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Widening participation to higher education in the East of England:

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Key points

- 'Widening participation' covers a range of actions: appropriate evaluation can be very different for each, and as much widening participation activity is recent, there is not yet a great deal of evidence of outcomes on which to base an evaluation
- Activities which improve application to higher education include mentoring by current HE students and participation in summer schools, though summer schools are currently not always targeted at the most appropriate groups
- Non-traditional entry qualifications into higher education, particularly vocational qualifications, are misunderstood and undervalued, and this is a significant barrier to widening participation.
- Access courses are successful as a route into higher education and through to a qualification; participation rates are different in different regions and there are suggestions of unmet demand
- Part time higher education, flexible learning and distance learning are undervalued as routes through higher education
- Retention is a key issue only now being seriously addressed in the literature
- Student finance and student debt are major barriers to widening participation and confusion over the introduction of the new fee and grant system is a current and urgent concern

1. Introduction

The rationale for this present study arises out of the wide interest among higher education and further education institutions in the East of England to gain a better understanding of what 'widening participation' means to the region. Our focus is both collaborative and pragmatic: institutions are keen to know 'what works' in other higher education institutions (HEIs) in the region, and what has been evaluated and reported on nationally. Such knowledge can only benefit the region as a whole.

Widening participation to higher education is a recent and energetic policy drive from central government and many of the practical programmes to develop and effect these policy initiatives have only recently been introduced. The advent of the Excellence Challenge national programme in 2001 was as an initiative from the DfES to increase the number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education. This has moved through several manifestations to become Aimhigher in 2004, as a government funded initiative to operate on a national, regional and local basis. The introduction of foundation degrees in 2001 was as a means of opening up higher education to students with vocational skills and to develop a wider range of progression routes through to a first degree. Recent policy (DFES 2003a) has promoted the role of further education colleges in the provision of higher education. Recent legislation on

disability (for example the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act* 2001) has led to initiatives to improve provision for disabled students in higher education. There is increasing call for more flexible delivery of higher education, to involve work-based learning, and different modes of study such as distance learning and part time higher education. All this has meant that there have been significant recent developments at national, regional, area and institution level and that the whole picture on widening participation is rapidly evolving. We report on the evaluation of key initiatives.

We give an overview of recent national research focusing on evaluations of widening participation initiatives, and provide with this report an accompanying CD of key papers (that is, those which are available in electronic form). We also point to studies which give a much more comprehensive analysis of national and international perspectives on widening participation. The major national study is the HEFCE funded literature review on widening participation *Addressing the barriers to widening participation in higher education* carried out between 2004 and 2006 by a team led by Stephen Gorard of the University of York. The report was published in July 2006 and is available at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/; there is a separate database of references available on http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/educ/equity/barriers.htm. We include a copy of the report on the accompanying CD.

In the East of England, there is a regional focus on widening participation in higher education through partnerships such as the Association of Universities of the East of England, (AUEE); the Association of Colleges in the Eastern Region (ACER) and through the East of England Development Agency (EEDA). The initiative Aimhigher has a regional focus in Aimhigher East of England and there are Aimhigher partnerships in each county, with representation from the higher educations institutions and further education colleges in that county. The Open University in the East of England, with its regional office at Cambridge links into the national Open University, with the widening participation initiative which has been its remit since its creation.

We focus particularly on research and evaluation with an East of England perspective. Regional research and evaluation is not always widely reported or made available or is sometimes simply not known about by other institutions in the region. This so called 'grey' literature has the advantage of placing widening participation theory and action in local contexts and conditions, and so providing practitioners in widening participation with 'what works' in context which they know and understand.

1.1. What is widening participation?

Widening participation is an issue at the forefront of national and international debate on higher education. There are moves to increase the *number* of students in higher education, with the argument that in the developed world the knowledge society demands higher level skills in the labour force.

> High entry rates help to ensure the development and maintenance of a highly educated
> population and labour force. Completion of tertiary education is associated with better

access to employment and higher earnings. Rates of entry to …. tertiary education are an indication, in part, of the degree to which the population is acquiring higher level skills and knowledge valued by the labour market in knowledge societies. (OECD 2004: 144)

This focus on increasing numbers in higher education is reflected in national policy with the drive for a 50% participation rate of 18-30 year olds by 2010. As HEFCE (2003a) points out,

> Increased participation is not simply a matter of providing more places. We have to work to increase **demand** for HE, and to support improved progression from schools and further education into the sector. (HEFCE 2003a:11).

Nevertheless, it is not only a matter of increasing the number of participants in higher education. The main focus of widening participation is in broadening the appeal of higher education to include groups who previously have not been well represented. This includes older students, those having a second chance at higher education, greater numbers of students from ethnic minorities as well as greater numbers of students in higher education with disabilities and special needs. The Open University of course has been a major successful influence in this arena since 1971. However, there is continued concern (e.g. DfES, 2003b) that applicants from 'manual groups' are constrained in aspirations, so for example, those who have the necessary qualifications are inhibited from applying to universities deemed more exclusive such as Oxbridge or the Russell group of universities. 'New' students are concentrated in the post-1992 universities and in the further education (FE) sector (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003).

The statistical research reported on in Thomas *et. al.* (2005:14-32), giving comparisons in UK HEIs between the years 2000 and 2004, suggests that there are continued urgent concerns. These include,

- Socio-economic status (SES): applicants from the highest socio-economic groups (SEGs) have increased their share of applications to the more selective institutions.
- Age and gender: younger students are more likely to be from high SEGs, while older students are more likely to be from low SEGs.
- School type: there has been an increase in acceptances to HE by students from low SEGs from the independent sector. Those from a grammar or independent school are considerably overrepresented in successful applicants to Medicine and Dentistry courses and under-represented in Education.
- Subject groups:
  a) there are stark differences between the socio-economic status (SES) of acceptances between different subject areas.
  b) gender differences for Engineering and Physics courses are apparent across the age bands.
  c) there is over-representation of a number of ethnic groups in Medicine and Dentistry. There is a relative lack of interest amongst almost all ethnic groups in participation in Education courses.

<div align="right">(from Thomas et. al. 2005:14)</div>

Widening participation is an umbrella-like term. What action is needed to improve participation rates for, say, students with a specific special need is going to be very different to what is needed to attract more students from a particular ethnic minority. These quite different courses of action to increase the participation of various groups can operate in varying time frames with very different kinds of judgement of success. Widening participation can refer to improving *access* to higher education through for example alternative access routes or acceptance of a wider range of qualifications, or by encouraging a broader range of students to apply. But widening participation is also taken to mean developing provision *within* the university which encourages a broader range of students not just to apply and begin but to stay and to gain the qualification. Retention is a key issue which we address.

Supporting widening participation at all points of the student life-cycle
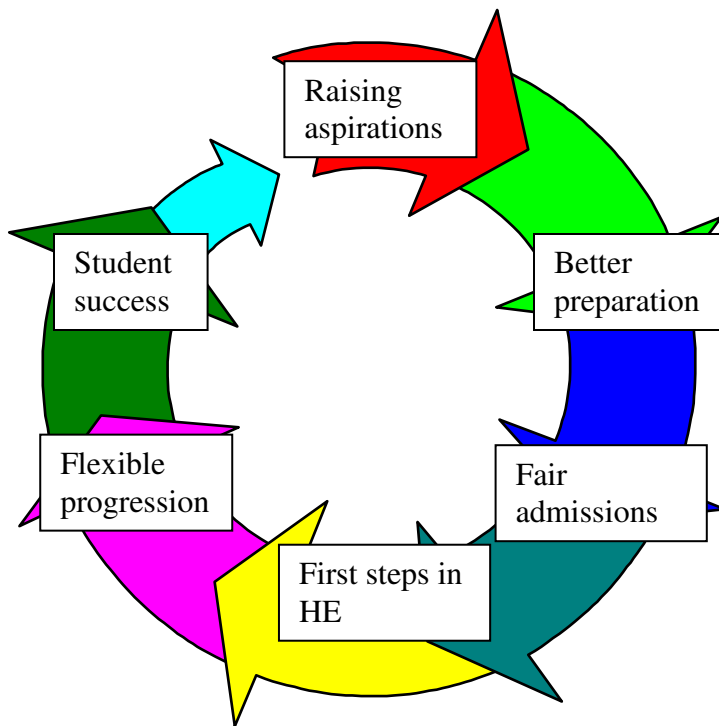
Source: HEFCE Strategic Plan 2003-2008 (HEFCE 2003a)

In an evaluation of HEFCE's widening participation strategy, commissioned by HEFCE itself, HECD/NCSR (2002) suggest that the difficulty of the task is that it is whole institutions, which in many cases "are a relatively loose collection of diverse units" which are being measured, with only recent data, and the data itself is not always suited to the task because small and detailed measurements are needed.

