

National strategy for access and student success in higher education

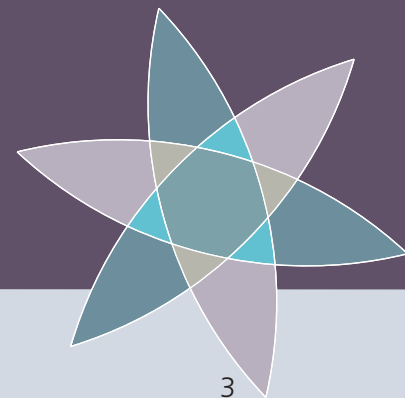
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Foreword



OFFA and HEFCE are pleased to present this national strategy for access and student success in higher education in England. Drawing on research and analysis from the UK and internationally, it has been developed in consultation with the higher education sector and with other key stakeholders.

The unifying ideal in this strategy is that everyone with the potential to benefit from higher education should have equal opportunity to do so. Higher education brings significant benefits to individuals, society and the economy. It enriches the lives of individual students, opening the door to rewarding careers and enhancing physical and mental wellbeing. Equity of opportunity also brings significant public benefit: higher education enables people to be active, committed citizens and is vital to social mobility and economic growth, building the knowledge and skills of the population to succeed in a highly competitive world. A diverse student body fosters a vibrant and cohesive intellectual, social and cultural environment. Considerable progress has been made in widening access and achieving student success in recent years. But there is still a long way to go. The national strategy will help the sector build on its achievements to date, adding fresh impetus to current and future work, delivering faster progress, supporting innovation, helping to identify gaps where more effort should be focused and maximising the impact of the investments made by Government and the sector.

Our overall approach is best summed up as one of promoting greater strategic alignment and cohesion. Our experience is that the diversity and autonomy of the sector are great strengths – universities and colleges work best when presented with a challenge rather than a prescriptive solution. Our ambition is to create an environment in which work to improve access, student success and progression can flourish. HEFCE and OFFA will support, facilitate and help to co-ordinate the contributions of all stakeholders, ensuring that investment in this area delivers the best possible outcomes for students, the economy and society.

Our approach assumes that investment, through agreements with OFFA and public funding, will continue. We call on the Government to work for parliamentary consensus to achieve a stable policy and funding base which supports widening participation as an integral part of the changes taking place in higher education.

Our approach also recognises that widening participation should encompass the whole student lifecycle: preparing to apply and enter higher education; receiving study support and achieving successful completion; and progressing to postgraduate education or to/within employment. The strategy considers how higher education providers and stakeholders can make improvements across these three broad stages – access, student success and progression.

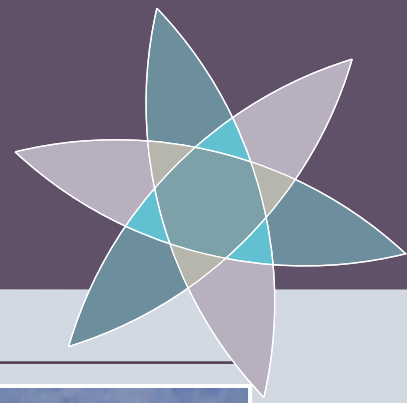
We see genuine partnership between all stakeholders as crucial if such improvements are to be made. Better collaboration is needed at every level – between Government departments, between

higher education providers, and between higher education providers and other key stakeholders such as schools, further education colleges and employers. There also needs to be improved collaboration within institutions: for example, between widening participation teams, those developing the teaching curriculum, student services, and marketing and recruitment teams. We will do our part by continuing to collaborate with one another, adopting a coherent approach when working with universities and colleges, ensuring as far as possible that our requests do not overlap and sharing information to meet our respective needs. Working together in this way will enable us to build a fuller picture of how higher education providers are approaching widening participation across the student lifecycle, and how they plan to meet the goals of this strategy both individually, as autonomous institutions, and at an aggregated, national level.

Since we delivered this strategy to Ministers in October 2013, further highly relevant research and analysis has been published. This includes the review of mature and part-time students by Universities UK, OFFA analysis looking at the impact of bursaries on retention and young participation by selectivity of institution, and further analysis by HEFCE of young participation data, giving more detail on participation rates across the English regions. There have also been important developments in the funding and regulatory landscape. For example, the Government has reduced the National Scholarship Programme for 2014-15 but increased the numbers of students that universities and colleges may recruit, creating 30,000 additional places in 2014-15 and removing the cap on student numbers for publicly funded HE providers from 2015-16. The grant letter from Ministers to HEFCE in February 2014 set out further changes, including a reduction to HEFCE's funding for teaching. The student opportunity allocation now incorporates funding that was previously allocated for the Access to Learning Fund. We expect institutions to continue to respond to local requirements in supporting students in cases of hardship and they can draw on the student opportunity allocation to do so, as well as their own funding. The grant letter also announced funding for collaborative outreach.

All these developments are directly relevant to the priorities identified in this strategy, but do not fundamentally change those priorities or the actions needed to address them. The strategy is, and was designed to be, a long-term view of access, student success and progression and we believe it can hold firm in the fluid policy and funding environment in which the higher education system operates.

There is no easy or quick fix to the highly complex issues involved in improving access, student success and progression. However, if the strategy is adequately resourced and implemented effectively, with buy-in from all stakeholders, it will create lasting and tangible benefits, not only for individual students but for higher education and society as a whole.



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April 2014

About this strategy



Why we have written this strategy

We have developed this national strategy for access and student success in higher education at the request of the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Minister for Universities and Science. An interim report was delivered to Ministers in January 2013.

About the document

Part 1 of this document summarises our vision, our overall approach and the key actions that we are proposing across the three broad stages of the student lifecycle: preparing for and entering higher education; staying on and achieving a qualification; and going on to postgraduate study or employment. We call these three broad stages: **access; retention and student success; and progression to further study or to/within employment.**

Part 2 describes the strategy in detail and the evidence that it is based on. It brings together new and existing research on access and student success, including evidence gathered through commissioned research, a call for evidence and discussions with a wide range of stakeholders in spring 2013.

- Chapters 1 to 3 discuss issues, evidence, and recommendations relating to the three broad stages of the student lifecycle.
- Chapter 4 describes in detail how we propose implementing the strategy and outlines the types of indicators we will develop to measure progress against the priorities it identifies.

Explanation of the terms we use

Throughout the strategy, we refer to “widening participation”, “access, success and progression” and “social mobility”. It is important to understand the differences between these terms. **Widening participation to higher education** is about ensuring that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can access higher education, get the support they need to **succeed** in their studies, and **progress** to further study and/or employment suited to their qualifications and potential. **Social mobility** is the outcome that the Government wishes to see: a society becoming less stratified by socio-economic class. Widening participation to higher education helps to increase social mobility but does not achieve it on its own: employers, schools, colleges, communities and the Government all have roles to play, too.

There is a glossary at the back of the report that explains all the technical terms and abbreviations used within it.

Part 1



Vision for the national strategy

1. The vision of this national strategy for access and student success in higher education is: that all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have equal opportunity to participate and succeed, on a course and in an institution that best fit their potential, needs and ambitions for employment or further study.

What this means

2. We want the student population in higher education to better reflect the rich diversity of the general population in England. This means creating a system which delivers equality of opportunity and fairness and in which a person's age, ethnicity, gender, disability and/or social background present no barriers to them accessing and succeeding in higher education and beyond.

3. Our strategy will show that creating such a system involves highly complex challenges and issues. It also demonstrates that success depends on Government, higher education providers, and HEFCE and OFFA taking on clear roles and delivering on their responsibilities.

- Government needs to set the policy framework that drives equality and social mobility. This means ensuring that its schools, further education, higher education and industrial/growth strategies are aligned and focused on improving life chances. Using this strategy and the evidence base, the Government should establish parliamentary consensus in order to achieve a stable policy and funding base with which to support widening participation over the next 10 years.
- The higher education system's strength lies in the diversity and autonomy of universities and colleges. But with this autonomy comes a responsibility to ensure that the opportunities to benefit from the education they deliver are distributed fairly. Continued focus and investment by higher education providers in all aspects of widening access, student success and progression are vital.
- HEFCE and OFFA must continue to provide or ensure public and institutional investment, and support and challenge institutions to drive progress and deliver success. They will do this by: providing mechanisms through which institutions can articulate and measure progress towards their individual ambitions; requiring greater levels of accountability and demonstrable value for money of the public investment; and supporting national research and evaluation to underpin continuous improvement and development.

Why equality of opportunity is important

4. Higher education benefits everyone. It helps individuals to unlock their potential, it is one of the best pathways to achieving a rewarding career and it contributes significantly to physical and mental wellbeing. It also benefits the wider economy – creating jobs, helping businesses prosper by providing them with highly qualified and skilled staff, and stimulating long-term economic growth,

innovation, and competitiveness in the global economy. Higher education has also been shown to have a positive impact on social cohesion and the development of active, committed citizens: for example, graduates are likely to be more engaged with their communities.

5. Given these benefits and advantages, it is essential that all groups have fair access to the opportunities that higher education offers. If we do not ensure that people are properly equipped to make informed choices and then given the support they need to realise their potential, we will continue to allow people's success or otherwise to be determined by their background instead of their talent.

Progress so far

6. Good progress has been made in recent years to widen access and improve student success. Students from all backgrounds now have increased opportunities to participate and succeed in higher education. This is a tribute to the commitment and hard work of universities and colleges, their partners and the students themselves.

7. But there remains a pressing need to do more. There are still significant gaps between the participation and success of individuals from the most advantaged and disadvantaged areas, and in outcomes for different groups of students.

8. This strategy aims to address these gaps, and challenges Government, higher education providers, and national bodies to drive change and make further progress. In enabling motivated and able students from diverse backgrounds to benefit from higher education and secure the best possible outcomes, Government, higher education providers, and national bodies will deliver high returns, both to the individual student and society as a whole.

Our approach

9. Our approach in developing this national strategy has been to create a fertile environment in which new and existing work to improve access, student success and progression can flourish. Much good work is already being done. But there is a need for a more coherent, collaborative and co-ordinated approach. The national strategy will provide this, bringing fresh impetus and coherence and, in particular, driving forward:

- greater collaboration and partnership at every level
- evidence-based practice
- a whole student lifecycle approach.

Greater collaboration and partnership at every level

10. There is a need for greater collaboration and partnership at every level including Government Departments and other organisations working in education, training and employment. The strategy can only be achieved with the co-ordinated support of all partners, and our actions reflect this.

11. Higher education providers, schools, colleges, communities, employers and, where appropriate, the third sector need to collaborate effectively and strategically. National policy makers also need to work together more effectively, taking a strategic overview and collaborating across the policy landscape to ensure better alignment of funding and policy across education sectors: for example, making sure that Pupil Premium funding in schools and widening participation funding in higher

education are working in complementary ways, and ensuring the coherent provision of information, advice and guidance across educational sectors to support informed choice.

Evidence-based practice

12. It is essential to understand which approaches and activities have the greatest impact, and why. An improved evidence base, and a robust approach to evaluation, are critical in helping the sector and partners to understand which of their activities are most effective and have the greatest impact on access, student success and progression, so enabling effort to be focused on these areas.

A student lifecycle approach

13. To maximise impact and effectiveness, it is crucial that all higher education providers and stakeholders take a broad view of widening participation encompassing a student's entire lifecycle: preparing for and entering higher education, graduating successfully, and progressing to employment or postgraduate study. The strategy looks at how higher education providers and stakeholders can make improvements across these three main stages, which we describe as:

- access
- retention and student success
- progression to further study or to/within employment.

14. Much of the material in this strategy relates to publicly funded providers, however we consider that the adoption of a broader, lifecycle view would benefit students across the spectrum of higher education providers.

Our aims

15. The strategy seeks to address the following key issues across the student lifecycle:

- **Access** – the wide gap in participation rates between people from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds in society, and between students with different characteristics, particularly at the most selective institutions.
- **Retention and student success** – the differences in experience and attainment for different student groups, for example, the persistent gap in the attainment rates for students from different ethnic minority groups, that cannot be explained by their entry profiles; the high non-continuation rates for part-time students intending to complete a full programme of study; the high non-continuation rates for full-time students at a number of institutions.
- **Progression to further study or to/within employment** – the clear differences in experience, outcomes and progression to further study or graduate employment for different groups of students in higher education.

The actions

16. The key actions for addressing these issues are summarised below. All are predicated on the continued financial support for widening participation delivered through both HEFCE grant and institutional fee income.

