraged to discuss these issues with local LSCs. Furthermore, LLNs have been advised that bridging provision of this sort should guarantee progression, and not simply strengthen an application that might subsequently be made.

Employer engagement

263. LLNs have an important contribution to make to policy and practice in employer engagement. The work of LLNs involves new opportunities for learners in the workplace. The Western Vocational LLN (Bath-Bristol), for example, is targeting work-based learners. All networks are developing foundation degrees, which a recent QAA report identified as attracting some students who might not otherwise enter higher education (QAA, 2005).
Through other curriculum initiatives, some LLNs are experimenting with shorter more focused provision that directly addresses the needs of learners in the workplace and exploring ways in which such learning can contribute in the longer term to a variety of HE qualifications. Networks developing the curriculum in this way have established working groups that aim to involve Sector Skills Councils and key employers in identifying appropriate provision, and thinking about issues of delivery. Examples where this is happening are Birmingham, Solihull and the Black Country LLN, South Yorkshire LLN and Thames Gateway LLN.

HE delivered in further education colleges

264. Our policy for higher education delivered in FECs has an occupational and employment focus, as much as a strong concern with increasing local access to HE for groups of learners from social backgrounds under-represented in HE overall. We regard HE delivered in FECs as making an important contribution to the creation of opportunities for higher level learning throughout life, whereby individuals move in and out of learning, and with learners moving around at the same level, or moving between levels as needs dictate.

265. Our review of higher education delivered in FECs has been prompted by a continuing concern that advanced occupational/vocational provision at Levels 3 and 4, the interface between FE and HE, is insufficiently developed in England in comparison with other countries, notably Germany and the USA.

266. We have also responded to the Secretary of State’s grant letter to the Chairman of HEFCE, dated January 2006. This asked the Council to lead ‘radical changes in the provision of HE’ through a strategy of growth which would incentivise provision wholly or partly designed, funded or provided by employers. This might include more opportunities for part-time study and short-cycle courses, curricula that are more responsive to learner and employer demand, and a more diverse range of providers, including reinforcement of the role of FECs in delivering HE.

267. The White Paper ‘Further education: raising skills, improving life chances’ (March 2006) proposes a changed role for HEFCE in funding and managing provision of HE in FECs, and will create a period of uncertainty for FECs and their partners. In that paper, the Government asked us to review the financial arrangements that underpin HE courses in FE colleges, including franchising arrangements. It also asked us to prioritise for funding allocations the development of ‘centres of HE excellence in FE colleges, focused on the twin themes of employability and widening participation’, and ‘to review the effectiveness of small pockets of HE delivered in FECs’. The outcome of our review has been the development of proposals in four areas: strategic development of HE in FECs, centres for HE excellence, and funding and relationships.
268. We have developed a statement of our view of the distinctive contribution that FECs can make to the overall provision of HE and we seek views on this.

**Strategic development of HE in FECs**

269. We are keen to ensure that all FECs that provide HE are taking a strategic approach to the provision offered, with due reference to the wider HE context in which they operate. This approach should be set out in a document that is made available to HEFCE. We have a number of expectations about HE delivered in FECs:

a. While we would not expect higher education provided in FECs to conform to a single model of provision, we believe that it should focus on the development of higher level skills and on engaging employers, closely and directly.

b. We expect that provision of HE in FECs will primarily focus on the needs of local and regional communities. This means that where FECs operate in relatively isolated communities, it is likely that the provision will be broader in scope than in more urban areas where there is likely to be a range of complementary HE provision. Notwithstanding the above focus, in niche curriculum areas, FECs may need to serve a wider and even national market, but we would not expect this to be the case in general.

c. This local and regional focus means that we expect that HE in FECs will attract learners who will be seeking progression opportunities from within their FE programmes, or, if entering HE directly, provision which is not available locally. It is likely, therefore, that these learners will be drawn from groups which are under-represented in HE overall.

d. We expect that HE in FECs will generally focus on dynamic, flexible ‘short-cycle’ provision (typically the equivalent of two years or less of full-time study) delivered in a variety of ways, including work-based learning.

e. This focus for HE in FECs should be set within the general expectation that all HE students should benefit from a high quality learning experience, supported by scholarship, that meets their needs and the needs of the economy and society, and which provides the opportunity of successful participation in HE to all who can benefit from it.