> Measuring success in widening participation is not simple. Firstly, what is to be measured is not always clear. At both national and institutional levels the key

target groups have changed over time, and attention has shifted from recruitment and admission to retention, on-course support, and access to equitable career opportunities (HECD/NCSR 2002: 4)

Provision can include improved pastoral provision. It can also include new and different kinds of course content, alternative pedagogies, new forms of assessment and the development of new modes of study (part time and e learning for example). Evaluation of the success of keeping students (as opposed to attracting them) necessarily involves analysis over the period of time it takes to gain the qualification. In our report, we also look briefly at what might be called the 'outcomes' of widening participation: that is what happens to this wider range of students when they gain their qualifications.

2. Issues raised by the widening participation agenda

In this report we are viewing widening participation pragmatically, with analysis of widening participation practices for an audience of higher education providers and practitioners. Nevertheless, in this section we review some of the pervading issues concerning the practices of widening participation, and the questions which are raised as to how successful they can be in reducing inequalities.

2.1 Choice

For Blanden and Machin (2004), the recent expansion in numbers in higher education has widened the gap in participation as the increase has disproportionately benefited those from relatively rich families. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003:598) suggest that "there has been little increase in the proportion of students from working class groups" and Archer and Hutchings (2000) state that differences in participation remain between similarly qualified working class and middle class groups. For Ball *et. al.* (2002), ethnic minority or working class students choose higher education courses or institutions for different reasons, for example the ethnic or social composition of the student body, whereas middle class students will more typically have instrumental, career-orientated reasons for their choice. Certain institutions are seen as elite, white, middle class and unfriendly so as to render them unthinkable choices for ethnic minority students, and Black students are concentrated in a small number of post-1992 universities (Archer and Hutchings 2000). Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) suggest that it is only towards the end of study that some students become aware of the 'hierarchy of institutions'.

Alternative routes into higher education institutions are often marginalised, categorising students who have entered via access courses as 'non-standard', and the discourses of selectivity and standardisation reinforce suggestions of separateness and inferiority (Burke 2002). Archer *et. al.* (2001) suggest that working class men see attending university as a route to becoming middle class: for some that is a norm to which they aspire but for other it is an inherent disadvantage of higher education and is to be resisted.

For Reay *et. al*. (2002:16), disadvantages for working class women are compounded by ethnicity and by parenthood, and the access process is "particularly difficult for women bringing up children on their own".

2.2 Risk

Getting accepted to university and participating in higher education are potentially about loss and risk, and the risks are significant (Archer and Hutchings 2000). They include the risk of academic failure, the concentration of working class students into new, second-tier universities and the resultant perceived lower value of their qualifications, and the relatively worse job prospects and lower salaries for working class graduates than their middle class counterparts (Archer and Hutchings 2000, Leathwood and O'Connell 2003, Brine and Waller 2004). The obstacles in widening participation are also seen to be understated in policy with an inherent, mistaken assumption that the United Kingdom is a meritocratic society and that opportunities are equally available to all.

> The dominant discourse of widening participation constructs access students as responsible citizens who have capitalised on their rights to learning, in order to improve themselves and their families. Structural inequalities such as class and gender are written out of this discourse, while lifelong learning opportunities are presented as available to all citizens who take the rational choice to gain credentials to improve their prospects within (waged) work. Unpaid work such as mothering is not recognised or validated as 'real work' and is only valued when supported by a breadwinner partner within a heterosexual relationship. Gender relations within the family are concealed. Educational participation is constructed as an instrumental action within the neo-liberal project of individual progress and success through market opportunities. Yet access students often reject these instrumental notions of education. (Burke 2002: 141)

2.3 Constructing identity

Students from non-traditional backgrounds have to construct learner identities, which can be problematic when in conflict with a cultural identity. Archer *et. a*l. (2001:435) point to resistance among working class men to higher education, and quote from interview the perceived stereotype of the male HE student as a 'bookish/socially inept male' and not someone to aspire to be.

> There's a general stereotype isn't there? The Tefal man with a big head. Someone who needs glasses. (Steve, 24, white English builder)

They also report resistance along lines of race, with Muslim men concerned about the dangers of drinking and drug-taking at university, and Black Caribbean men concerned about higher education participation being seen as 'uncool'.

> Many students enter Access programmes knowingly risking academic failure. Throughout the course they continually (re)construct their fragile learner identities. Early in the year, whilst their student identity is still new, they must consider and apply to university: taking further risks of

academic failure, both short-term through possible rejection, and longer-term, during university study. These (re)constructions do not occur solely within the educational site, but are exaggerated or ameliorated by relationships with family, friends and partners. (Brine and Waller 2004:103)

There are suggestions (for example Bowl 2001) that for non-traditional students entering higher education (including mature students, women with young families, lone parents, and students from ethnic minorities), the process of study is to be endured rather than enjoyed, and for Leathwood and O'Connell (2003:610), a dominant theme on graduation is that of having survived the experience.

3. Routes into (and barriers to) higher education

Taking into account the concerns set out in the previous section about the widening participation agenda, in this section we report from national and regional research on what encourages and what discourages under-represented groups to enter higher education.

3.1 Social Class

Connor and Dewson (2001) report on the decisions affecting participation by 'lower social class groups' from a research project using samples of students from 14 HE institutions in England and Wales, and 20 colleges and schools involving 223 potential students, 1600 current students and 112 'non-HE entrants'. The 'encouraging factors' were that there is a general emphasis on expected beneficial outcomes (especially among those with vocational qualifications, some ethnic minorities and older students) and a belief that there will be a better job at the end of it. The 'discouraging factors' were that they wanted to start earning money and become independent, or that the job they had decided on did not need an HE qualification. There was also fear of the expense of studying and of getting into debt. Other concerns range from the practical ones of arranging childcare to a lack of confidence in being able to achieve at an HE level. Connor and Dewson (2001) make clear recommendations that:

- The benefits of HE should be clearly communicated to potential students from lower socio-economic groups
- Mentoring from current students should be widespread
- There should be much more, clearer and more timely information on student finance

Action on Access (2005a) concurs with the view of Connor and Dewson (2001) on class barriers to participation and states that though the social class V participation rate has more than doubled since 1991-92, increases in participation by all have left poorer classes filling the same share of the student population. As they say, added to this, applicants from poorer social classes are less likely than average to succeed in converting their

applications to accepted offers. In research in a multi ethnic neighbourhood "of significant poverty and social disadvantage" in Bradford, Lall *et. al.* (2003) also found that the fear of getting debt was a major barrier to entry to higher education.

3.2 Vocational qualifications

For Gorard *et. al.* (2006: 37), the admissions process in terms of the 'threshold level' of entry requirements is "at least neutral or even favours those from less elevated backgrounds", but there are actual constraints on their choice of institution and the choice of course. As well,

> There is a lack of awareness amongst HE applicants of admissions practice, particularly in relation to the variance between published entry requirements and those that may be accepted later. Students entering HE have to learn to 'play the game', which is more of an adjustment for non-traditional students, particularly those entering with vocational qualifications

In a national study which looks at young people with Level 3 (L3) vocational qualifications (mainly BTEC nationals and AVCEs) and their progression to full-time degree study, Connor *et. al.* (2006) found continued prejudice and lack of awareness of vocational qualifications. There is uneven distribution of L3 vocationally qualified entrants to degree courses, from very small percentages at the Russell group of universities to 30% at HE/FE colleges. Recommendations are for the development of more positive attitudes among HE staff to develop consensus about the parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications; for HEIs to use the UCAS tariff point system in a less simplistic way and to examine the effect of the trend of rising A Level scores on tariff equivalences.; to give more consideration to how young people with only 12 units at L3 (e.g. AVCE double) should be treated in admissions, and for more research on what restrictions there are for some in this category to gaining access to degree courses of their choice.

In a regional report on vocational and occupational progression, ACER (2005:27) also highlights the gaps in provision for progression through to higher education.

> There is a perceived lack of regional and national activity or projects which promote progression to higher education for those already in employment or following an advanced modern apprenticeship… and not much evidence of bridging or preparatory modules to prepare these students for higher education.

Both ACER (2005) and Chelbi (2005) drawing on research conducted within the East of England region, report on the lack of clarity in the language used to describe further and higher education qualifications. Chelbi (2005: 36) reports on the "confusing and unhelpful terminology" and that "levels of knowledge and understanding about Higher Education in general and Foundation degrees (Fds) in particular are low amongst both employers and students and act as a barrier to informed choice". ACER (2005: 27) reports,

This research has also thrown up the need for a common term for "higher education", particularly in relation to vocational areas. Some of those approached assumed that higher education includes only prescribed under and post graduate qualifications at levels 5 -8. Others included provision at NVQ4 and/or professional body membership. Non-prescribed HE is a term used to describe higher level vocational qualifications at level 4 and above in FE. It is funded by the LSC, while 'prescribed' HE is funded by HEFCE. Most FE colleges offer non-prescribed HE and see it as an important part of their vocational offer. Of the 600 qualifications available as non-prescribed HE in FE, 30% are NVQs and much of the rest are professional body qualifications.