The strategy for improving access

17. The strategy aims to:
 - a. Make significant and sustained improvements in the participation rates for the most disadvantaged groups and in the diversity of the student population.
 - b. Narrow the gap in the participation rates in and across higher education between advantaged and disadvantaged groups.
18. To meet these aims, we propose the following actions:

New approach to collaborative outreach

19. We will work with higher education providers and partners to develop a national approach to collaborative outreach aimed at both young and mature students.
20. This will build on and enhance existing arrangements and enable new collaborative partnerships to be formed where needed. It will complement the work that institutions undertake individually to maximise the impact and coverage of their access work, reduce duplication and recognise the contribution institutions make to widening access beyond their own student intake. In 2014-15 HEFCE will allocate funding to institutions to enable them to develop single points of contact for schools and other organisations seeking outreach activity. We will also support the sector to track more effectively the progression of learners that have taken part in outreach activity.

Improving information, advice and guidance

21. We will work with Government and other national bodies to develop a more joined-up approach to the provision of effective information, advice and guidance through the schools and further education sectors and into and beyond higher education. Although much has been done to provide high quality information, prospective students need individualised advice and guidance if they are to make informed and appropriate choices.
22. Higher education outreach programmes will provide part of a solution but a high-level, cross-government policy response to this issue is required, and it is imperative that schools policy and higher education policy in this area are joined up.

Support the development of flexible study options that meet the needs of students and employers

23. It will be important to support the development of flexible study options that meet the needs of both students and employers. HEFCE will develop understanding and knowledge of local economic and market conditions with regard to part-time and flexible higher education study as part of its activity to address the decline in numbers entering higher education to study part-time. This activity will inform future policy and funding responses to part-time and flexible learning. OFFA will support the inclusion of flexible study options in their agreements with HE providers.

National evaluation framework

24. We will develop a national evaluation framework of common measures and effective evaluation practice. This will help universities and colleges to evaluate their own access and student success activities more effectively, and provide comparable data and evidence that can be used at a national level to inform both policy and practice.

Co-ordination of national research

25. There are many bodies/agencies/organisations that conduct national research into the issues identified in this strategy. HEFCE and OFFA already have established relationships with many of these bodies and so will work with them to try to assess whether there would be an effective way of co-ordinating this activity to better support the national evidence base.

Institutional strategies for access and student success

26. We see a strategic, long-term “whole institution” approach as crucial and HEFCE and OFFA will adopt a coherent approach when requesting information from institutions, within which publicly funded higher education providers can set out their strategies and targets for access and student success. We will ensure as far as possible that our requests do not overlap and that we share information to meet our respective needs.

The strategy for improving retention and student success

27. The strategy aims to:

- a. Improve student retention, reducing the number of students who withdraw early from higher education.
- b. Narrow the gap between the retention rates of the most advantaged and most disadvantaged.
- c. Improve outcomes for different student groups by addressing the unexplained differentials in attainment.

28. To meet these aims, we propose the following actions:

Support national activity to address issues of student retention and success

29. We will work with the Higher Education Academy, the Equality Challenge Unit, the National Union of Students (NUS), the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and others to support the development of knowledge, expertise and good practice that seeks to address non-continuation and disparities in attainment.

Support the Student Engagement Partnership

30. HEFCE, NUS, GuildHE and the Association of Colleges fund and support the Student Engagement Partnership to work with students’ unions and institutions to help them to develop more effective and comprehensive student engagement and partnership approaches. By engaging with all aspects of their learning experience, students will be active partners in securing the best outcomes for themselves and progressing successfully to postgraduate study or graduate employment.

Other actions

31. Additionally, our work to improve retention and student success will be supported by **the development of flexible study options that meet the needs of students and employers**, **the national evaluation framework**, **the co-ordination of national research** and **the further development of institutions’ strategic approaches**.

The strategy for progression to further study or to/within employment

32. The strategy aims to:
- Improve progression to postgraduate study for people from disadvantaged groups.
 - Narrow the gap in progression to postgraduate study in and across higher education between advantaged and disadvantaged groups.
 - Reduce inequalities in employment outcomes for graduates from different groups.
 - Narrow the gap in employment outcomes between graduates from advantaged and disadvantaged groups.
33. To meet these aims, we propose the following actions:

Build the evidence base on postgraduate study

34. Our priority in this area during the coming year will be to continue to build up the evidence base to inform policy and practice, both through further research looking at the dynamics of progression into postgraduate research and by testing different finance and activity options.

The Postgraduate Support Scheme

35. HEFCE will support a portfolio of pilot projects through the £25 million Postgraduate Support Scheme (PSS), which was launched in July 2013. This scheme aims to help institutions test finance and activity options for stimulating progression into taught postgraduate education.

Develop a national programme to support access to postgraduate study

36. The outcomes of both the research and analysis we undertake and projects funded through the PSS will be used to inform the development of a national programme for postgraduates to run from 2015-16.

Support the higher education sector in understanding graduate employment patterns

37. We know that there are unexplained differences in the employment outcomes for students from different groups. We will work with institutions and our partners to identify further research and analysis to better understand the reasons for these disparities and to support activity to address them.

Information, advice and guidance

38. High quality information delivered through effective advice and guidance is a key priority to ensure that students are making the right decisions from the outset to achieve their career ambitions. This starts before higher education, as noted in our strategic responses to access, but should continue throughout a student's time in higher education, particularly with regard to advice and guidance on postgraduate study options and further careers advice.

Other actions

39. Additionally, our work to improve progression to further study or to/within employment will be supported by the **national evaluation framework**, the **co-ordination of national research**, the **Student Engagement Partnership** and the **further development of institutions' strategic approaches**.

Next steps

40. This national strategy has been designed to be sufficiently flexible to take into account progress made at an institutional and sector level and other changes in the sector. It is therefore intended to remain relevant for a significant period. However, we will regularly review and evaluate progress, and build on our strategy as new evidence emerges. For example, we need a better understanding of the complexities contributing to varying outcomes in progression to postgraduate study and to/within graduate employment.

41. The issues that the strategy aims to address are long-standing, with complex causes, and we do not suggest that they will be easy to tackle. However, our firm view is that a more coherent, collaborative approach, helped by sustained investment and resourcing, will ensure that the sector continues to make progress in making participation and success in higher education more equitable.



Introduction: widening participation in the changing higher education environment

1. In Part 1 we set out why it is important to harness the whole pool of talent and potential in England. A person's background should not affect their choice and opportunity in accessing higher education (HE), fulfilling their potential within it – whether at undergraduate or postgraduate level – and realising their career goals. Breaking down barriers to access and success would not only reflect the diversity within the country's population, but would also enrich the HE environment and help towards wider goals of social justice, social cohesion and the needs of the economy.
2. Universities, colleges, schools, HEFCE, OFFA and others – including the third sector – are already working to widen participation. This has resulted in progress in access and success for disadvantaged groups, although many of the issues are long-standing, and we started from a low base, so there is still a long way to go.
3. The work of HE providers and other research has given us a body of evidence that suggests how we might make further impact. It is often problematic to point to causal links between interventions and outcomes though, owing to the complex range of factors that may affect each person's experience, and further research is required in many areas.
4. Our strategy aims to inject pace into existing widening participation (WP) work and to build upon it to achieve further progress. It must do this in the context of fundamental changes in higher education policy and funding, which present both challenges and opportunities for WP.

The reforms

5. Central to the reforms is the shift in the source of funding for teaching. From 2012-13 funding for higher education began to move so that instead of it mostly being provided directly to institutions from the public purse it is mostly provided by the individual through fees of up to £9,000 per year, supported by a progressive loans system.
6. Because each student now represents teaching income, many HE providers have refocused their recruitment systems more heavily towards marketing and there is increased competition to attract students, particularly those with the highest grades. The introduction of higher fees and increasing competition between HE providers make it more important than ever to safeguard and promote access and student success. The reforms increase the importance of ensuring that people from disadvantaged backgrounds receive the best advice, guidance and support, and are steered towards relevant information, at every stage of their HE journey – preparing and applying to HE, successfully completing their studies and progressing to further study or graduate-level employment.
7. The Coalition Government has also put in place other measures to mitigate any potential negative impact of the reforms on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It established the National

Scholarship Programme to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds in the first three years of higher fees; it increased maintenance grants for full-time students from the lowest income households (incorporating the previous amounts delivered as the minimum bursary in access agreements); and it brought in fee loans for part-time students. It also introduced a new system of 24+ advanced learning loans for students studying at Level 3 or 4 or doing advanced or higher apprenticeships, under which repayments can be combined with those for a higher education tuition fee loan, or in some cases even written off. This joining-up of policy between educational levels is greatly welcome.

8. The Government also strengthened the role and resources of OFFA which, through its regulation of access agreements, plays a key role in safeguarding and promoting fair access and ensuring that reforms to the higher education system do not unintentionally raise barriers to WP. OFFA's focus has broadened from concentrating mainly on access to include retention, student success and progression from HE.

9. OFFA's increased resource enables it to engage more fully with institutions, providing greater support and challenge to them. This has included focusing more strongly on outcomes (that is, universities' and colleges' performance on access and student success). With the rise in fees, OFFA has been able to secure more institutional investment than under the previous fee arrangements with a greater differentiation in expenditure according to each institution's performance. OFFA is also now able to take a more active role in growing the evidence base that underpins WP work, through identifying good practice and by commissioning, and carrying out in-house, analysis and research.

Next steps

10. We are still in the early stages of the reforms and we do not yet know their full impact on students from disadvantaged groups. It does seem, from UCAS application statistics¹, that young people from poorer backgrounds have not been deterred from applying; but people who applied to start courses in the 2012-13 and 2013-14 academic years may have already made decisions about higher education before the changes were widely understood, meaning it may be too early to draw anything but tentative conclusions from current information.

11. The national strategy for access and student success sets out how the HE system can inject greater pace and rigour into WP and social mobility. It encompasses the whole of the student lifecycle. It addresses the challenges of the current HE context while maximising the opportunities it presents. To make real progress will require cross-government support and the full engagement and commitment of other stakeholders, including employers and students themselves.

¹ [UCAS "Demand for full-time undergraduate higher education \(2013 cycle, March deadline\)" \(2013\).](#)



Chapter 1:

Access to higher education

Our objectives for access to higher education

- a. Make significant and sustained improvements in the participation rates for the most disadvantaged groups, and in the diversity of the student population.
- b. Narrow the gap in the participation rates in and across higher education between advantaged and disadvantaged groups.

Introduction

1. This chapter updates and extends the information and evidence about widening participation (WP) that we set out in our interim national strategy report². It puts forward strategic approaches that universities and colleges, HEFCE, OFFA and Government and other organisations should take to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds in preparing for, and entering, higher education (HE).
2. The interim report looked at how continued policy focus, coupled with national and institutional investment, had developed a culture of WP in the HE sector. It drew together our understanding about how WP operates and is funded in higher education, and how and whether HE providers invest in a way that most effectively meets their WP aims and objectives. It looked at the latest participation data and explored application and enrolment patterns for students from disadvantaged groups.
3. The interim report went on to draw tentative conclusions about potential areas of focus for WP in terms of the preparation for, and access to, HE. These conclusions can be summarised as:
 - Outreach is most effective when it is a progressive, sustained programme of activity and engagement over time.
 - Outreach programmes need to be directed towards people at different stages of their education, starting at primary level.
 - Effective outreach requires the full, adequately resourced involvement and engagement of higher education institutions (HEIs), further education colleges (FECs) and schools (for young learners) or employers and communities (for older learners).
 - Collaborative outreach delivers benefits in terms of scale, engagement, co-ordination and impartiality.
 - Progression pathways for learners with non-traditional or vocational qualifications need to be clearly articulated.

² HEFCE and OFFA “National strategy for access and student success: Interim report to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills” (2013).

4. We now build on these early conclusions, using a range of new information and research. This includes: HEFCE and OFFA's series of analysis on trends in young participation; CFE/Edge Hill University's research on how other countries approach their own challenges of widening participation to HE³; qualitative information from the ARC Network literature review⁴; intelligence gathered from roundtable meetings with stakeholders and WP practitioners⁵; and evidence provided by institutions⁶. This range of research has confirmed the direction set out in the interim report, but also adds richness and detail to our early findings.

Trends in access

Application data

5. UCAS data⁷ shows that, between 2012 and 2013, application rates for 18-year-olds to full-time undergraduate courses have increased by one percentage point to 35 per cent. It also reports the highest recorded rates of applications from people from disadvantaged groups – continuing a pattern of substantial increases over the past 10 cycles. It shows that the gap in demand between advantaged and disadvantaged young people is closing (in 2004, demand from 18-year-olds from more advantaged groups was 4.3 times greater than demand from those from disadvantaged groups: this has fallen to 2.7 times in 2013). While UCAS data shows demand, not actual enrolment on courses, these patterns are encouraging.