**Centres for HE excellence**

270. We envisage that these centres will:

a. Develop responsiveness to local and regional employer needs through strong links with employers, involving them in discussions on curriculum design and delivery.
b. Develop work-based learning programmes in partnership with employers.

c. Offer flexible professional, work-related and higher level skills programmes that have strong employability outcomes for learners.

d. Support development designed to improve students' learning experiences.

e. Widen participation in HE among under-represented groups of learners.

f. Encourage progression into and through HE.

g. Strengthen partnerships with HEIs and FECs.

h. Foster regional collaboration and the dissemination of good practices.

Funding and relationships

271. We propose to revise our funding strategy so that colleges with indirectly funded HE provision have a minimum period of security of funding and student numbers (not less than three years), and therefore more opportunity for long term investment. We would want to see codes of practice in place for all partnerships with an inclusive approach whereby member institutions collectively agree the purposes for which the consortium or partnership is established, the responsibilities of each member, including how fee levels will be set, and the structures and mechanisms for operating the arrangement and for its review.

Timetable

272. We have recently published our consultation on the principles of our policy (HEFCE 2006/48). Following analysis of the responses, we intend to have a further consultation on the mechanisms for implementation in 2007. We would expect to begin the implementation of our policy with the academic year 2007-08.

Diplomas

273. The extent to which HEIs have confidence in the Diplomas will be important to ensuring their success. Arguably, HEIs did not see Curriculum 2000 as ‘their’ reform, which had significant implications for how schools, colleges, parents and learners responded. Awareness of the nature of the qualifications and underpinning learning is only one aspect. An especially important way of ensuring the commitment of HE is to involve HEIs in the curriculum development of the Diplomas.

274. The White Paper on 14-19 Education and Skills (February, 2005) emphasises the importance of engaging young people who are not involved in the academic track of GCSEs
through to A-levels. This is because the major weakness of the 14-19 phase of education is low participation post-16.

275. The following data show the proportion of young people staying on at school post-16, which is an indicator of success at later stages of education. The proportion of 16 year-olds in full-time education was 77 per cent at the end of 2005. The corresponding figure for 17 year-olds was 63 per cent and for 18 year-olds 38 per cent. Participation in education and work-based learning by 16 year-olds was 89 per cent at the end of 2005. The corresponding figure for 17 year-olds was 76 per cent and for 18 year-olds 59 per cent. (Source: National Statistics, SFR, 21/2006.)

276. GCSEs provide an indicator of the number of students who might go on to take advanced level qualifications. There has been a 10 per cent increase in the number of young people with 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C over the last 10 years, with 54 per cent achieving this in 2004-05 (HEPI, March 2006). This increase has not been translated into an equivalent increase in numbers taking advanced level qualifications or entering HE. Just over 30 per cent of 18 year-olds achieved two or more advanced level qualifications in 2004-05 (HEPI, March 2006).

277. The 14-19 Implementation Plan aims to transform participation, so that by 2015 90 per cent of 17 year-olds are participating in education or work-based learning. To achieve this, the curriculum and qualification offer to young people must be one that they will find attractive. The reform programme fits in with the skills agenda, for which the key driver is competitiveness in a global context, so as to further the development of UK business productivity as highly-skilled and high added value rather than low costs-based. Another important driver for the 14-19 education reform is social inclusion.

278. GCSEs and A-levels are to be retained as the ‘cornerstone of the new system’, with Diplomas becoming a separate and distinctive pathway for young people interested in vocational learning. Through the national entitlement to Diplomas available at Levels 1 (foundation), 2 (GCSE), and 3 (advanced), and including academic and vocational material covering each occupational sector of the economy, it is anticipated that qualifications and curricula will be available that will increase the participation of young people staying in education in the post-compulsory phase thereby increasing their choices of employment and likelihood of progression to HE.