Connor *et. al.* (2006) in their national study call for improvements to be made in both UCAS and HESA data provision on different entry qualifications, to give a more accurate picture to enable the monitoring of admissions and progression more effectively, and point out that there have been repeated calls from previous studies for this kind of improvement. They also recommend HEIs exchanging views and practices on delivering courses where young people are recruited with different types of qualifications and pre-HE educational experiences, to include examples of the use of different teaching and assessment methods, 'levelling up' modules, personal tutor support and specialist subject support. ACER (2005) similarly highlights the continued lack of robust regional longitudinal data, particularly on 'hard to reach learners', for example the Level 3 students in the region who are not progressing to higher education.

3.3 Access courses

According to Gorard *et. al.* (2006:48), the evidence of the success of Access courses is patchy as there are other barriers to access for these students besides the lack of formal qualifications, evaluation is based on a 'positive student experience' rather than on entry to HE and research is almost always of small scale projects. However a subsequent large-scale report, HEFCE (2006), evaluates the success of Access courses and reports that one in four first-time mature entrants to full-time degree programmes still enter via an access course. Reporting on the 21,716 student cohort who took Access courses in 1998/99, 39% go onto a degree or other undergraduate programme, often near where they live (within 30 minutes drive time). Most go onto full-time courses in post-1992 universities and two thirds graduate within five years. They study a wide range of subjects, with subjects allied to medicine (22%), social studies (12 %), art and design (10%), and maths and computer science (8%) accounting for half the programmes. Six months after graduating, of those who are in employment, 78% are in graduate jobs. Two thirds of Access course students are female and the typical access student is in her late twenties or early thirties. 22% are from an ethnic minority. There are varying participation rates in different regions. For example, almost one third of access students are at institutions in the London region and this is a higher rate of participation, even given the concentration of population.

The following table shows participation rates by region for both standard length and extended length Access courses, and in the final column, the participation rates of young people (20-29 years) in HE in that region.

Access Students by Region (1998/99 cohort)

Region	Standard		Extended		Total		Population (20-29)[8]	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number (000s)	%
South East	1,945	10%	310	12%	2,255	10%	945	15%
South West	1,553	8%	179	7%	1,732	8%	549	9%
London	6,258	33%	221	9%	6,479	30%	1,257	20%
East of England	944	5%	379	15%	1,323	6%	622	10%
East Midlands	686	4%	252	10%	938	4%	506	8%
West Midlands	1,467	8%	592	23%	2,059	9%	641	10%
Yorkshire/Humberside	1,451	8%	356	14%	1,807	8%	625	10%
North East	1,499	8%	86	3%	1,585	7%	308	5%
North West	3,393	18%	145	6%	3,538	16%	824	13%
Total	19,196	100%	2,520	100%	21,716	100%	6,276	100%

(source HEFCE 2006:13)

HEFCE (2006) say that the differing levels of provision by region indicate that there may be unmet demand, but given the lack of robust evidence for this, the report suggests it is unwise to set national target figures for growth; rather that "individual colleges should be in a position to be able to test their local markets and develop programmes sometimes in conjunction with Aimhigher partnerships " (HEFCE 2006: 39).

We feel that the relatively low total numbers (1,323) and low participation rate (6% of the national total of Access students) in the East of England must be cause for concern.

3.4 Participation rates

Participation rates in higher education (HEFCE 2005a) are reported in *Young participation in higher education* (available at www.hefce.ac.uk/publications). The Polar Data, available on the HEFCE website under "widening participation", consist of maps and data sets that show how the participation of young people varies according to where they live. www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/polar/.

Ireland and O'Donnell (2004) report on a longitudinal study which surveyed Year 11 students from schools in the Excellence in Cities programme in Spring 2001 and then surveyed them again in Autumn 2003, two years after they finished compulsory education. 8,800 took part in the initial survey and 1,248 of them in the follow up survey. The research compares their intentions in Year 11, with what actually happens to them in the following two years. (None of them were involved in Excellence Challenge or

Aimhigher activities in their compulsory schooling as they completed their Year 11 before introduction of the policy though those who stayed on at school may have participated in Year 12 and Year 13). The surveys showed that most made positive transitions post 16 but that many felt that they would have liked more guidance in Year 11 and that a sizable proportion were unsure that they has made the right choice. 89% had gone on after Year 11 into full time school or some other kind of training (such as a Modern Apprenticeship) and these who had made a 'positive transition' were more optimistic about higher education, feeling that they would enjoy it and it would be worthwhile. 70% of those surveyed in 2003 were going or planning to go to university. Results of the survey suggest that those who made a 'negative transition' would have liked more help on preparing for examinations and would have liked more support. For all students, Ireland and O'Donnell recommend better careers and guidance programme to run alongside the attainment- and aspiration-raising activities that are part of the EiC and Aimhigher policies.

Fox *et. al.* (2000) report on participation patterns in higher education among 18-25 year olds in Cambridgeshire, Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk. Their aim was to identify 'hot' and 'cold' spots at ward level in the four counties and to use the information to inform widening participation policy and activities. Hot spots were defined as "any local government district where the UCAS Year 1 acceptance rate for 18-25 year olds was above the national average" (in this case 5.35%) and cold spots as "any local government district where the UCAS Year 1 acceptance rate for 18-25 year olds was below the computed combined regional average for the four counties" (4.18%). The data collected revealed that out of thirty four districts, two districts, Barbergh and mid-Suffolk (Suffolk) were 'hot', and thirteen districts, Fenland, (Cambridgeshire) Basildon, Tendring, Harlow, Southend on Sea, Thurrock, Colchester, (Essex), Great Yarmouth, North Norfolk, Breckland, Kings Lynn and West Norfolk and Norwich (Norfolk) and Forest Heath (Suffolk) were cold spots. There is not necessarily a correlation between rurality and low participation: the two hot spots are both rural. Barriers to participation include confusion over the messages from HEIs, and each HEI giving different information. Brief encounters with HEIs through one-off visits were not seen as helpful. Part time study and distance learning are not well recognised as solutions. The projects planned as a result of the evaluation included targeting the cold spots, and an undergraduate mentoring scheme

A study by O'Hanlon *et. al.* on what can be done to improve the chances of young people achieving their potential in rural Norfolk found that poor rural populations are being overlooked in the drive to widen participation. Information on career choice is needed to be built into the curriculum from a much earlier age especially for boys, as at present it only occurred in the last two years of school and was linked to economic necessity rather than long term aspirations. It also found that more resources are needed to convince poor rural working class populations that HE is attainable and worth the risk and found that for this population, higher education is seen as exceptional

A study by Watts and Bridges (2004) questioned the assumption that low aspirations and achievements act as barriers to the government's widening participation agenda. Research was conducted with fifteen young people and their peers at three sites across the

East of England: the Arbury Estate in Cambridge, Luton and North Norfolk. The research found that for the young people, vocational forms of post-16, such as NVQs and Modern Apprenticeships, were often more useful in achieving their goals and higher education was not necessary to what they wanted to achieve. Although some indicated they might consider higher education if its vocational and personal relevance could be demonstrated, they were unaware of undergraduate-level vocational qualifications such as the NVQ Level 4. They also viewed higher education as a full-time pursuit, and were unaware of part time and distance learning options and potential help with funding.

3.5 The work of Aimhigher

In a national evaluation of Aimhigher which focuses on aspirations to higher education, Morris and Rutt (2005) were broadly positive, finding that for the young people involved, there was,

- A greater likelihood of a successful transition at 16
- Positive attitudes to higher education
- A greater likelihood of stating an intention to go to university.

but that for some, the "activities were insufficient to overcome barriers to aspiring to a university education that appeared to result from a lack of motivation on their post-16 course and a concern about incurring debt". Morris and Rutt (2005:iii)

Using samples from the 2000/2001 and 2001/02 Year 11 cohorts, 2,318 young people from the 2000/01 Year 11 cohort responded to a follow-up survey a year later (a 49% response), while in spring 2002/03 there were 1,854 respondents (a 45% response) from the 2001/02 Year 11. A further sub-set of this data (1,248 young people) from the 2000-2001 Year 11 responded to a further survey in 2003, when they were in Year 13 or equivalent. A limitation of this longitudinal study is that these who responded to the follow-up surveys "were more likely to be white, to be female, to have few socio-economic problems, to be identified as gifted and talented as part of the EiC programme and to be higher attaining than the EiC or EAZ non-respondents" (Morris and Rutt 2005: ii). A further limitation is that the focus of Aimhigher on compulsory school age students means that other influences during Year 12 and Year 13 on aspirations to HE can be hard to disentangle.

The two cohorts were similar to each other in terms of their aspirations to follow a higher education course. The most influential interventions appeared to include in-school discussions about HE, the opportunity to visit campuses, and lessons on transition skills, for example in application writing. Other important factors which affected aspirations included how interesting and valuable they found their post-16 course, attendance at a summer school and access to Personal Advisers to discuss higher education. Interestingly, those most likely to express 'positive attitudes' to higher education were those who had gone to an 11-16 school and then gone on to further education college, though students in school sixth forms were more likely to have 'stated an intention' towards higher education than those who attended an FE college.