6. The increasing demand from 18-year-olds since 2004 has focused on institutions that have relatively lower entry requirements, although in 2012 and 2013 demand for institutions with higher entry requirements has increased slightly more compared to others – a 3 per cent increase compared to 2 per cent, with the greatest proportional increase among those from disadvantaged areas.

7. UCAS data shows rising trends in applications for all ethnic groups. Between 2006 and 2013 the application rate for the Black ethnic group rose from 20 per cent to 34 per cent, a proportional increase of 70 per cent. This is encouraging.

Participation data

Young students

Low participation neighbourhoods

8. The latest "Trends in young participation" report (HEFCE 2013/28) shows an encouraging trend in participation from low participation neighbourhoods between the 1998-99 and 2011-12 academic years.

³ CFE/Edge Hill University "International research on the effectiveness of widening participation" (2013).

⁴ ARC Network "Literature review of research into widening participation to higher education" (2013).

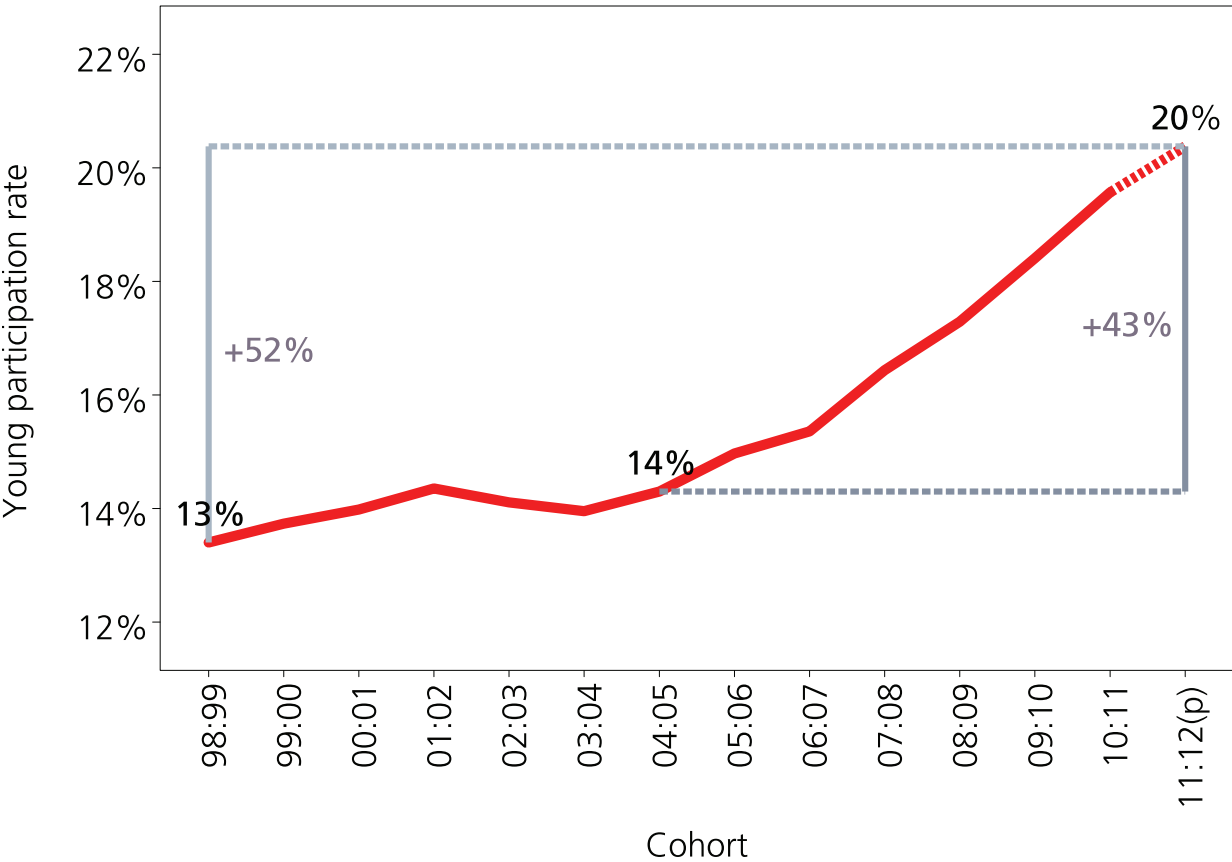
⁵ A series of roundtable discussions that took place to inform the national strategy for access and student success. A report synthesising these discussions is available at www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/currentworktowidenparticipation/natstrat/research/.

⁶ We issued a call for evidence from institutions in spring 2013. For more information, see www.offa.org.uk/national-strategy-for-access-and-student-success/call-for-evidence-national-strategy-for-access-and-student-success.

⁷ UCAS "Demand for full-time undergraduate higher education (2013 cycle, March deadline)" (2013).

9. The report uses the Participation of Local Areas (POLAR3) classification (POLAR is explained in the glossary at the back of this document) which divides small neighbourhood areas into quintiles according to progression rates to HE. We use these as an indication of relative levels of educational advantage or disadvantage for people from these areas. As shown in Figure 1, the rate of young entry to HE from the most disadvantaged quintile has increased from 13 per cent to 20 per cent (seven percentage points or a proportional increase of 52 per cent) between the 98:99 cohort and the 11:12 cohort⁸.

Figure 1: Young participation rate for the most disadvantaged areas (POLAR3 classification)



Source: HEFCE 2013/28

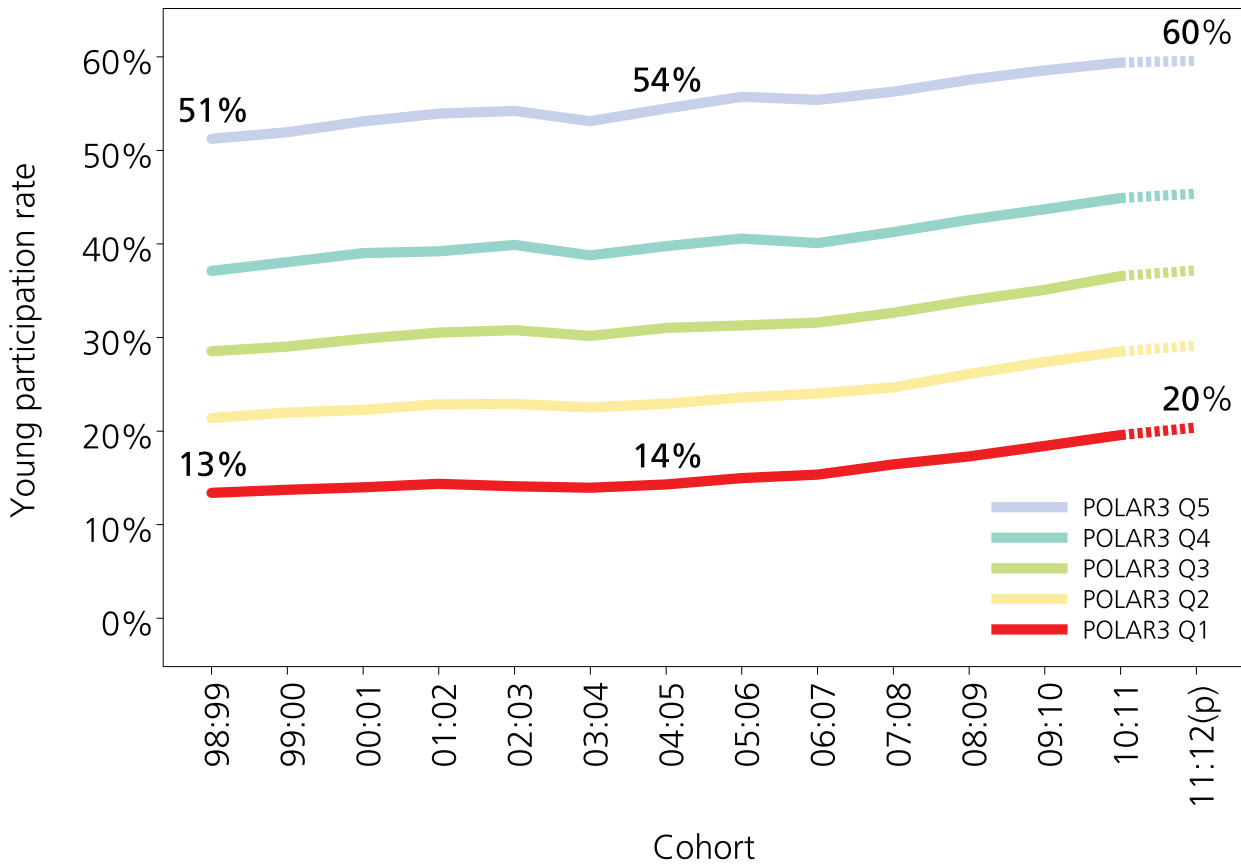
Note: "Cohorts" and the notation used to describe them are explained in the glossary at the back of this document.

10. However, as Figure 1 shows, this increase in young entry to HE from the most disadvantaged quintile was not evenly distributed across the study period. There was a much larger increase during the latter half of the period, where participation rates increased by six percentage points, compared to a one percentage point rise in the first half of the period. Though we do not yet have POLAR analysis beyond 2011-12, UCAS data does suggest continued progress (using the POLAR2 classification, rather than POLAR3 as above).

⁸ The 98:99 cohort refers to students who were 18 in the academic year 1998-99 and entered HE either aged 18 in 1998-99 or aged 19 in 1999-2000. For a full explanation of "cohorts" and the notation used to describe them, see the glossary at the back of this document.

11. However, a gap remains between the participation rates of disadvantaged and advantaged young people. Figure 2 shows the trends across all quintiles in the same period as Figure 1, revealing how this gap has persisted. (Quintile 1 is the most disadvantaged group.)

Figure 2: Young participation rate for all POLAR3 quintiles



Source: Source: HEFCE 2013/28

Note: "Cohorts" and the notation used to describe them are explained in the glossary at the back of this document.

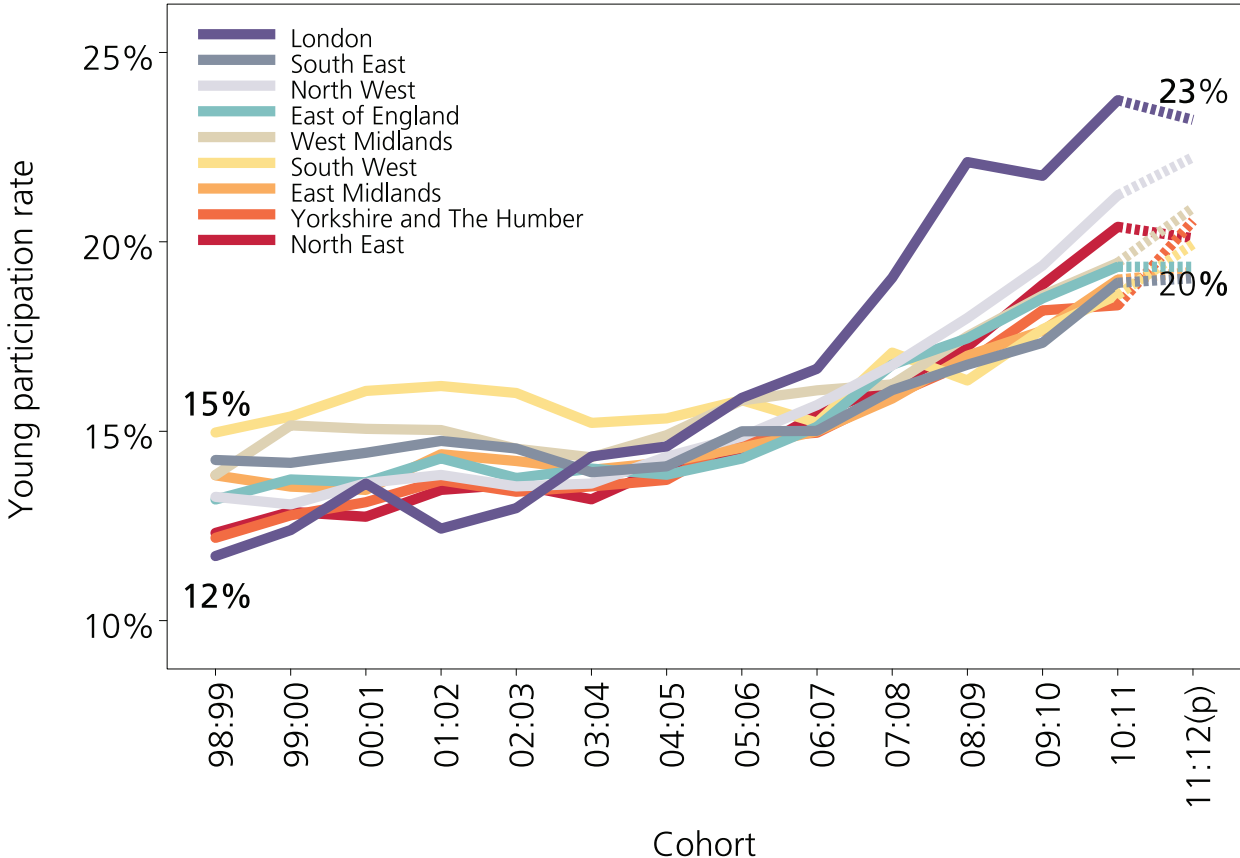
12. Figure 2 shows that across the full period, participation among the most advantaged group increased by nine percentage points compared to only seven percentage points for the most disadvantaged group – although, since the mid-2000s, the percentage point increases for both these groups have been the same. So, while the proportional gap between the most advantaged and the most disadvantaged has reduced – participation rates for quintile 5 are now three times higher than quintile 1, compared to around four times higher at the start of the study period – the absolute gap between the most advantaged and most disadvantaged remains as wide as at any point during this time.