Supporting curriculum development 14-19, and in higher education

279. We see LLNs as an important route for HEIs to become involved in reviewing the HE curriculum and qualifications, leading into discussion of any corresponding changes that might be appropriate, so as to facilitate progression for learners that might be following the Diploma route to HE.
280. LLNs are already engaging in a number of ways. In South Yorkshire the local 14-19 strategy co-ordinators are involved in the LLN’s three occupational working groups, and have representation on the strategic management board. Sheffield Hallam University, the LLN lead institution, is represented on two of the Diploma development partnerships. The Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire LLN is working with the local 14-19 implementation groups as they draw up their local area prospectuses. Also, the University of Derby is engaged with local 14-19 groups through a pathfinder project on e-learning. In many others (Coventry, Herefordshire, Cheshire, Kent and Medway) explicit links have been made with the 14-19 curriculum in LLNs’ plans.

281. However, in order to ensure the delivery of our strategic objectives in this area, we can work with the LLN National Forum which can influence the development of LLNs to shape their responses to the 14-19 reforms regionally. The LLN National Forum organises an annual conference, facilitates the sharing of best practice and has established a network for addressing curriculum issues.

282. The design of the Diplomas in respect of knowledge and skills is down to Diploma Development Partnerships (DDPs) led by Sector Skills Councils (and involving an HE representative), while awarding bodies will develop the curriculum from the ‘architecture’ of learning outcomes agreed by DDPs. LLNs could become involved in DDPs, which would increase the opportunity for a more significant HE contribution to the final qualification. This is particularly important given the LLNs’ paramount interest in developing progression accords that genuinely widen access to higher education.

283. In particular, LLNs could become involved in the piloting/trialling of material for the first Diplomas in engineering, health and social care, ICT, creative and media, construction and the built environment, which are all curriculum/occupational areas that a number of LLNs are concerned with.

284. The White Paper on 14-19 Education and Skills (2005) might appear to reinforce the so-called academic/vocational divide in its route-based approach to 14-19 education – of A-levels or Diploma. However, we need to be aware that the Diplomas will combine academic and work-related elements, and they will be designed to enable learners to progress either into employment or higher education. Significantly they have not been named ‘vocational’. Taking account of this, we would expect the LLN progression agreements to establish guaranteed progression routes for holders of the Diplomas, and to enable holders of the Diplomas to have the widest possible progression opportunities. In turn this is likely to have a beneficial influence on encouraging the take-up of Diplomas.

285. Through the HE Engagement Project Board, of which HEFCE is a member, we will work with the DfES and Consolidate (a PR company) to influence the development of HE responses to the 14-19 reforms. Once we have more information about the Diplomas, Aimhigher Partnerships too can become more involved in raising awareness within the HE
sector. Aimhigher Partnerships could increase their involvement with the local 14-19 partnerships, for example by offering ‘tasters’ for schools/colleges introducing learners to the new curriculum and its links with HE.
### Summary of LLNs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>LLN</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>SDF Funding £m</th>
<th>ASNs 2006-07</th>
<th>ASNs 2007-08</th>
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<tr>
<td>NW</td>
<td>Cheshire and Warrington</td>
<td>Funded</td>
<td>3.990</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>355</td>
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<td>NW</td>
<td>Greater Merseyside and West Lancashire</td>
<td>Funded</td>
<td>1.900</td>
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<td>NW</td>
<td>Cumbria</td>
<td>Development funding awarded</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance</td>
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<td>NE</td>
<td>North East Higher Skills Network</td>
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<td>5.465</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>350</td>
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<td>YH</td>
<td>Higher York</td>
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<td>YH</td>
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<td>West Yorkshire</td>
<td>Development funding awarded</td>
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<tr>
<td>YH</td>
<td>South Yorkshire</td>
<td>Funded</td>
<td>3.146</td>
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<tr>
<td>WM</td>
<td>Birmingham, Black Country and Solihull</td>
<td>Funded*</td>
<td>3.899</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>WM</td>
<td>Moving on Up- Herefordshire and Worcestershire</td>
<td>Funded</td>
<td>3.703</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>WM</td>
<td>Coventry and Warwickshire</td>
<td>Funded</td>
<td>2.540</td>
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<td>Staffordshire, Shropshire, Stoke on Trent,</td>
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<td>100</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Telford and the Wrekin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>EM</td>
<td>LEAP AHEAD</td>
<td>Funded*</td>
<td>3.995</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>EM</td>
<td>Skills for Sustainable Communities</td>
<td>Funded</td>
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<td>ES</td>
<td>MOVE – East of England</td>
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<td>SE London</td>
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<td>Thames Gateway</td>
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<td>Linking London</td>
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<td>Sussex Learning Network</td>
<td>Funded</td>
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<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and</td>
<td>One year funding awarded</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Surrey</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Kent and Medway</td>
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<td>SE</td>
<td>Hampshire and the IOW</td>
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<td>SW</td>
<td>Western Vocational</td>
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<td>GL NAT</td>
<td>VETNET</td>
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<td>WM NAT</td>
<td>National Rural LLN</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL NAT</td>
<td>National Arts Learning Network</td>
<td>Funded</td>
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<td>TOTALS</td>
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<td><strong>91.226</strong></td>
<td><strong>1679</strong></td>
<td><strong>5250</strong></td>
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</table>