However Morris and Golden (2005) in a related report on the national evaluation of Aimhigher, report that Aimhigher activities have not had a significantly different impact on young people from ethnic minorities, with the possible exception of improved GCSE scores for Black Africans, and that some ethnic minorities (for example Indian and Bangladeshi students) are underrepresented in Aimhigher activities. Morris and Golden (2005:v) also report that for families with no history of higher education there is as yet "no conclusive statistical evidence that such interventions have then led to increased aspirations to enter higher education"

Widening participation activities in the East of England include summer schools organised by Aimhigher at universities across the region: for example at the University of East Anglia (UEA), University of Cambridge, University of Essex, University of Luton, University of Hertfordshire, Norwich School of Art and Design and Writtle College. There are example of summer schools for mature learners and FE college students (University of Cambridge). There are schemes such as the mentoring of potential applicants, for example at UEA, and university of Essex. There are initiatives to encourage underepresented minorities: for example the University of Cambridge has GEEMA – the Group to Encourage Ethnic Minority Applications, and the University of Hertfordshire has an Equality and Diversity Unit website with links to information on issues of gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The webpage on the University of Hertfordshire also links to statistics on monitoring the admissions and progression of ethnic minorities. The University of Luton runs a 'passport to academic life' (PAL) where unemployed local people over the age of 25 study a choice of subjects over two semesters, to give them experience of academic study and a taste of what course they might like to pursue in higher education. Aimhigher East of England has also created a website called Move Up, giving advice and guidance on post 16 courses and progression routes across the region.

Regionally, McLinden (2003) reports on the longitudinal study of 'Children into University' a three day thematic visit each year for Years 8-13, with two days spent at an FE college and the third a visit to an HEI. By 2004, this was running in 23 schools in the East of England in seven different locations (Cambridge, Forest Heath, Fenland, Lowestoft, Tendring, Thurrock and West Norfolk). The scheme is cumulative, with students participating each year starting in Year 8, visiting a different FE college and HEI each time, and the visit involves the parents/carer in the third day each time. Over the period of 4C funding 2000-2002, the cumulative total of students involved was 936, and 621 parents/carers for the same period. Results would appear to be mixed. Of the 219 Year 8 students who participated in the research in the first phase of the research, only 62 were taking part in the study by 2003. Students saw themselves as more confident learners, with 65% seeing themselves as going to university, but "they remained unclear on availability of higher-level study outside of a traditional University setting and entry requirements" (2003:9). They still had misconceptions, which were resistant to change.

Gorard *et. al.* (2006:32), in their national review on widening participation, report on this East of England scheme and concur that the involvement of parents, particularly mothers is important as "the main influence on young people's decision making" (a view of

maternal influence supported by David *et. al.* (2002)). Gorard *et. al.* (2006) conclude that one of the main judgements of McLinden's East of England study is that "students were focused on post-16 as opposed to post-18 decisions. (2006: 31), echoing Morris and Rutt (2005), that causal links are hard to establish between Aimhigher activities in Years 9-11 and decisions about HE in at least Year 13 (or equivalent).

Morris and Golden (2005), in their national evaluation of Aimhigher state that residential schools and structured campus visits/open days are activities considered to be particularly effective,

> The continued demand (and in some areas, growing demand) for places on summer schools and residential courses was heralded by a number of partnership coordinators as a signal that the strategy was playing an important part in helping young people to understand university life and to aspire to following a course in higher education. Such activities, however, were thought to be more effective when they were planned jointly by school, college and university staff and less effective where the pedagogical style adopted by higher education staff was felt to be inappropriate to the target audience; lectures were thought to be less effective than interactive, subject-based activities.

In the East of England, Aimhigher commissioned its own evaluation of its summer school programme of 2004, which is reported on in Chakravorty (2005). In the programme, as it states (p,1)

"Year 10, 11 and 12 students attended residential or non-residential summer schools based at higher education institutions, attended academic lectures, talks on career advice, making application to universities, student finance and graduate job opportunities, and participated in debates, group discussions and workshops. They also met with the University staff and students and took part in social events".

710 students took part overall and all the regional HEIs (with the exception of Cranfield University and Norwich School of Art and Design) took part. The attendees were 39% were from Year 10, 44% from Year 11 and 18% from Year 12. 67% of the participants were female and 33% were male. 81% were from white ethnic groups and 19% from minority ethnic groups.

The schools are for 'underrepresented groups' in HE with the following basis for selection:

- They are capable of achieving at least the minimum entry qualification for HE (at A-level or equivalent), but their family or educational background is such that they might not apply to higher education, or might consider only a limited range of subjects;
- They are in year 10, 11 and 12.
- They are, or may become, disaffected.

One strand of the evaluation was to assess whether in fact the targeted groups were being recruited and the other was to assess the impact of the summer school on the students'

aspirations. The evaluation showed limited success in reaching the target group of 'students with no previous family experience of higher education'. In fact, 28% came from families where one or both parents had experience of HE, 24% had siblings with HE experience and 9% had both sibling and parental experience of HE. On the other hand, there was evidence of a greater proportion of ethnic minority young people (12%) than is the percentage of ethnic minority 15-17 year old in the East of England (7%), suggesting "affirmative action" (2005:8). Similarly, there was greater than average representation from underrepresented socioeconomic groups, with 28% of students with fathers from lower managerial and professional backgrounds; 24% from lower supervisory and craft related occupations; 14% with routine occupations and 12% with intermediate occupations. Overall, the summer schools were evaluated as having had an impact on attitudes to higher education and increasing knowledge. The impact was greater on younger age groups, on females and on those with parents without experience of higher education. However, it made no difference to students' attitudes to their chances of getting into higher education, or on its economic benefits, or on whether they would fit in. In fact, the change in those who saw entry as more difficult after the summer school than before was statistically highly significant. Money, in terms of the fear of financial hardship, was the most cited barrier to participation.

The recommendations of the Chakravorty (2005) evaluation include: limiting recruitment to the target groups; making summer school more appealing to male students; collecting student background data consistently for monitoring purposes; raising awareness of the economic benefits of higher education, raising awareness of the different progression routes (for example work based learning and through further education as well as via university); and the possibility of different study modes (part time, distance, flexible and modular learning for example).

3.6 Access for ethnic minorities

Action on Access (2005a) reports that ethnic minorities are a significant proportion of undergraduates, at present comprising 15% of all students. However, the detailed picture is more complex, and rates of participation vary between different minority ethnic groups and kinds of higher education institution. Some groups, such as Indian, Chinese, African and Asian Other, are much better represented than others. Some groups – Black Other, Pakistani and Bangladeshi are under-represented compared to their position in the young population. Proportionally, there are more minority ethnic students in the post-1992 universities, in more vocationally and professionally oriented subjects and in Greater London.

Research (e.g. Connor *et. al*. 2004, Thomas *et. al.* 2005) shows that people from ethnic minorities are more likely to take higher education qualifications than White people. According to Connor *et. al.* (2004), not only is the entry rate higher for minority ethnic groups than the average, they represent a higher proportion of graduates compared to their share of the working population. However, their representation varies across universities, subjects, regions, and courses. Different ethnicities have very different

profiles in terms of gender balance, average age at entry, highest entry qualification, socio-economic class profile and so on. While a range of factors affect entry into higher education, expectations of the benefits of higher education are a 'driver' for minority ethnic students, especially most Asian groups. Nevertheless, though their HE initial participation rates are higher, all minority ethnic groups do not do as well in degree performance as White students on average. Even when background and other variables known to affect class of degree are taken account of, they still do less well overall. All minority ethnic groups have higher initial unemployment levels than White graduates. They also do less well in the labour market, initially at least, than White graduates and face more problems securing their preferred choice of jobs or careers. Connor *et. al.* (2004) suggest that there are particular problems facing refugees and asylum seekers in access to higher education and point to this as an under-researched area.

Watts and Bridges (2005) consider the widening participation agenda in the East of England from the viewpoint of asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers. There is a regional strategy for employment, skills and lifelong learning, the Regional Refugee Employment, Skills and Lifelong Learning Strategy, and Watts and Bridges (2005) recommend specific widening participation strategies targeted at asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers, some of whom will be seeking to requalify or to bridge gaps in their competences. As Watts and Bridges (2005) point out, at present across the region,

- Most universities and other higher education institutions in the East of England have refugees and/or asylum seekers registered as students on foundation, honours and post-graduate courses. There is no data on migrant worker students.
- None of the regional HEIs offer specific courses for revalidating the existing qualifications of refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers.
- Volunteering opportunities in the regional HEIs tend to be ad hoc and enjoy limited success. There are no mentoring schemes.
- Most university libraries are accessible to refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers as members of the public but this is not widely known.

4. The provision of alternative routes through higher education

In this section of the report, we report on evaluations of the higher education offered through alternatives to the typical route via A Levels into a full-time first degree course. We include the articulation of progression routes from access courses into undergraduate education and to first degree courses. We include national and regional evaluations of foundation degrees here, and look generally, both nationally and regionally, at calls for more employer involvement, in work-based learning. We look at national and regional research on part time higher education and distance and e learning.