Regional trends

13. The "Trends in young participation" research (HEFCE 2013/28) shows substantial differences in participation rates in different parts of England for disadvantaged young people. As shown in Figure 3, trends are upwards in all regions, but London shows the largest increase, almost doubling from 12 per cent to 23 per cent. The North West and North East also show greater than average increases.

Other regions show increases below the national average. The South East had the smallest rise (just five percentage points compared to the national average of seven percentage points), which means that disadvantaged young people living in the South East are now less likely to participate in HE than similarly disadvantaged young people from other regions.

Figure 3: Young participation rates by region for most disadvantaged young people (POLAR3 quintile 1)



Source: HEFCE 2013/28

Note: "Cohorts" and the notation used to describe them are explained in the glossary at the back of this document.

14. The distribution of the most disadvantaged young people varies geographically. For example, only 3 per cent of the young population in London (around 3,000 young people) are in the most disadvantaged group nationally, whereas in the North East a third of the young population (around 11,000 young people) are in this group. Nonetheless, the proportion of each region's young population that falls into the most disadvantaged groups remains stable over time, suggesting that the trends in Figure 3 reflect real changes in the chances of disadvantaged young people entering HE, and are not the effects of migration between regions.

Sex

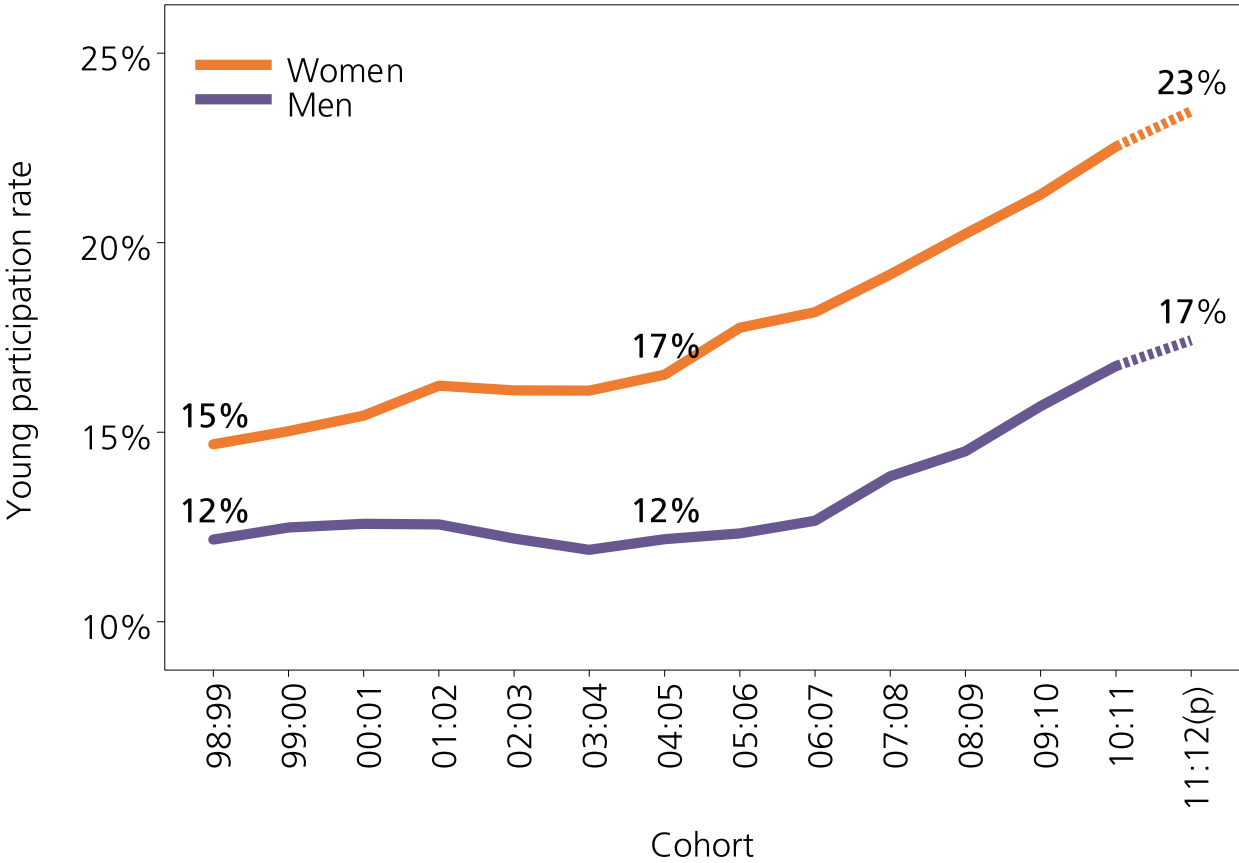
15. The "Trends in young participation" research (HEFCE 2013/28) also shows that, although participation is rising both among young men and young women, there is a widening gap between the genders.

16. At the beginning of the study period the overall participation rate for young men in England was 29 per cent compared to 32 per cent for young women. This three percentage point difference rose to eight percentage points by 2011-12 (34 per cent participation for young men compared to 42 per cent for young women).

17. In the 11:12 cohort 18,000 more women participated in HE in England than men; it would take a further 24,000 young men to enter HE in order to bring their participation rate into line with that of young women.

18. Figure 4 shows young participation rates for men and women from the most disadvantaged areas (that is, those with the lowest rates of young participation in HE under the POLAR classification). The trends are similar to those for England overall. Participation rates among women are higher than those for men throughout the period, but the gap between them doubled, from three percentage points to six percentage points by the end of the study period.

Figure 4: Young participation rates by sex for most disadvantaged young people (POLAR3 quintile 1)



Source: HEFCE 2013/28

Note: "Cohorts" and the notation used to describe them are explained in the glossary at the back of this document.

19. In numerical terms, for the 11:12 cohort, 3,000 more young women than men entered HE from these areas, and equalising the participation rates of both genders would require an extra 4,000 young men to enter HE.

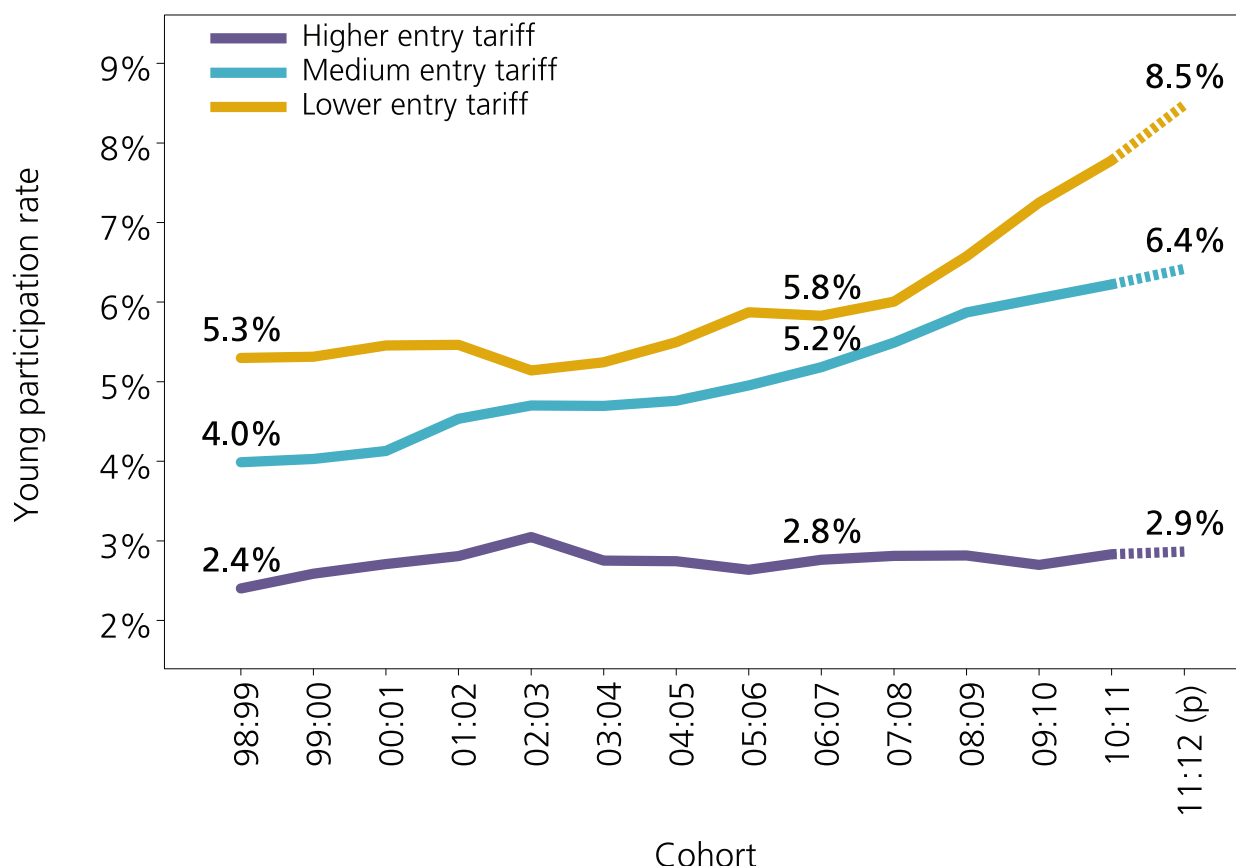
20. These gender gaps are troubling and we will encourage institutions to increase the focus on boys from disadvantaged areas when targeting their outreach activity.

Selectivity of institution

21. OFFA's "Trends in young participation by student background and selectivity of institution" report (OFFA 2014/01) shows participation rates at institutions with high, medium or low entry requirements in terms of UCAS tariff points, for young people from the 40 per cent most disadvantaged areas (measuring disadvantage by the number of children in each area with at least one graduate parent).

22. Figure 5 shows that the participation rate of this group at universities with high entry tariffs has remained relatively flat since the late 1990s, peaking at 3.1 per cent in the 02:03 cohort and remaining at, or below, 3 per cent since then. By contrast, participation rates for this group at medium and lower entry tariff institutions have increased since the early 2000s, rising sharply since the 07:08 cohort, and with the greatest increase at lower tariff institutions (from 6 per cent for the 07:08 cohort to 8.5 per cent for the 11:12 cohort).