* LLNs are ‘funded’ subject to the agreement of a payment profile with HEFCE.
Conclusions

286. Because this report is primarily intended for information we do not give extensive recommendations. The report is a check on work-in-progress and provides an opportunity to consider how WP could be strengthened. We comment below on each of the main themes of the report and how they might be developed.

287. Sustaining the investment in WP, particularly in funding devoted to widening access:

- WP is a long-term commitment because the under-representation it addresses is deeply rooted in more general socio-economic disadvantage. The level of funding is important but the way a commitment is sustained over the long term is probably more important still.

288. Support for Aimhigher beyond 2008:

- we are aware that decisions on funding beyond 2008 depend on the outcomes of the Comprehensive Spending Review. We simply note the importance of stability and certainty for a partnership of the size and complexity of Aimhigher. Its value to institutions is amply illustrated in this report.

289. The commitment of institutions to WP, and the embedding of WP in the culture, mission and management of institutions is a high priority objective. We need to find ways to develop and nurture the commitment that has begun to take root:

- this report underlines the progress made over the past five years or so in winning the consent and then the support of HEIs to WP. Cultural change and the organisational, management, and leadership changes that go with it are critical.

290. An objective is to develop WP practice for Aimhigher and HEIs as a move away from discrete interventions to sustained, planned, predictable and integrated contributions to work with the wider learning community:

- there is evidence that this is already under way. HEFCE and the DfES might consider how the work undertaken with institutions could encourage this further.

291. Acknowledge the weakness in the evidence base for the impact of WP and take steps to rectify it:

- research projects can be used to explore some aspects of this and the relationship between discrete interventions at the level of institutions and Aimhigher partnerships and outcomes at the level of the sector and society as a whole. Support could be offered to engage partnerships and institutions in a more
structured evaluation of the immediate impact of the main forms of WP activity undertaken. Advice on targeting and associated issues could be part of this project which would aim to improve practice as well as better understand its impact.

292. Work with the NAO in its forthcoming study on retention, and follow through by working with the sector to identify good practice for which the sector itself takes responsibility:

- early conversations with the NAO indicate an interest in the idea that the best way to develop good practice is to involve the sector in identifying it and bringing it to the attention of others.

293. Continue support for initiatives to broaden WP opportunities, particularly for vocational learners through LLNs, HE-FE partnerships and involvement of HE in the developing 14-19 curriculum:

- this section of the report describes recent work-in-progress that could be strengthened in the next year or so, particularly in engaging the HE sector with the 14-19 curriculum.
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## List of abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASNs</td>
<td>Additional student numbers</td>
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<tr>
<td>CETL</td>
<td>Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DDP</td>
<td>Diploma Development Partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DfES</td>
<td>Department for Education and Skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>FE</td>
<td>Further education</td>
</tr>
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<td>FEC</td>
<td>Further education college</td>
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<td>HE</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
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<td>HEFCE</td>
<td>Higher Education Funding Council for England</td>
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<td>Higher education institution</td>
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<td>Higher Education Initial Participation Rate</td>
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<td>Lifelong Learning Network</td>
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<td>Learning and Skills Council</td>
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<td>National Audit Office</td>
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<td>National Statistics socio-economic classification</td>
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<td>Office for Fair Access</td>
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<td>Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education</td>
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<td>SENDA</td>
<td>Special Educational Needs and Disability Act</td>
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<td>Science, technology, engineering and mathematics</td>
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<td>Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund</td>
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<td>Transparent Approach to Costing</td>
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<td>Widening participation</td>
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