As HEFCE (2003a) report in their strategic plan,

In our review of funding for teaching, we are examining our funding for part-time and continuing education, funding for completed modules, and funding for flexible modes of delivery (including open and work-based learning). We are ready to consider changing our funding method accordingly. We intend to introduce pilots for a '2+' scheme of progression programmes within and between institutions to enhance progression opportunities, and to work on extended-year schemes and credit accumulation. (HEFCE 2003a: 13)

4.1 The relationship between FECs and HEIs

Higher level study is not the exclusive preserve of the universities, and further education colleges provide undergraduate level courses as well as access routes into university. Further education colleges have a vocational route, through GNVQs into undergraduate level HNC and HND, besides the route through access courses. Further education colleges have historic links with the 'new' universities in their previous incarnation as polytechnics, and these links have been strengthened and developed through higher education courses being offered at FE colleges which are validated by the partner university. While such courses include first degrees such as B.A. and B.Sc degrees, and some postgraduate courses, it is the provision of foundation degrees and the related introduction of flexible and work-based learning which are seen as key to widening participation.

A strategy announced in the White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* in 2003 (DfES 2003a) is that an increasing amount of higher education, particularly at undergraduate level is to be provided by the further education colleges, HEFCE (2004) reports on the strategic planning to reduce the burden of administration on mixed economy institutions (MEIs), (which are further education colleges with substantial levels of higher education provision), in the light of the plan outlined in the 2003 White Paper. There are proposals for a single funding system. HEFCE (2004:3) points to the complexity of current arrangements for higher education that is taught in FE colleges, because of the number and types of collaboration, and says that there is need for greater transparency, particularly given that a significant proportion of the increase in higher education students by 2010 will be studying at FECs.

> Some FECs cannot afford the necessary infrastructure to support multiple partnerships. In addition the varying practices and procedures of different HEIs create divisions and different experiences for the HE staff and student populations within a single college – in terms of what is offered and expected, and in the demands made on them. (HEFCE 2004: 14)

The complexity is set to increase with the introduction of the new funding arrangements in 2006, with each HEI making individual decisions about levels of 'top up fees' and, more significantly, different criteria for bursaries. At an FE college which has multiple partnerships, there may be very different financial arrangements for students on different higher education courses, based on which HEI is the partner for the course.

HEFCE (2003b) gives an evaluation of the success of the Development Funding to FE Colleges, (£27.9 million between 1999-2004) 'specifically to raise the quality and standards of HE learning and teaching'. A qualitative survey by the University of Warwick suggests that much of this funding was spent on ICT resources often for specialist equipment or industry standard resources. A key factor for widening participation is the assumption that the FE college experience is not the same as the university one: that levels of staff expertise, a lack of research culture in the FE college, (or of little research done to establish the extent of a research culture), the major focus on vocational courses and even the hours of work expected of staff all point to a different experience for the student.

This report (HEFCE 2003b:46)) also sets out a framework for the evaluation of the subsequent round of funding and suggests that understanding and evaluation of the 'student life cycle' (illustrated in the Figure given in the Introduction to this report) is key to widening participation, so that evaluating in terms of the following key points along the way will provide feedback on success at important stages of the cycle.

- information, advice and guidance on HE opportunities, studying at HE level, HE progression routes, and employment opportunities
- a fair and transparent admissions process
- academic support in reaching the required academic standards and the skills necessary to achieve these
- ICT facilities comparable to those available in industry and HEIs
- study facilities appropriate to the purpose
- strong links with industrial, professional or academic worlds beyond the college, whether in the workplace or the HEI

A study by KPMG/LLP (2003) of higher education in further education colleges provides an evaluation of the provision, particularly of FECs which have merged with HEIs, of FE institutions which have transferred to HE status and of mixed economy FE colleges which have substantial levels of HE provision (though this evaluation is based on case study rather than statistical analysis). In terms of widening participation, they report some initial resistance from students to studying a foundation degree at the FEC rather than at the main university campus. However, retention and achievement rates have improved in general. The majority of FECs are mixed economy, often with the multiple relationships with HEIs already mentioned. The study emphasises the following points, all important for widening participation

- There are good rates of progression from FE to HE within ME colleges and, for marketing purposes, the colleges emphasise the potential for progression through different levels of FE and into HE within the same institution.
- ME colleges will encourage certain students (who may otherwise drop out of education) to progress to higher education. However, the lack of HEI status and the lack of dedicated HE facilities will always be a barrier to recruiting other classes of student who will aspire to a HEI experience. Where the college operates

in close proximity to a HEI, it must aim to distinguish itself from the HEI in the eyes of students.

- Many ME colleges now undertake a significant amount of provision for 14-16 year olds and this level of provision may increase, given the growing national emphasis on 14-19 within Success for All. Thus there may be strategic problems in providing large scale HE provision at the same time as providing an increasing range of provision to 14-16 year old students. There may be problems in meeting the needs and expectations of HE students within a wider environment (e.g. access to licensed bar facilities) among a population of much younger students.

(KPMG/LLP 2003)

HEFCE (2003b 33-35) helps to provide a regional picture, by including a case study of the collaboration between Suffolk College and UEA. The suggestion is that as the college serves local needs in Ipswich without close geographical competition from any other HEI, it was well placed to provide HE courses. The fact that Suffolk chose to develop a relationship with one HEI rather than the more frequent mixed economy model discussed above is seen as advantageous, with the two institutions able to develop a strategic plan for HE provision across a wide region. The increasing amount of devolution to the college as a result of the 'robust' relationship which has developed has had important implications for widening participation, providing students in Suffolk with HE courses which would otherwise not be locally available, and with the attraction of a 'high status ' award from UEA.

The report by Association of Colleges in the Eastern Region (ACER 2005) reminds us that further education colleges are a significant provider of higher education in the region. In 2002-03, of 89,000 FTE students, 5000 were registered at FE colleges. Colleges make significant vocational provision at Level 3 and it is the widening participation potential of these vocational routes, and the current barriers which are the subject of discussion in this report. This report focuses on Construction, Freight Logistics, Child, Health and Social Care and Creative Industries There are Centres of Vocational Excellence (COVEs) in all six counties of the East of England and the strategic role of COVEs is highlighted in the current government policy. However, COVEs are not included regionally in Aimhigher or other widening participation initiatives. (The need nationally for improved partnership between Aimhigher and the LSC is set out in Action on Access 2005b). In the ACER report, for participation rates to be met, there are recommendations for bridging from the practical skills needed for vocational qualification to the skills of essay writing and unseen examination which are still the favoured kinds of assessment in HE. The recognition of prior learning is an issue, and the report calls for a consistent approach across the East of England region to the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)

Like the reports by Seiffert and Mills (2005) and Chelbi (2005) discussed below, ACER (2005) reports on the need for much greater employer involvement than at present and an understanding of employer needs. In terms specifically of APEL, this would address employer concerns about the time needed to complete HE qualifications by their employees. The report suggests that for the potential student, there a need for

streamlining information, best done at regional level (for example to avoid duplication of national material and to bring together sub-regional information). The example of Aimhigher is given, which has an East of England website and websites for individual counties (Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk) rather than one single site or links through all of them. Overall the report calls for more activity at regional level (particularly as the work-based apprentice or employee is less likely to see the county as the area which defines opportunities to study) and asks for regional-wide evidence and evaluation of impact.

4.2 Foundation degrees

In the HEFCE strategic plan 2003-2008, foundation degrees are seen as "the main vehicle for continuing expansion and in widening participation" (HEFCE 2003a:13), and the aim is to make the programmes "accessible, flexible and relevant to employment needs, with smooth transition onward to honours degrees". QAA (2005) reports generally on the defining characteristic of foundation degrees as a means of attracting students who would not otherwise be drawn to higher education. Similarly, York Consulting Limited (2004) report positively on an evaluation of foundation degrees based on 841 returned questionnaires from foundation degree students, and 68 staff interviews from 15 case study institutions across England (11 HEIs and 4 FECs), to suggest that foundation degrees are meeting previously unmet need. However, Gorard *et. al*. (2006) express some scepticism in the assumption that foundation degree students would not otherwise find routes into HE and Wagner *et. al*. (2004:46) suggest that it is too early to tell whether the increase in the demand for foundation degrees is substituting for the decline in the Higher National Diploma (HND).

QAA (2005) states that nationally there is a gender divide in foundation degree take-up, which has implications for practice. The two distinct groups of foundation degree students are male under 25 year olds who are studying full time and enter foundation degree through traditional routes from education or training and with A Levels as entry qualifications; the other group is female, mature and studying part-time (QAA 2005: 8) with much more diverse qualifications on entry, including NVQs, and QAA recognised access qualifications. According to QAA (2005), significant benefits are gained where providers achieve the following good practice in information and communication:

- clarity about the defining characteristics of FDs in the programme
- accessible information about APEL procedures for applicants before enrolment, and encouragement to use the procedures
- effective communication of assessment schedules
- assessment information with clear criteria-referenced grading descriptors
- useful student handbooks that contain clear descriptions of the ILOs, assessment and WBL arrangements
- module information containing up-to-date reading lists and texts
- clear information for employers and work-based mentors about the programme, particularly in relation to WBL

- clear and timely information for students about articulation with an honours degree, including any bridging arrangements
- accessible, accurate information for students in the programme specification, particularly where changes have taken place
- consistency in the content and use of terminology throughout the programme documents
- consistency of information for students studying at different educational delivery sites
- effective monitoring information to ensure that programmes are kept up to date, accurate and complete
- effective guidance for external examiners on commenting on all of the defining characteristics of FDs
- appropriate identification of opportunities for additional face-to-face meetings when this helps to achieve a shared understanding.