Figure 5: Participation rates by selectivity for most disadvantaged 40 per cent of young people

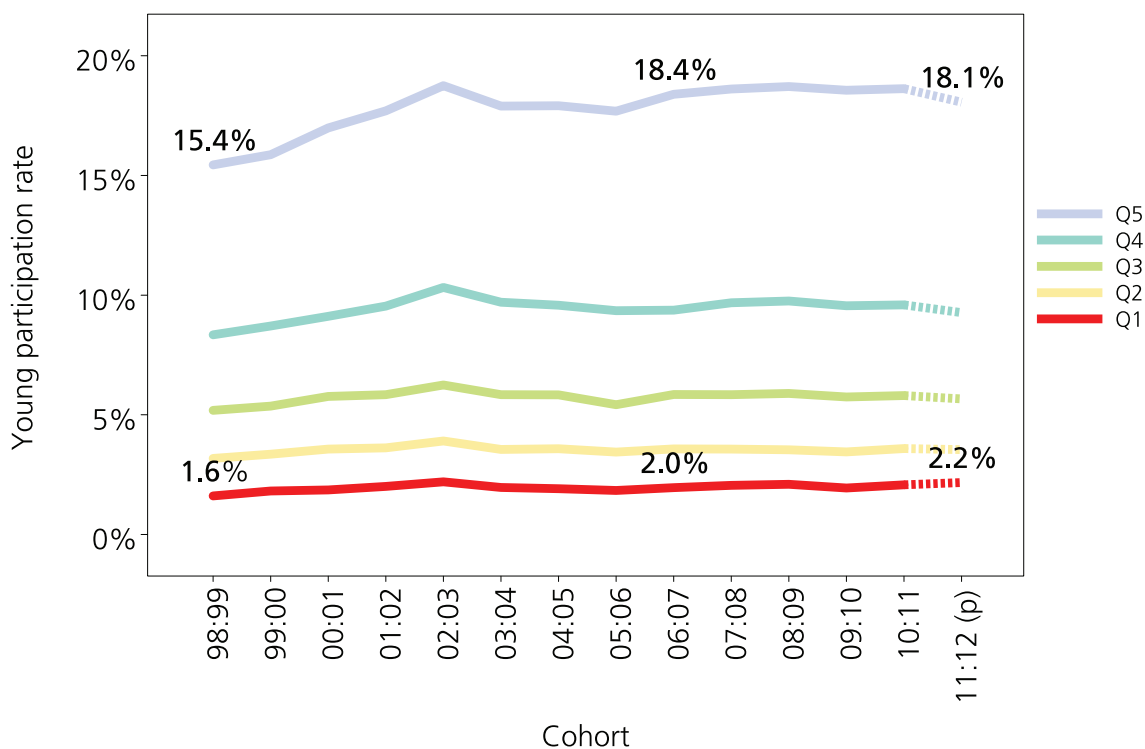


Source: OFFA 2014/01

Note: "Cohorts" and the notation used to describe them are explained in the glossary at the back of this document.

23. The report shows that in 2011-12 a young person from the most advantaged group was 6.3 times more likely to study at a higher tariff university than a young person from the two most disadvantaged quintiles (measuring levels of advantage by the proportion of people in a local area who have a graduate parent or parents). It also shows (see Figure 6) that the profile of participation at these universities has remained relatively unchanged over the last decade.

Figure 6: Trends in young participation in higher tariff HEIs for areas grouped by the proportion of children with graduate parents



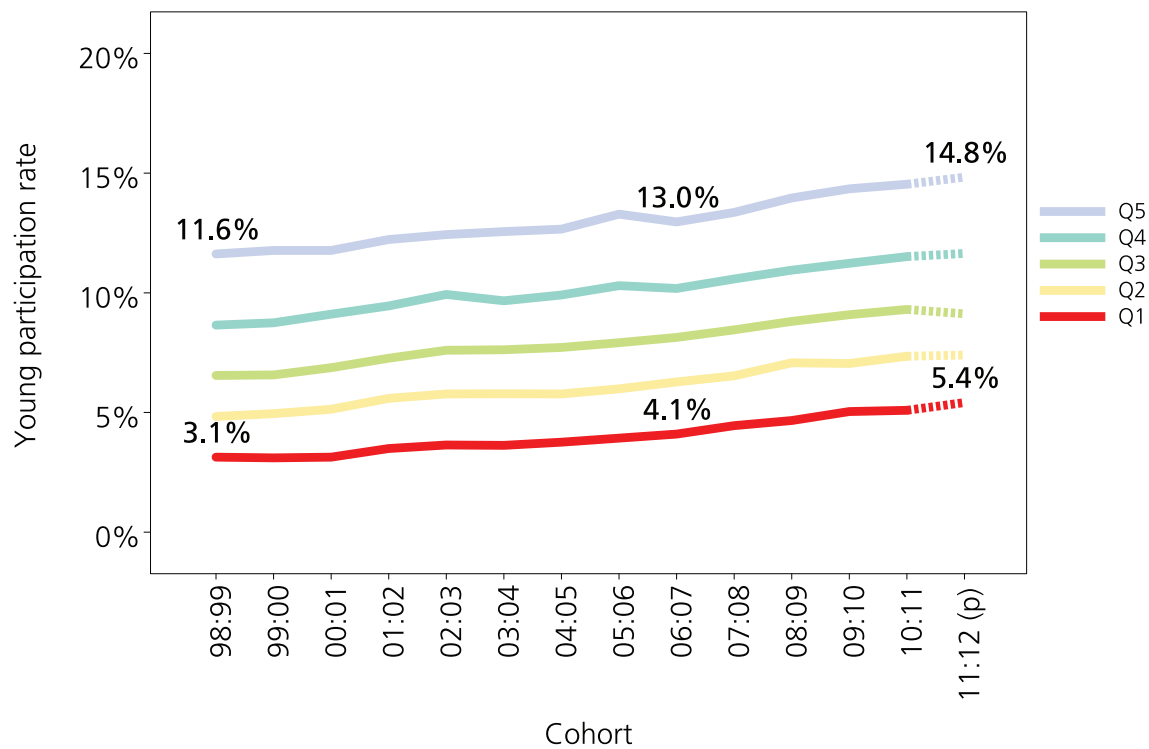
Source: OFFA 2014/01

Notes: "Cohorts" and the notation used to describe them are explained in the glossary at the back of this document. Q1-Q5 = quintiles 1 to 5.

24. In medium tariff institutions (Figure 7), the trend and relative participation rates are much closer to that of HE as a whole: participation rates for young people from all backgrounds have increased since the mid-2000s.

25. The pattern for lower tariff institutions (Figure 8) is different: greater increases in participation for the most disadvantaged compared to the most advantaged have led to a nearly even participation rate of 9.3 per cent and 7.9 per cent respectively for the 11:12 cohort.

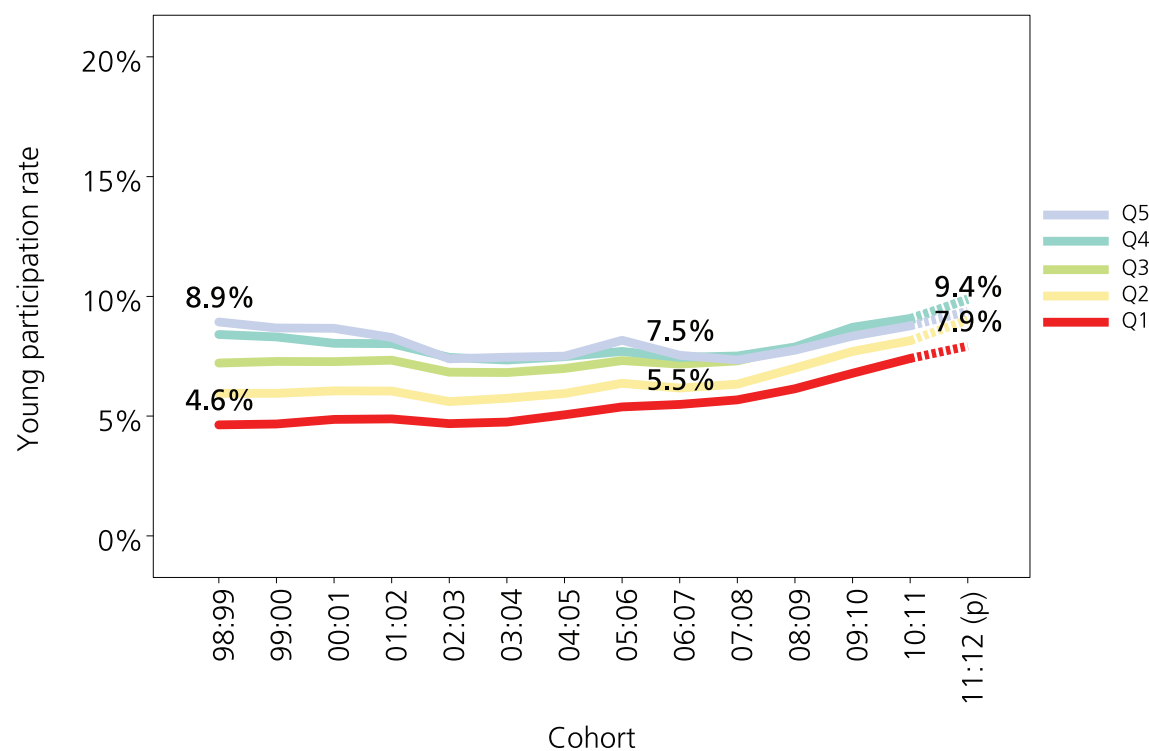
Figure 7: Trends in young participation in medium tariff HEIs for areas grouped by the proportion of children with graduate parents



Source: OFFA 2014/01

Notes: "Cohorts" and the notation used to describe them are explained in the glossary at the back of this document. Q1-Q5 = quintiles 1 to 5.

Figure 8: Trends in young participation in lower tariff HEIs for areas grouped by the proportion of children with graduate parents



Source: OFFA 2014/01

Notes: "Cohorts" and the notation used to describe them are explained in the glossary at the back of this document. Q1-Q5 = quintiles 1 to 5.

26. These large differences in the chances of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering high tariff universities compared to their more advantaged peers are partly explained by prior attainment at school. This often leaves them lacking the necessary grades in the requisite subjects to meet highly selective universities' entry requirements:

“The picture ... is one of early inequality in attainment amongst pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds which increases incrementally through primary and secondary education. Disadvantaged pupils may well have had a more limited curriculum choice from the age of 14 and are significantly less likely to progress to post-16 education than their advantaged peers, even if they are very able. When they do progress, they are less likely to achieve the highest grades. As many as 60,000 pupils (10 per cent of the cohort) were at some point in the top fifth of school performers, but did not enter HE by age 19.” (OFFA 2010/03)

27. However, differences in prior attainment do not entirely account for the entry gap to highly selective institutions. Sutton Trust analysis has found that each year, more than 3,000 suitably qualified young people from disadvantaged backgrounds did not enter these universities⁹. Subsequent work undertaken by the Sutton Trust and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)¹⁰ found that pupils from independent schools were more likely to apply to highly selective institutions, and to make more applications than their state school peers who had the same entry qualifications. Indeed, earlier work by BIS and the Sutton Trust¹¹ showed that if application patterns were the same for independent school pupils and state school pupils, approximately 4,500 more students from state schools would enter the 500 most selective courses each year.

28. It is clear, therefore, that highly selective universities need to take a multi-layered approach to diversifying their student populations. This would entail both developing approaches to attract more highly qualified applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds, and working intensively with schools and colleges to ensure that people are making the right choices to maximise the chances for entry, and are supported to achieve their full academic potential.

29. Many highly selective universities already choose to use contextual information in their admissions processes to help them identify applicants' potential. Some also choose to use it to make lower offers; some use it as a tool to target outreach. OFFA and HEFCE both appreciate that academic autonomy is an essential aspect of our HE system and that the freedom of institutions to control their own admissions criteria is an important part of this. However, all highly selective universities should consider whether they could make better use of contextual information in their admissions process and critically examine their entry requirements, policies and processes to ensure that they are not unduly disadvantaging certain groups of students that have the potential to succeed on their programmes.

⁹ Sutton Trust “[The missing 3000: State schools under-represented at leading universities](#)” (2004).

¹⁰ BIS and Sutton Trust “[Tracking the decision making of high achieving higher education applicants](#)” (BIS research paper no. 86) (2012).

¹¹ BIS and Sutton Trust “[Applications, offers and admissions to research led universities](#)” (BIS research paper no. 5) (2009).

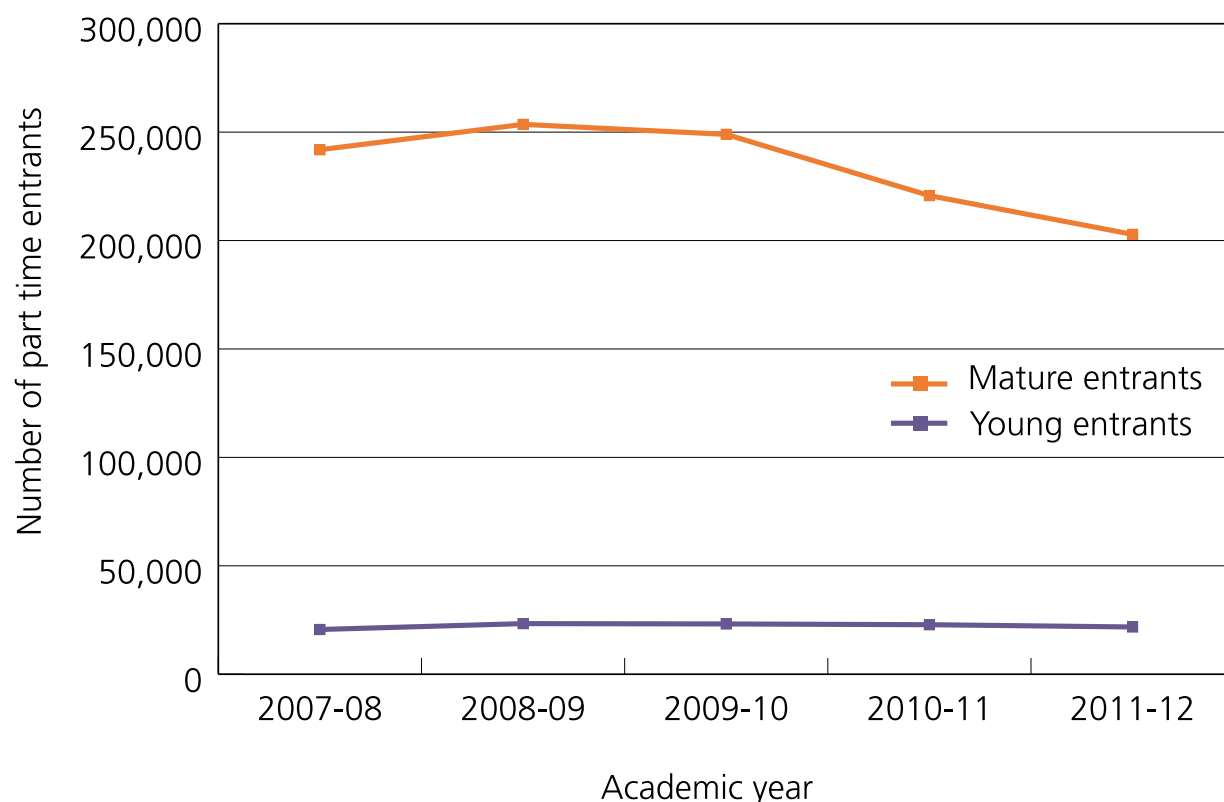
Mature students

30. The rising trends reported by UCAS for young applicants are not mirrored in older age groups in England. Application rates through UCAS in 2013 (up to March 2013) for people aged 23 and older fell by between 3 and 10 per cent; this followed a drop of between 15 and 20 per cent for people over 19 in the 2012 application cycle.

31. As UCAS points out, these drops follow unusually large increases in application rates in 2009 and 2011, so the latest figures could be a reversion to earlier trends; and it is also the case that application for full-time courses through UCAS is much lower from these older groups than from younger people. Nonetheless, this is an area of concern.

32. Our concern is all the greater given that these drops have coincided with substantial decreases in part-time enrolment, both undergraduate and postgraduate, between 2010 and 2012¹². Since 90 per cent of part-time undergraduate students are mature (although most mature undergraduates study full-time), this undoubtedly includes a substantial drop in mature participation. The number of part-time undergraduate entrants has fallen by 40 per cent – equivalent to 105,000 fewer people – and, as shown in Figure 9, this decline is almost entirely due to the fall in mature entrants (in this case, meaning people aged over 21).

Figure 9: Part-time undergraduate UK domiciled entrants to English HEIs



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency data

¹² Source: HESES information, reported in [“Higher Education in England: Impact of the 2012 reforms”](#) (HEFCE 2013/03)

Part-time students

33. HESA data show that the declines in part-time first degree entrants registered at HEIs are largely driven by changes in students studying at an intensity below 25 per cent of a full-time equivalent student. These students would not be eligible for student loans. Numbers of such entrants fell by 42 per cent (8,000 students) between 2010-11 and 2012-13. Numbers of entrants studying first degrees at higher intensities – and so eligible for loans if they met the other criteria – were at about the same level in 2012-13 as they were in 2010-11.

34. The picture is different, however, for non-first-degree courses. Across all intensities of study for such courses, the number of entrants declined by around 40 per cent between 2010-11 and 2012-13. This decline raises some concern for WP because, although not all part-time students are from disadvantaged backgrounds, part-time study is an important route into HE for people from under-represented groups. It represents a “second chance” for many who have low or no entry qualifications, or who did not participate when young, and the opportunity to reskill or upskill for those already in employment. Recent analysis by Claire Callender concludes that “part-time study plays an important role in raising, updating and improving the skills levels of people already in employment and ensuring that they possess the skills and qualifications required by employers”¹³.

35. Analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) information by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI)¹⁴ reveals that:

- in headcount terms, approximately 33 per cent of students (undergraduate and postgraduate) study part-time, which equates to 13 per cent full-time equivalent (FTE)
- more than half of part-time students are studying for undergraduate degrees and other awards; a significant minority are on postgraduate taught courses
- 61 per cent of part-time students are women (compared to 54 per cent of full-time students)
- 61 per cent of part-time students are over 29 years old when they start their course
- the four most popular subject areas for part-time students are: subjects allied to medicine; education; combined studies; and business and administrative studies. These are chosen by over two-thirds of all part-time students
- 45 per cent of college-taught undergraduates are part-time (compared to 29 per cent across the HE sector as a whole)
- a high proportion of part-time students already hold an HE qualification
- a significant minority of part-time students have no or low level entry qualifications
- on graduation, a high proportion of part-time graduates were employed in the public sector compared to full-time graduates
- two-thirds of part-time students have family commitments
- part-time students have lower completion rates.

¹³ Claire Callender, “The private and public benefits of part-time HE” (2013), published in *Adults learning Extra: Part-time higher education*.

¹⁴ HEPI “Flexible learning: wrapping higher education around the needs of part-time students” (2013).

36. This list does not give definitive answers about what motivates students to undertake part-time study, nor about the role played by other groups such as employers in a person's decision to enter HE. But the list does show that part-time students are a heterogeneous group, and suggests that they have different motivations in choosing to study compared to full-time students. For example, the fact that many undergraduate part-time students already hold an HE qualification implies a substantial amount of re-skilling, as opposed to up-skilling. Meanwhile, the fact that a substantial minority of part-time students have low or no entry qualifications means that a declining part-time market could reduce opportunities for progression from non-traditional pathways.

37. Furthermore, part-time provision varies greatly by region and geography, and across institutions, which is important because part-time students are more likely than full-time students to study closer to home (partly because they are more likely to be mature and thus have deeper ties to their locality).

38. Participants at the roundtable discussion concerned with mature and part-time students provided, from their experience in universities and colleges, a number of possible explanations for both the steep decline in part-time entrants between 2010 and 2012 and slightly longer-term downward trend in demand for part-time study observed since 2008. These explanations included:

- a decline in employer-supported part-time study
- institutional decisions to concentrate on full-time provision
- greater debt aversion among part-time learners
- poor communication of the changes to tuition fees, fee loans and student support
- the Government policy under which public funding for higher education is not provided in relation to students studying for a qualification equivalent to, or lower than, one that they already hold, except for those on certain courses (the "ELQ policy").

Flexible provision

39. It is difficult to assess whether the flexible study options offered by HE providers are adequate for the diverse needs of potential HE learners. Therefore, addressing the decline in part-time study requires a fuller understanding of demand so that appropriate provision can be developed. This can be an opportunity to review the different ways in which HE can be accessed and delivered, for example through more flexible, student-centred approaches to existing or new forms of delivery. This is particularly timely in the wake of reforms that seek to open up the system to a broader set of HE providers and as new forms of delivery potentially take hold such as massive open online courses (MOOCs). Understanding the needs and learning preferences of prospective HE students, particularly those that have already left formal education, is difficult but will be essential if we are to develop effective policy and institutional responses to address the decline in part-time study.

40. HEFCE has already undertaken a great deal of work on flexible learning, credit transfer and employer engagement/workforce development, and Universities UK (UUK) published a review of part-time HE in October 2013¹⁵. Throughout 2013-14, the Association of Colleges (AOC) is working with BIS to research the particular circumstances and challenges for college-based, part-time HE. All of this

¹⁵ Universities UK "[The power of part-time: Review of part-time and mature higher education \(2013\)](#)".

activity, as well as other work such as surveys carried out by the mixed economy group of FECs, will be integral to our work to understand and address the challenges for part-time study and students.

Evidence and approaches

41. The CFE/Edge Hill international research found that each of the countries studied faces similar, persistent issues relating to socio-economic status and participation. Some, notably the USA, South Africa and Australia, have particular problems in the participation rates of certain ethnic groups, but the over-riding determinant for progression to HE remains socio-economic class. Despite these challenges, participation, including among target groups, is rising in each of the countries studied.

Targeting and funding

42. Clear targeting is central to WP because it ensures that policy messages about national goals are articulated and understood, provides the basis for effective evaluation and enables performance to be recognised through funding mechanisms.

43. The main policy focus in England has been on increasing the participation of learners from groups that are under-represented in higher education. Overwhelmingly, these are people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. People with disabilities and, more recently, care leavers, are also identified as distinct target groups. OFFA publishes annual guidance on targeting activity in access agreements. HEFCE published targeting guidance in 2007 (“Higher education outreach: targeting disadvantaged learners” (HEFCE 2007/12)) and has refined this in later publications, such as guidance on developing WP strategic statements (WPSSs).

44. Liverpool John Moores University’s outreach work for looked-after children, care leavers and students estranged from their families is an example of how WP can be closely targeted to overcome the disadvantages facing a specific group of people.

Case study: Liverpool John Moores University – support for looked-after children, care leavers and students estranged from their parents

What is it?

Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) offers a package of support for its students who have experienced being in care or who are estranged from their parents. This is complemented by a range of targeted outreach activities for looked-after children in local schools and colleges.

Who is it for?

In the last two years the outreach programme has worked with over 80 young people through targeted events. A total of 41 looked-after children identified as having the potential of progressing into higher education have participated in a programme of academic mentoring.

On application to LJMU students who declare that they have spent time in local authority care are contacted and offered individual support. Since 2009-10 220 students have benefited from this support while studying at LJMU.

Activities

Alongside a series of targeted outreach events to raise aspirations, LJMU have been working with Wirral Borough Council to raise attainment at Key Stage 4. Over 40 looked-after children have received academic mentoring by trained undergraduates. The mentoring aims to support their GCSE preparation and is focused on specific subjects. All receive one-to-one support over a six-week programme.

Whilst at LJMU care leavers or students estranged from their parents receive a John Lennon Imagine Award which consists of financial assistance and year-round access to an approachable and expert member of staff (the Care Leavers Project Co-ordinator).

The co-ordinator acts as an advocate for students within the university. Liaising with other departments and academic teams, the co-ordinator provides advice on navigating the social services and student funding mazes to ensure students are able to live independently and succeed. The co-ordinator also runs regular events on money management, cooking, careers guidance or any other topic that students might suggest.

Financial support is provided through a minimum bursary of £1,000 per year. Primarily, the bursary assists with students' accommodation and course costs, but students also say that the bursary enables them to reduce the amount of part-time hours they work so that they are able to volunteer or take on work placements in addition to their course.

Impact

The outreach programme has been evaluated by reviewing the students' performance at GCSE. Since the academic mentoring started the students have improved their GCSE performance, with 31 per cent of students increasing their GCSE score by two grades, 35 per cent by one grade, and the remainder maintaining their predicted grade. The programme is now being established across Greater Merseyside.

LJMU was highly commended in 2011 by Buttle UK for "the exemplary level of support offered to care leavers". Care leavers when surveyed stated that they found the pre-entry contact of benefit (94 per cent) and they "would not have found it as easy to have successfully completed this year" without support from the dedicated member of staff (93 per cent). Ninety-four per cent of students feel that they had benefited from the financial assistance provided by the award, with more than half of the students commenting that it "made sure that I stayed on course".

The first cohort of students to receive a John Lennon Imagine Award graduated in July 2012, with half of the graduates receiving firsts or 2:1s.

45. Government, policy makers and institutions also increasingly aim to address broader issues of equality and diversity in access approaches. For example, as well as the concerns over the representation of men and of some ethnic groups, as discussed earlier in this chapter, learners with vocational Level 3 qualifications are under-represented in many institutions. OFFA has encouraged institutions to align their access agreements with their broader institutional equality and diversity objectives, and required access agreement activity to take account of equality and diversity.

46. Part of the motivation for this is that since April 2011, public sector bodies (including HEFCE, OFFA and HEIs) have had a legal duty under the Equality Act 2010 to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people from different groups.