QAA (2005) also reports on the take-up by region of foundation degrees, and point to the relatively low take-up so far in the East of England.

> London, the North East and the South West currently offer the largest number of FD programmes and also have the greatest number of students enrolled on FD programmes. The East of England, East Midlands and West Midlands offer fewer programmes and have fewer enrolled students than the other RDA areas. These geographical differences persist even when taking into account factors such as population density. (QAA 2005:9)

Regionally, in a report on foundation degrees in the East of England, Seiffert and Mills (2005) stress the need for more regional marketing of foundation degrees, and the importance of obtaining the view of employers to provide annual monitoring. They also highlight the need for a systematic collection of data on foundation degrees which properly accounts for all take-up in the region. They report, as part of the debate on bridging from foundation degree to honours courses, that at least some HEIs in the East of England (for example the University of Hertfordshire and Norwich School of Art and Design) are using levels of achievement at foundation degree as a marker to judge whether to allow a student to progress to an honours degree. However, articulation from foundation degree to honours degree remains an issue, with credit transfer between institutions lacking clear articulation agreements. Sieffert and Mills (2005) also suggest that there has been differential takeup in the east and west of the region. In the east, this has been connected with the fact that Anglia Ruskin University, the University of Essex and University of East Anglia have received prototype funding and so have developed significant provision; also Colchester Institute moved wholescale from HND to foundation degree. However, elsewhere in the region (as also reported separately in Chelbi 2005) there has been a re-badging of HND as foundation degree.

4.3 Work-based learning

The foundation degree "is seen as a key enabler of workplace learning [and] a substantial test-bed for a raft of issues pertinent to the development of workplace learning

opportunities more generally" (Brennan and Little 2006: 31). However, in this HEFCE funded study, Brenner and Little (2006) report continued resistance in higher education institutions to the acceptance of the relevance of workplace learning in the achievement of higher education goals. They report resistance in terms of theories of knowledge and learning, the argument being that workplace knowledge is context bound and not transferable and so unsuitable for recognition as part of a higher education award. This of course is not a new debate and specialist courses such as engineering, health, social care or education have a long history of a workplace component in the course, either as one long period (for example a sandwich course) or in alternating between taught modules and short periods of practice. However, the emphasis on foundation degrees as a more general undergraduate award has brought this debate into sharp relief. From the student's point of view, a HEFCE funded study on the demand for flexible and innovative types of higher education (SQW and Taylor, Nelson Sofres, 2006) suggests that both current and prospective students saw benefits in higher education programmes that involved some element of workplace learning (be it work experience, placements with employers, or accreditation of employer training).

Reinforcing the QAA (2005) statistics on the relatively low take-up so far of foundation degrees in the East of England is the study by Chelbi (2005). This study at City College Norwich, of vocational routes into HE, suggests that levels of knowledge and understanding about foundation degrees are low amongst both employers and students and act as a barrier to informed choice. Most information employers have at present is coming from personal contact. According to Chelbi (2005), marketing for foundation degrees needs to emphasise the range of employee situations which could benefit from a foundation degree (for example specialist and supervisory) and further work needs to be done to make employers aware of the versatility of foundation degrees and their appropriateness for the large number of local SMEs. In Chelbi's study, in the majority of cases the education or training that employers most valued is role-specific and directly related to staff employment opportunities. Some of the employers were particularly interested in the development of foundation degrees that cover 'soft skills' such as people skills and customer relations and this development is an area of potential growth. The replacement of some HNDs with foundation degrees is a concern to some employers because they were not sure of the status of the foundation degree as a stand-alone award, or whether their employees would have to top-up to an honours degree in order to have a recognised qualification. Some employers used HNDs for staff at certain levels in the organisation and felt that the foundation degree would not be suitable for these people because they perceived it as more advanced than their need. Specific plans to remove existing HNC/Ds need provision to ensure that the employers who currently support staff to study these awards were consulted. Marketing in foundation degrees needs to emphasise that a foundation degree is a stand alone degree and the level of foundation degrees needs to be clarified in marketing materials. The time employees have away from work to undertake their studies was a concern to many employers and the capability of foundation degrees to be undertaken in less than two days per week needs to be emphasised in promotional strategies.

4. 4 Part time, distance and e learning

There have long been calls for the change to higher education that would see institutions open throughout the day and night, and throughout the year, where study would not necessitate moving away from home, with universities practicing outreach and offering course and facilities off campus as well as on, and learning as "one complementary part of adult life, pursued alongside employment, community involvement and social, family and leisure activities" (Tight 1991: 132).

According too SQW (2006), E-learning is at a variable stage of development in different HEIs. Some have well developed virtual learning environments (VLEs), which are now an integral part of their teaching and learning strategies, and which are designed to reach diverse student groups and widen participation and wit e learning embedded across all subject areas. One of the case studies in SQW (2006) has 17 fully on-line study programmes, from foundation degrees to masters level, for around 500 UK students; there is no requirement for attendance on campus. E learning is seen as a means of reaching dispersed populations within the UK. And it is seen as a way of attracting individuals who would not otherwise be interested into HE. The availability of modules on-line is convenient for those studying part-time (as well as full-time) since they can access modules without physically visiting the HEI. It may also provide a convenient method of revision/retake thereby providing some flexibility in pace. However, some of those consulted made the point that the backgrounds and experience of their non-traditional entrants mean e-learning alone is insufficient. Attention was also drawn to differences between subjects and in particular that some science, engineering and technology subjects could not be wholly delivered via elearning.

SQW (2006:2) also report on the demand for more innovative and flexible approaches to teaching and learning, with a particular focus on flexibility with respect to pace of study. HEIs "have introduced this type of flexibility in response to student demand, and because in many cases it forms a necessary component of institutional strategies towards meeting the widening participation aspect of their missions". Inherent to this flexibility in most HEIs is the modular approach to study, with teaching and learning defined in terms of discrete units. This allows for switching from part-time to full-time and vice versa, and often, the possibility of starting a course (or beginning university) at two different points in the year - with some HEIs are now considering three intake points a year. Some course are being set up deliberately to change both degree and mode of study after one year (for example with a full time first year, moving onto part time for the remainder of the course. According to the SQW (2006) study, the flexibility of pace is most visible with respect to numbers of modules per semester that a student takes, allowing for completion of a course over a longer period, typically seven or eight years.

Watts, Cullen and Mills (2006) report on the potential to widen participation in higher education through part time study in the East of England. They suggest that there are real opportunities being missed at present because of the relatively low priority given to part time study by many of the HEIs in the region. The Open University in the East of England is a major provider of undergraduate courses for non-traditional entrants and, for

example in 2004, had 20,720 undergraduates, more undergraduates than at any other HEI in the region. In fact, if OU undergraduate students are included, then almost half (47%) of the total undergraduate population in the East of England was studying part-time in 2003/04; and if all OU undergraduates registered for an award are included as (potential) first degree students, then 30% of first degree students in the region were studying part-time. There are plans at several HEIs in the East of England to significantly develop part time higher education through increasing collaboration with partner FE colleges, and higher education in the FE colleges is seen as successful. Watts, Cullen and Mills (2006) make recommendations including that:

Institutions should:

- consider whether to focus more part time courses in linked FE colleges rather than main university campuses;
- review their fee payment systems to enable part time students to pay in instalments;
- offer diagnostic or taster courses to help potential students understand what is expected when studying for a higher education (whether part or full time); and
- enhance (or, where necessary, introduce) specific induction courses (not necessarily face-to-face) for part time students.
- liaise more closely with regional and local business and industry and the Skills for Business Network to develop appropriate part time programmes.
- seriously investigate the use of e-learning as a tool to increase the take-up of part time higher education and the successful retention of part time students; and
- examine the potential for using Open University materials in support of their part time students.
- review the availability of facilities and support for part time students (e.g. library, counselling/advice and careers services) and explore options that increase their accessibility (e.g. on-line and telephone options as well as occasional evening and/or weekend opening hours);
- take steps to ensure part time students, and potential part time students, are aware of and can access governmental and/or institutional financial support packages;
- review and enhance part time student records to generate databases providing greater knowledge of who takes up part time study, their motivation and success;
- develop and publicise case studies illustrating how part time higher education has helped both individual students and employers in the region in order to increase awareness of the value of part time study to both individuals and employers

5. Navigation and completion of higher education

In this section we report on research on the issues which affect the route through a higher education course and the completion of the qualification. We look at research on issues

of disability and Special Educational Needs, at research on retention and on students' financial concerns.