47. All the countries studied in the international research target groups of people in which disadvantage or under-representation is concentrated, although there has also been debate about whether definitions are equitable.

48. The ARC Network literature review and the international research both discuss the importance of a strong national policy framework for targeting, within which there is enough flexibility to respect the diversity of institutions and the particular needs of communities (for example the differences between urban, rural and coastal districts). The international research notes that WP is much more likely to be goal orientated, effective and less fragmented when legislation, policy guidelines and institutional activity work together. It states that: "Compacts or agreements between governments and providers which outline how funding will contribute to national indicators on WP are helping to ensure that national policy objectives and institutional missions are broadly aligned."

49. The international report also notes that governments in some countries use funding as a further policy lever, making allocations on a per-student basis as a direct reward for performance against national participation aims.

50. In England, a "dual" system of WP investment and regulation operates. OFFA, through its agreements with individual institutions, regulates their plans for additional investment in access and student success, and monitors targets and performance that build towards national goals. HEFCE's SO funding recognises the additional costs of recruiting disadvantaged students and supporting them to successful completion. This system of investment and regulation means institutions can build and maintain the infrastructure necessary for effective WP, while also being held accountable for their own performance.

Outreach

Channelling aspiration and raising attainment

51. The international research shows that some institutions have reacted to governments' desire for demonstrable impact by shifting the balance of their outreach further towards recruitment activity that allows them to meet access agreement milestones, rather than longer-term aspiration building and attainment raising. As OFFA and HEFCE make clear in our respective guidance documents, a balanced approach is important, with activities that widen the pool of young people able to progress to HE working alongside activities that help the institution recruit from it.

52. Approaches to outreach, and the reasons for doing it, vary according to institutional, Government and regulatory priorities. As discussed in the literature review, opinions differ about the fundamental purposes of outreach and progression activities, and the role of higher education providers in addressing the aspiration and attainment gaps that lead to under-representation.

53. The interactions between aspiration and attainment are complex. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation report cited in the literature review suggests that aspirations may be higher among lower socio-economic groups than is generally believed¹⁶. The report concludes that there is no evidence

¹⁶ [Colleen Cummings et al "Can changing aspirations and attitudes impact on educational attainment? A review of interventions" \(2012\).](#)

that changes in attitudes, particularly aspirations, influence attainment but that rather a focus on changing behaviour and actions might have a more direct impact on attainment. To achieve this change, the study found that it was important to keep aspirations on track over time, ensuring that they remained realistic and, importantly, that relevant information, advice and guidance was delivered at appropriate times, helping learners to understand the pathways to achieving their ambitions.

54. Research and evaluation carried out under the Aimhigher programme demonstrates this pragmatic approach to outreach, in which the inter-relationships between aspiration and confidence, attainment and progression were understood. In the best examples of partnership there was little competition between schools and HE providers over who was responsible for managing aspiration, building confidence or driving up attainment. Instead each element was seen as a part of the broader, overall aim of progression for all stakeholders, most particularly the learner.

55. Research undertaken by the Policy Research Institute for Aimhigher Greater Manchester in 2011¹⁷ found that the most significant impact of Aimhigher on learner identity was the increase in confidence and self-esteem – this was evident across the majority of learners in the study. The report drew similar conclusions to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report above, finding that changing behaviours and actions led to increased impact on outcomes; it noted that the outreach activities provided by Aimhigher appeared to have increased motivation and made learners realise that they needed to work hard if they wanted to achieve their goals. The report notes that the outreach activity highlighted to the learners the need to achieve in their GCSE exams because these outcomes affected their progression to HE – a fact that some had not previously realised.

56. Although aspiration may be higher than is understood, it nevertheless requires some seeding. Young children without family experience of HE need to know about the possibilities of progression in order to begin to factor it into their life choices. The University of Portsmouth's UP For It Juniors scheme is an example of how this can be done.

Case study: University of Portsmouth – UP for It Juniors

What is it?

UP for It Juniors is designed to raise the aspirations of primary school children.

Who is it for?

UP for It Juniors works with primary school pupils in Years 5 and 6. It targets 32 primary schools each year, which are selected by being above the national average for the percentage of children receiving free school meals, a high IDACI (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index) ranking and being a feeder school to targeted secondary schools. Since its launch in May 2005, UP for It Juniors now reaches over 3,200 children each year.

¹⁷ [Aimhigher and Leeds Metropolitan University "Qualitative Research into the Learner Progression Framework Approach in Greater Manchester" \(2011\).](#)

What happens?

In Year 5 each pupil takes part in games and activities covering the what, where, who, why and when of university and life as a student. This includes exploring pathways into higher education, finding out what students are really like and understanding the different careers and subjects available. University students act as positive role models and work with the children and teachers during the session.

In Year 6 the pupils visit the university for a “Day in the Life of a University Student”. It is led by academics and students, and activities include fun and practical mini-lectures on a range of subjects studied at Portsmouth, an interactive tour of the university campus led by the students, a “Design a Campus” practical, a virtual tour of halls of residence and a class graduation ceremony.

What is the impact?

In 2011, 1,741 children took part in Year 5 sessions and a digital voting and answering system recorded the children’s answers to a series of questions to monitor the session’s impact. Answers were compared at the beginning and end of each session. Improvements were seen in the understanding of what a university is (66 per cent at the start of the session compared to 90 per cent at the end), aspirations to go (63 per cent at the start of the session, 84 per cent at the end) and the belief that it will be interesting, fun and exciting (65 per cent at the start of the session, 82 per cent at the end).

In 2011, 1,464 children took part in the Year 6 visits and the impact was measured through feedback postcards, with 67 per cent stating that the visit made them want to go to university.

“I thought this day was awesome! Now I want to go to university. I hope I graduate for real one day.”

The programme has built-in longitudinal tracking of individuals, with the first pupils now in Year 12 and approaching the university application process.

Collaboration and partnership

57. The international research and the literature review stress that partnership between HEIs, schools and colleges is key to effective outreach, a finding that was endorsed by roundtable discussion participants.

58. As the literature review points out, cross-sector and inter-sector partnership can maximise resources, ensure impartiality, widen the distribution of activity and aid equitable distribution of HE outreach and progression opportunities. It also suggests that collaboration can enable pooling of smaller sub-groups of disadvantaged people to make outreach more efficient, thus improving provision and targeting.

59. The international research notes that national programmes, with established frameworks, tend to be more visible and, by having common aims, can make activity more transferable and national evaluation more straightforward. It goes on to suggest that interventions are most likely to

retain focus and be able to demonstrate impact when there is state funding available for outreach and access activities, coupled with a strong policy imperative and a robust evidence base. The international research emphasises the need for local flexibility in terms of who to target, when and with what type of activity, as does the literature review.

60. We do not underestimate the challenges in partnership working, not least in terms of the significant levels of time and resources that each partner needs to commit. Collaboration, and the confidence to establish it and carry it through, requires long-term commitment from Government and policy makers as well as institutions and their partners. Building the pool of applicants can encompass a wider partnership between HE providers and schools that focuses on school improvement, enabling a broader cultural change across the school that leads to enhanced progression. An example of this is the impact that the University of the West of England (UWE) has had on attainment by using a strategic, whole-school approach to outreach engagement.

Case Study: University of the West of England – Enhanced partnerships

What is it?

School and college partnerships are a key feature of UWE's vision and mission and it is in partnership with over 400 educational institutions. However it has "enhanced partnerships" with several schools in Bristol that are strategic, sustained, institution-wide, focused on school improvement and are often on a legal footing. Two enhanced partnerships with Bridge Learning Campus and the Cabot Learning Federation schools have seen significant improvement to educational attainment and have experienced notable culture change among both staff and students.

Who is it for?

Within Bristol there are neighbourhoods where only one young person in 20 enters HE. UWE works with the local authority, schools and colleges in order to increase aspiration and attainment in these parts of the city.

UWE became one of three partners to develop Bridge Learning Campus (BLC) in 2006. It comprises a primary school, secondary school, special school, student support centre, and a co-located vocational centre run by the college.

The Cabot Learning Federation (CLF) was formally created in 2009 and brought together three schools, along with UWE and Rolls-Royce as co-sponsors.

What happens?

In both BLC and the CLF, UWE has been actively involved in governance and management. UWE has provided mentoring and informal advice to support senior management through the change process. It provided the first chair for BLC's newly formed trust while other members of the governing body were identified by UWE to fill particular skills gaps. The 2010 Ofsted report considered governance of BLC to have become "outstanding". There is senior management involvement from UWE in the board at CLF too, with Professor Ron Ritchie (Pro-Vice-Chancellor) acting as chair.

UWE has encouraged significant involvement between the schools and the university's education department, enabling evidence-based approaches to pedagogy and encouraging dialogue between researchers and practitioners. A masters in teaching and learning has been created to establish a research culture at the schools and encourage lifelong learning by staff. In its 2010 inspection of BLC, Ofsted noted that the development of an innovative and creative curriculum has underpinned the improvement in students' achievement.

UWE's commitment to these schools is comprehensive and it provides expertise and support from a range of areas across the university to facilitate improvements within the schools, for example, in human resources, marketing and finance.

An important part of UWE's connection with these schools continues to be directly with their pupils to raise aspirations and achievement. UWE has a wide ranging and sustained programme of engagement with schools that provides learners with opportunities to gain experience and knowledge of higher education, to engage with university students and to be supported in developing a range of skills.

What is the impact?

Attainment has improved within the schools. BLC was Bristol's second most improved school in 2009. In 2006 only 11 per cent achieved five A*-C GCSEs including English and maths and 36 per cent achieved any five A*-C GCSEs. In 2011 this had moved to 40 per cent and 76 per cent respectively. Results at Key Stages 2 and 3 have also shown improvements, and applications for the school have risen.

The CLF originally brought together a high achieving school with two in need of improvement. John Cabot Academy continues to have excellent results, with 73 per cent of students gaining five grades A*-C at GCSE including English and maths in 2011. The predecessor schools with low academic attainment prior to joining the federation have seen substantial improvements. Bristol Brunel Academy has seen an increase from 19 per cent to 42 per cent of students gaining five grades A*-C at GCSE, including English and maths, between 2007 and 2011. Bristol Metropolitan Academy has seen an improvement of 13 per cent (five grades A*-C at GCSE including English and maths) in the two years it has been part of the federation.

Information, advice and guidance

61. Information, advice and guidance, commonly conflated to "IAG", is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of activities and interventions. "Information", "advice" and "guidance" are discrete elements, covering different activities and – particularly in terms of delivering advice and guidance – there is a need for a personalised approach, sensitive to the needs of each individual. The ARC Network literature review points to a Sutton Trust study that found that learners in non-selective state schools receive less advice than others regarding HE admissions processes, and that teachers in these schools are "not equipped with the knowledge and expertise to advise"¹⁸.

¹⁸ [Sutton Trust "Increasing higher education participation amongst disadvantaged young people and schools in poor communities" \(2008\)](#)

62. The literature review also notes that, in the context of WP, IAG should include access to careers education but that, with the new arrangements for careers services, planning an outreach programme that complements the approaches of individual schools may be challenging for HE providers. Planning may be made easier if the recommendations in the recent Ofsted report “Going in the right direction?”¹⁹ are adopted and implemented and lead to greater consistencies in how schools put careers guidance into place.

63. The literature review and international research both confirm that delivering the elements of information, advice and guidance requires a coherent programme that targets appropriately, starts early and intensifies during periods of transition. The literature review underlines that simply delivering more IAG is not enough: it needs to dovetail with the needs of the learner and be part of a framework of outreach activity. The Higher Education Progression Framework²⁰, developed by Action on Access with Aimhigher partnerships, promotes this approach.

64. Many stakeholders have worked to improve the availability of information, and many provide excellent material in highly navigable formats. However, static sources alone are not enough for people who lack the confidence or experience to look for information and apply it to their own circumstances. These learners, and groups of learners, need personalised and time-relevant support to bring together advice and guidance, in order to make information relevant to them.

65. As the literature review also points out, IAG programmes also need to reach out to learners’ parents, carers and other key influencers.

66. The advent of higher fees has increased the concern about debt and the economic return of higher education, and schools and HE providers have amplified calls for clear, high quality information about student finance. The 2012 NUS report “Pound in Your Pocket” included evidence (from before the 2012 changes) that students have found the various financial support mechanisms fragmented and difficult to navigate and understand²¹.

Outreach to older learners

67. Neither the international research nor the literature review revealed much about how HE providers and employers interact to support the participation of older learners, and both noted that there was a paucity of information about partnership in this area.