5.1 Disability

Although people with disabilities are significantly under represented in higher education, disability has tended to be treated (both by HEFCE and within institutions) as a distinct issue, often differently located to widening participation and with different staff and accountability arrangements. Institutional work on disability tends to focus on responding to the needs of those already admitted (or about to be), and, by comparison with other widening participation activity, relatively little attention has been given to aspiration or recruitment, despite clear and continuing under representation. (HECD/NCSR 2002: 8).

Perceived difficulties in assessing data on disability, reported in Ramsden (2005:37) include,

- In common with the concept of social class, there is no generally recognised definition of disability, and also no general taxonomy of subsets of disability.
- In common with the concept of ethnicity, disability within the population statistics is essentially self-assessed
- Unlike both ethnicity and social class, the coding frames which are used in national statistics and higher education statistics are significantly at variance
- And even within the Higher Education constituency, there is no consistency of definition as between the HEIs and the Further Education Colleges which provide Higher Education courses.

HEFCE's work on disability has been to ensure that all institutions meet an agreed base level provision, and this has more recently been enhanced by the need to comply with the 1995 *Disability Discrimination Act* and the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act* of 2001. A minority of HEIs have sought to bring disability and widening participation together, and responses to the HECD/NCSR 2002 survey were critical of some perceived confusion within HEFCE on the linkages between the two. According to this research, there needs to be clarification of the inter-relationships between widening participation and disability, and a consistent interpretation would be welcomed by institutions, for example the need to link disability strategies to teaching and learning strategies.

In research with under-30 year olds with disabilities, the National Disability Team (NDT 2004) found that disabled people continue to be underrepresented in Higher Education notwithstanding the fact that it might not be an option for some (those with particular learning difficulties for example). Students with disabilities face special difficulties in navigating a route through their studies to a qualification. The National Disability Team (2004) reports on raising the aspirations of students with disabilities particularly in transition from further to higher education, and they report that transitions are particularly difficult for the disabled, more so than for other groups. Most higher education providers help students to apply for Disabled Students' Allowances and some providers manage the

employment of assistants, relieving students of employers' tasks that they would otherwise have to undertake. The Disability Rights Commission has indicated in a draft Code of Practice under the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act* 2001 that help of this nature may be appropriate to prevent students being placed at substantial disadvantage. (NAO 2002: 3)

The National Disability Team (2005a, 2005b) provide in these two papers details of a range of tools and processes to conduct an audit and an overall review of disability provision in an HEI. Disabled students can have difficulty accessing information through higher education websites, and NDT (2004: 28) cite a study from Nomensa (2003) which showed that 43% of all HE websites failed to achieve even the minimum on a scale of accessibility guidelines. NDT (2004) suggest that there are problems of isolation for disabled students, for example in housing in separate specialist flats. There are also concerns about disabled students being considered a homogenous group, with ethnic, cultural and socio economic background not being taken into consideration, when, for example there may be very different cultural attitudes to a particular disability

In helping with the transition from further to higher education, additional practical ways of supplying provision for disabled people are suggested in the report by NDT (2004: 40). These include:

- aiding individuals with DSA applications and promoting early DSA applications
- having assessments completed before the student moves on
- enabling informed social work involvement
- ensuring individuals meet their key staff members, carers/ personal assistants as early as possible
- having support in place when the student arrives at the HEI
- providing students with help to managing their allowance
- providing a structured programme of support that meets individual needs
- ensuring the student has time to learn how to use equipment
- ensuring the student has time to learn the layout of buildings
- collecting regular feedback from disabled students about their experiences at HE, and then acting quickly to remove any difficulties

Of regional significance is the NDT (2004) recommendation, following the Australian model, for a 'Regional Disability Liaison Officer', (RDLO) who would provide a holistic approach to disability issues, since such a post is to support both disabled individuals during pre-16 school and post-16 FE/HE study, and FEC/HEI institutions. This RDLO model could be replicated on a regional basis in England, with English RDLOs supporting the delivery of: a student "transition programme"; disability-related training for staff; and any guidance that promotes good practice.

Regionally, Gaskell *et. al.* (2002) report on a conference to raise awareness of the provisions in the region's HEIs for people with disabilities and to review recommendation for widening participation for people with disabilities. There was a general view that there is a need for transference and continuity of provision for students moving from further education into higher education and that the system needs 'joining

up'. Specific recommendations from the conference were for one-stop information centres/advocacy services from the age of 14 onwards to provide both practical and academic support, and a web site dedicated to the same general purpose.

5.2 Retention

HECD/NCSR (2002) report that institutions are only now becoming aware of the "array of academic, personal and financial issues that non-traditional students brought with them, which needed to be addressed if they were to prosper within a higher education environment" (HECD/NCSR 2002:56-57). They also report an increased failure rate of 20%. Thomas *et. al*. (2005) report from the results of a national survey of UK HEIs (with 141 responses) that,

> A large proportion (64 per cent) of the widening participation interventions 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).

Thomas (2002:439/440) addresses the question `In what ways can institutions support non-traditional students to succeed?' Her answer is that successful practices include:

- staff attitudes, and relationships with students, which minimize the social and academic distance between them, and enable students to feel valued and sufficiently confident to seek guidance when they require it.
- inclusive teaching and learning strategies which do not assume that the habitus of `traditional' HE students should be the habitus of new cohorts. This includes an awareness of different previous educational experiences, the language of instruction and implied requirements, alternative learning styles and needs and other assumed norms.
- collaborative or socially-orientated teaching and learning which promotes social relations between students through academic activities.
- a range of assessment practices that give all students, irrespective of their preferred method of assessment, the opportunities to succeed, and which do not assume the same access to time and other resources (such as computers). This includes utilizing a range of assessment tools, providing opportunities and support for reassessment and consulting students about other (academic and non-academic) commitments when planning assessments.
- choice, flexibility and support with regard to accommodation, which allows students to find the living arrangements that best suit them and to move if necessary;
- a diversity of social spaces: the Students Union bar is an important social facility for some students, but alternative spaces need to be provided for students with different needs. Particular attention is needed with regard to local students who are not able to socialize through their living arrangements;
- students are allowed to be themselves, and not expected to change to fit in with institutional expectations which are very different to there own habitus.

According to Thomas *et. al.* (2002), the UK has the second highest rate of retention after Japan and maintaining this is largely centred on efficiency concerns.

Retention issues in the national literature are similar to those described in the study carried out in four counties in the East of England region reported in Younger (2002). The initial research was carried out with 462 students (45% of the cohort beginning access courses in FECs across the four counties. The research showed that 85% of these students were under 40 and the biggest tranche was in the 25-30 age group. There was a female-male ratio of 3:1. Most of them were unemployed or full-time parents. Research was then carried out with a small number (16) of the students who dropped out and an exit survey was completed by 118 of the students who completed the course. The research with students who dropped out showed no effects for distance travelled or kind of transport or funding, but compared with those who completed, they were younger, fewer of them had experience of formal education since leaving school, more of them had qualifications below Level 3, and fewer of them had family experience of higher education. The exit survey identified the following issues as critical to success: access to resources such as computers and the internet, and the means to develop the skills to take advantage of ICT; support throughout the course including peer and tutor support; financial advice throughout the course, and support from government agencies like the DfES and DSS (for example in changing the system whereby becoming a student means loss of benefits).

McLinden (2002) consider retention in the region and reminds us that the East of England is a net exporter of undergraduates, with only a third of those domiciled in the region as staying to study, (reported in Slater and Younger 2001). However, there is also inflow from students domiciled elsewhere and the Open University in the East of England is a popular choice for distance-learning students. Retention in different areas in the region is different: the area with the highest retention rate is Luton and the lowest is Peterborough, (suggesting that some policies on retention are best developed locally). However, key to retention is a formal retention policy seen as central to the university mission. A longitudinal student-centred approach, such as that of UEA is seen as most successful, where an individual application is tracked through induction and into study (as opposed to retention seen in terms of a snapshot of institutional numbers). Pre-entry activities involving parents and carers are also seen as key to retention.

McLinden (2002), following on from the Four Counties 'Children into University Scheme' (reported on earlier as McLinden 2003) also considers issues of retention within the institution. Retention post-entry involves high levels of formative assessment and feedback, an induction process which lasts, a proactive concern about individual needs, greater flexibility in teaching and learning in terms of timetabling, accreditation of prior learning and a personal tutor along with peer support (but without any suggestion of ghettoisation or of singling out the individual). The mismatch between withdrawal due to student-cited difficulties in learning and actual levels of failure suggests the need to change the learning process.

5.3 Drop Out

Davies and Elias (2003:ii) report that "recent estimates indicate that approximately 17 per cent of UK students who started a full time first degree course in 1997/98 will obtain no qualification". Potential 'withdrawers' were identified for the years 1996/97 and 1998/99 at 30 selected institutions of higher education and of the 15,200 students sent an initial questionnaire, there was a response rate of approximately 10%. The analysis is necessarily tentative but Davies and Elias (2003) report the following influences on the decision to withdraw:

- a mistaken choice of course (24 per cent of respondents);
- financial problems directly related to participation in higher education (18 per
- cent);
- and personal problems (14 per cent).

They also state (Davies and Elias 2003:iv),

> There is some evidence to indicate a tendency amongst respondents to under-report the importance of academic difficulties upon the decision to withdraw. The importance of academic difficulties may be further under-estimated due to higher rates of non-response to the survey amongst those with lower entry qualifications. Alternatively, respondents may regard academic difficulties as having arisen ultimately due to a mistaken choice of course.

Quinn *et. al.* (2005) report on research into the high drop out rates at 'inclusive' universities; that is those with a wide variety of schemes to support disadvantaged students, including mentoring, paid work opportunities, childcare provision and learning support, and in areas where there is high unemployment. Young white working-class male students are particularly vulnerable to dropping out. However Quinn *et. al.* (2005) remind us that working-class drop out is a construct, with people seen as flawed and lacking. There are pressures on students in conventional HEIs "to complete their studies within a fixed and predetermined time" (p.13) (which takes little account of, for example, the Open University perspective where time for study is open-ended). Quinn *et. al.* (2005) point to other countries like Germany and Canada where longer interruptions to study are allowed without a student being deemed to have dropped out.

5.4 Finance

Finance and worry about finance are significant barriers to participation. In research carried out by the National Audit Office (2002), young people not currently in higher education were concerned that debts after studying were too large to contemplate and that graduate starting salaries caused financial difficulties even without a debt. Others were conscious of family finances and wanted to contribute to them rather than costing more money Some had found that higher education institutions only provided information about extra financial help after the young person had decided against further study. (NAO 2002: 13)

The reasons for studying are primarily economic (Warmington 2003), a belief that educational qualifications generate their own employment opportunities or, that lack of qualifications is a barrier to desired forms of employment. For young working class people, higher education is valued as having potential economic benefits (Archer and Hutchings 2000, Brine and Waller 2004). However, many non traditional students are trying to combine full time or almost full time work, family responsibilities and study (Reay *et. al* 2002). Combining work and study is not easy: mature, non traditional students are always 'counting the cost' of study, and are,

> … caught up in a constant balancing act between wanting to study, meeting domestic responsibilities and needing to earn money. In this sense, the idea of a student lifestyle, with its combination of independence, dependence, leisure and academic work, was unthinkable to these mature entrants. Being a student for them meant something entirely different from the conceptions and experiences of the younger students. (Reay *et. al.* 2002: 10)

Similarly, for Warmington (2003: 96), the world of mature students is "self-evidently pitted with financial insecurities, family responsibilities, potentially fraught educational relationships and the conflicting demands of coupling study with paid employment". The lived experience of a non-traditional student is that poverty is an unmentionable in academia and the students cover up their financial difficulties (Bowl 2001). In a study of the HEFCE widening participation strategy, non-traditional students are often having to try and maintain a balance between keeping up with their studies and financing themselves with part time work, and this was felt to be a common cause of students dropping out of higher education. (HECD/NCSR 2002:96).

Research by The Open University Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) and South Bank University (2005) reveals that most of the students surveyed had student loans. Students from lower social classes, were more likely to have higher levels of student loans and students with higher levels of loan were also more likely to undertake term-time work. Student loans accounted for 91% of students' final debt. Students from the highest social class, White students and younger students were more tolerant of debt and yet had the smallest student loans. On the other hand, those from the lower social classes and those with dependent children (who are generally older students) tended to have higher levels of student loan and were the most debt intolerant. However, despite having borrowed more money, it was these students (and Muslim students) who were more likely to have serious financial difficulties and have the greatest burden of debt to repay at the end of their studies. Furthermore, the amounts allowed to them through the student finance system can be inadequate, because these students have had to supplement their income by working during term-time.

Regionally, Chelbi (2005) reports that getting into debt and the fear of having to pay higher education fees are major barriers to further progression. The majority of students who were sent information after completing the survey wanted information on fees. Any myths that students might have about the cost of HE and the affordability of study in HE

need to be dispelled by giving students clear information on student finances as a matter of course. This is particularly the case for the top-up fees being introduced in 2006/07.

Research on the new system of student finance, summarised in a short report by Kendall and Kukhareva (2005), took place at the University of Luton for Aimhigher. Interviews were conducted with 50 students (60% female, 40% male; 55% White, 14% Asian, 26% Black; 5% Other). The findings were that there is low understanding about both the present system of student finance and the arrangements being introduced in 2006. The research found that a significant number were likely to change their plans in the light of emerging information about the new levels of fees, for example by studying closer to home or changing course length or mode of study or by working alongside studying. Kendall and Kukhareva (2005) found particularly poor awareness of part-time study and other alternative routes through HE. The research recommends that local teams are needed to carry very clear and positive messages about the benefits of the new system of finance to potential full-time students (for example with upfront fees abolished and substantial grants introduced) and HEIs need to work with appropriate partners to develop, for potential students, the skills needed for financial decision-making.

Woods (2005) in a short paper for Aimhigher East of England deliberates on the ways in which OFFA access agreements might affect widening participation in the region. Most HEIs in the region are charging the maximum fee for full-time Home and EU students, and only a few exceptions (Luton, Writtle College and Otley College) are surcharging less for foundation degrees. With the obligatory system of bursaries, every HE is offering a different package, with different amounts, using different scales and different criteria. For example the University of Cambridge gives a £3000 bursary to an under 21 year old in receipt of the full maintenance grant. However, only 10% of its full fee-paying home undergraduates are expected to be eligible for the full amount, with 22% receiving a partial bursary. Peterborough Regional College on the other hand plans to give £300 to those on the full maintenance grant, but estimates that 63% of its HE intake will be eligible. Some HE providers are targeting particular groups: ARU, besides bursaries to low income groups, is offering bursaries to ethnic minorities and disabled students and South East Essex College is offering bursaries to anyone entering directly from a state school or an FE college. As indicated previously, in the section on the relationship between HEIs and FECs, the bursary system is going to be confusing to potential students trying to choose between institutions in the East of England. Particular confusion could arise when trying to weigh up the benefits of specific courses in the different HEIs alongside the different financial arrangements each HEI might be making.

5.5 Graduation and Career

In a HEFCE funded study of outcomes of higher education for students from lower socio-economic groups, from certain ethnic minorities and mature students, Blasko (2002) found that they are disadvantaged in terms of outcome with social background having a greater negative effect on labour market outcomes for men than for women and age

having an impact on both men and women. Even when they have had the same educational experience (ie the same qualifications and the same higher education institutions) as those from higher socio economic groups, (2002:31)

In the case of males

- Graduates who came from a family where parents completed compulsory education only earned on average 8% less a year, are slightly less satisfied with their job (by -0.173 points on a 5-point scale) and rated somewhat lower on the combined subjective measure of job level than graduates with both parents having a degree;
- Asians are more likely to remain unemployed after graduation for a period of at least six months than those belonging to the ethnic majority;
- Entering higher education at the age of 21-24 can increase the risk of being unemployed to a significant extent. (However, members of this age group can even enjoy a range of advantages, such as higher income, greater likelihood of being in a graduate level job and more satisfaction with the work compared to the younger ones);
- Those who entered higher education after the age of 24 have an increased risk of unemployment, poorer career prospects and even have a significantly smaller chance of being in a graduate job three and a half years after graduation than traditional age graduates.

In the case of females

- First-generation graduates are only half as likely to feel that their qualification was necessary for their job than graduates with two graduate parents;
- Asians have clear advantages over their white British counterparts in terms of level of job, both according to the objective categorisation of occupations and their subjective rating of it;
- Black female graduates are less happy with their jobs than members of the ethnic majority;

6. Conclusions

From the national and regional research reported on, we focus on key issues in widening participation to take forward in the East of England.

- There is a need to investigate whether vocational qualifications facilitate progression and to undertake research on L3 learners who are not currently progressing to higher education
- It would be beneficial to evaluate whether there is unmet demand for access courses in the East of England

- Career and guidance programmes need to be built into Aimhigher or to be running alongside the Aimhigher programme. There is a need not just for programmes to improve aspirations, but to give long-term guidance on courses and careers. The present pattern of careers guidance in the last two years of compulsory school is inadequate
- Mentoring schemes are seen as key to improving applications to higher education from underrepresented groups, and extending existing schemes as well as the development of new ones would be beneficial
- Summer schools are important in widening participation, but need to be targeted fully at appropriate student groups and, for example, not include those students who already have family experience of higher education
- Aimhigher need to consider how the role of Centres of Vocational Excellence fits into the Aimhigher objectives
- Given the low take-up of foundation degrees (compared with other regions) and the uneven distribution across the region, there may be a need to plan for their further development
- The relative lack of employer engagement in foundation degrees and concerns over work place learning are matters to be researched and evaluated
- The benefits of part time and distance learning need to be promoted in the region, and the significance of the Open University in providing part time higher education in the region should be emphasised
- There is an urgently need to comprehensively address student concerns over the financial implications of going to university, and the fear of debt
- There is a need for comprehensive research and evaluation of widening participation in the region. This research should be managed and co-ordinated on a regional basis and should be geared to provide information on outcomes which would guide regional and institutional decision makers as they plan their next programmes. We suggest that this research should be co-ordinated by Aimhigher with the support of AUEE and ACER.

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