68. HEFCE has gathered some evidence, for example through its work to widen participation of all age groups within and across the science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects and disciplines²², and its programme relating to workforce development. In addition, as highlighted in the interim report, the CFE/Edge Hill study of the use and impact of the HEFCE WP funding²³ found that just under half of all HE providers that responded to CFE’s survey (43 institutions) were engaged in awareness-raising work with employers and/or delivered foundation degrees; a similar proportion (38 institutions) also provided IAG for employers and their staff; 39 respondents had mechanisms

¹⁹ [Ofsted “Going in the right direction? Careers guidance in schools from September 2012” \(2013\).](#)

²⁰ For more information, see the [Action on Access “Higher education progression framework guide”](#).

²¹ [NUS et al, “Mapping the evidence. A review of the literature: student financial support in further and higher education” \(2012\).](#)

²² More information on this programme is available at www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/crosscutting/sivs/stem/.

²³ [CFE/Edge Hill University “The uses and impact of HEFCE funding for widening participation” \(2013\).](#)

to give accreditation for prior experiential learning. The majority of these HE providers are small or inclusive; highly selective and specialist institutions most commonly do not engage with employers to widen access.

69. The CFE/Edge Hill report also noted that a substantial minority of HE providers seek to reach key target groups, and adults in particular, through engagement with voluntary, community and faith groups. Just over half of the institutions in CFE's survey said they provide IAG to community organisations and approximately a third offer campus visits, outreach visits and taster days specifically targeted at adults in the community.

70. OFFA's guidance to institutions on preparing their access agreements has specifically encouraged them to consider working with communities and employers to reach out to mature learners. Teesside University, for example, takes an innovative approach to outreach for older learners who are likely to want to study part-time, and also demonstrates a highly flexible, demand-led style of provision that is tailored to meet the needs of employers and their employees.

Case study: Teesside University – partnering with employers

What is it?

Teesside University is committed to working in partnership with employers and business. The university listens and works alongside business and industry to tailor programmes directly to their needs, providing a truly flexible offer which fits their business model.

The university's Darlington campus was launched in 2011 to support businesses locally, regionally and across the whole UK. The campus is an accessible venue where a wide range of provision, including traditional part-time courses, training sessions, specialist conferences and business networking events can be offered.

Who is it for?

The university used partnership to raise awareness of the opportunities available at the new Darlington campus. As an example, a link was developed with the Marketing Manager in one of Darlington's successful business parks, Lingfield Point. Through discussions it became clear that the university was able to effectively support the mission of this organisation.

Over a short space of time the university developed a strong, productive and mutually beneficial partnership which was celebrated by a well-attended launch event.

The partnership with Lingfield Point opens up a number of opportunities to engage with the employees and businesses based there. The university provides bespoke events and information sessions to engage employees, staged at different times of the day and evening in order to reach and include shift workers.

What happens?

Lingfield Point already hosted a range of lunchtime sessions for employees on their site and the university tapped into this audience, developing additional sessions to complement their existing programme. Sessions were linked to the ethos and interests of the organisation, while

also promoting the university's offer. Taster sessions included digital photography, health and wellbeing, design, upcycling and thrift and nutrition.

Lingfield Point wanted to promote higher education and skills to their workforce and businesses on a permanent basis, understanding that the decision-making process can be lengthy. The university designed a number of stands for the business park and established permanent displays of both university and Lingfield Point literature.

Each month university staff visit Lingfield Point to provide information, advice and guidance on higher education as well as specific course information to interested employees. These sessions are promoted in partnership with the Lingfield Point management team and through individual employer communications.

A new development for 2013-14 is a webinar for Lingfield Point staff. These will provide opportunities for Lingfield Point employees to engage with university staff on a range of higher education topics including fees and funding, subject talks and application/course information without leaving their desk.

Impact

The establishment of this partnership was crucial in order to raise the visibility of the university and its offer at both Middlesbrough and Darlington campuses. There are benefits in several key areas:

- Feedback highlighted that without the university's presence in their place of employment the employees would not have sought out information or applied to attend a course. University staff engaged over 300 employees in the information sessions and taster sessions. Requests from other local companies have been received, notably Everything Everywhere and Student Loans Company. Other Darlington community venues such as the Dolphin Centre Leisure Centre and Darlington Library have also been involved.
- Registrations for the university's part-time open days from Lingfield employees increased over 50 per cent between 2012 and 2013.
- Part-time applications have seen an increase of 3.5 per cent on 2012-13 performance with conversion being 13.3 per cent higher than the previous year.
- There has been progression to university part-time courses and progression to summer university taster courses.
- Other opportunities are emerging, for example discussions with a fostering agency based at Lingfield Point which may lead to bespoke training at regional and national levels.

Given the success of this scheme the university is working to replicate this model across other businesses and commercial centres.

Student finance

71. The international research found that all the countries studied were increasing their reliance on student/parental contributions towards the cost of HE, but that students were not deterred by higher level fees if appropriate mechanisms, including deferred payment and financial aid, were in

place to enable them to manage the cost and minimise the risks. This point was also made by NUS in 2012 in its “Pound in your Pocket” research, which states that the pre-2012 system “has not actively discouraged students from participating in higher education”. The ARC Network literature review also found that changes in HE finance have not been associated with any material reduction in HE participation by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and concluded that financial support could mitigate the effects of rising costs, although there was evidence that students found the various financial support mechanisms fragmented and difficult to navigate and understand.

72. It is important to ensure that financial support for students is such that financial concerns do not prevent students from low income backgrounds from applying, entering and completing their HE course. Financial support plays an important role in supporting students in their studies and may aid retention; this is discussed further in chapter 2. But evidence shows that other factors such as academic fit, geography and engagement in the course outweigh financial support in the decision making of prospective and existing students (source: [“Have bursaries influenced choices between universities?” \(OFFA 2010/06\)](#)).

73. Attitudinal research shows a relationship between income and concern around affordability and debt, and quantitative evidence shows that students from low income backgrounds are more likely than those from higher income backgrounds not to complete their course (see chapter 2). This might suggest that providing bursaries to these students would be beneficial. However, the evidence around the impact of bursaries on students’ behaviour is inconclusive, and we have found no clear evidence of a relationship between the size of bursary offered and the behaviour of targeted students at the point of entry to HE.

74. A formative evaluation of the year two outcomes of the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) by CFE²⁴ has found, through interviews and focus groups with NSP recipients, that while some said that the availability of financial aid influenced their decision, none suggested they would not have applied to HE if an award were not available. Although having an NSP award helped to alleviate some concern and worry over financing, the report goes on to say that where students have already decided to pursue HE, the failure to secure scholarships and bursaries will not necessarily change their minds. In addition, earlier OFFA analysis of participation rates, application patterns and choices between offers under the pre-2012 system of fees and student support found consistently that bursary size had no clear influence on disadvantaged young students’ choice of institution (“Have bursaries influenced choices between universities?”, OFFA 2010/06).

75. It is therefore concerning that the considerable investment that institutions have made in financial support for students has not yet been accompanied by clear evidence of its impact. The sums currently devoted to financial support as a tool for encouraging disadvantaged groups to enter HE are too large to be supported by the existing evidence base, suggesting that a proportion of this investment should be used more effectively for outreach. OFFA’s guidance to institutions has therefore encouraged them to rebalance their access agreement investment towards outreach, to better reflect the available body of evidence about impact.

76. However, despite the lack of national-level evidence on the impact of bursaries on students’ behaviour, there remains a view within the sector that financial support has an important role in

²⁴ [CFE “Formative evaluation of the National Scholarship Programme: Year 2” \(2013\)](#).

supporting students in their studies and that “the level and type of financial support available for students can play a significant role in the choices, experience and eventual outcomes for students in higher education”, as stated in the NUS “Pound In Your Pocket” report. This is demonstrated by institutions’ access agreements over recent years. OFFA has been pleased to see some rebalancing between types of expenditure in proportional terms, and substantial rises in cash expenditure on outreach, retention and student success, but OFFA would have liked to have seen larger and more rapid adjustment. The great majority of access agreement expenditure remains focused on financial support and the balance needs to shift further towards outreach.

77. There is clearly more work to be done to better understand the impact of financial support on entry to HE by disadvantaged groups. This includes the need to understand good practice in providing financial support to maximise its impact, for example in ensuring that financial support is in close strategic alignment with other WP measures and that it is clear and easily understood by prospective recipients. And, alongside national research and analysis, we will want to see evidence and evaluation at institutional level from those that believe there to be a positive impact. National and local research and evaluation should examine to what extent, and how, bursaries meet their objectives to attract students from disadvantaged backgrounds and support their retention, engagement and success; and the extent to which there is “dead weight” within bursary schemes that could be better used for other access and student success activity.

Evaluation

78. Evaluating widening participation activity has been a considerable challenge for all countries included in the international research. As noted above, the existence of a national framework of expectations, including clear targeting, is a pre-requisite of evaluating at a national level. There are some interesting examples of national evaluation frameworks for outreach such as the Design and Evaluation Matrix for Outreach (referred to in the international research) designed for operation in Australia, and we will consider these as we develop the English national evaluation framework.

79. The international research also identified a need for institution-level evaluation with the capability of co-ordinating and synthesising this with national evaluation, including longitudinal analysis and comparisons between individual institutions.

80. A key challenge in evaluating access work is tracking outcomes for the learners that institutions engage with through outreach. Local, robust tracking systems would greatly help institutions and their partners to generate better evidence that they can use to inform their approaches, improve the impact of their activities and demonstrate how they meet collaborative targets. Some tracking systems are already in place, for example the Higher Education Access Tracker in the South East (for more information, see www.highereducationaccesstracker.org.uk) and, in developing the evaluation framework as part of our strategy, we will determine how we can more actively support and facilitate the development of such systems.

Providing accessible routes to HE

81. Alongside activities that help prospective students meet HE entry requirements, the international research suggested that providing supplementary admission/progression routes has the greatest impact on access and retention, particularly when accompanied by pedagogical reforms and activities that build up socio-cultural capital and familiarity with HE.

82. The international research shows that successful models include compact arrangements whereby pathways between school or college into HE are developed at the local or regional level. Collaboration with employers, FECs and vocational education providers can improve progression pathways for potential students with inadequate or non-traditional qualifications. For example there is evidence that pre-entry access and foundation courses, often delivered collaboratively between schools, colleges and HE providers, contribute to retention and completion as well as access, by offering career guidance, tuition in maths and English, and help with applied writing and study skills. "Access to HE" courses are a long-standing entry route to HE for mature learners that have no, or low, academic qualifications, and their importance is recognised by their inclusion in the list of exemptions for the high grade student number policy. There were 42,150 students studying an Access to HE course in England and Wales in 2011-12²⁵ and in 2012-13, 32,230 people applied to HE through UCAS with Access to HE qualifications, 21,875 of whom were accepted (representing about 6 per cent of the total acceptances through UCAS in that cycle).

83. The international study states:

"More mainstream consideration should be given to alternative entry routes and bridging programmes to facilitate the access of academically well prepared young people and adults who otherwise would lack appropriate entry qualifications. Developing nationally recognised schemes would be advantageous, and consideration should be given to how the additional costs for students could be minimised or eliminated.... Ireland has developed specific routes for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and disabled students which have contributed significantly to improving participation by these groups in HE. Australia and Ireland have developed 'bridging programmes' for adults to access HE, while both Norway and South Africa provide alternative entry routes for adults that recognise informal learning and accredit competences." (CFE/Edge Hill University "International research on the effectiveness of widening participation")

84. The process of applying to and entering HE can be daunting for anyone, but especially so for learners from more disadvantaged backgrounds – particularly if they are the first in their family to go to university or college. The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) guide for institutions on developing best practice throughout the applicant journey²⁶ is clear that a poor applicant experience is to the detriment of both applicant and institution because it "perpetuates barriers to entry, disengages potential applicants and their advisors, risks incongruence between student expectations and institutional character and therefore embeds an enrolment strategy leading to unfulfilled potential and increased drop-out".

85. SPA's guide defines four stages of the applicant experience – pre-application, application, admissions and transition, and supports the need for learners to get individualised advice and guidance throughout their progression to HE:

"The applicant experience should be considered as far more than just a one-way, or passive, journey taken by an individual. Experience is gained via participation, so there should be a fully interactive path of engagement in which all potential students have the

²⁵ Source: [QAA "Key statistics 2013 for the Access to HE diploma" \(2013\)](#).

²⁶ [SPA "The applicant experience" \(2012\)](#).

opportunity, knowledge and understanding to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and aspirations and in which higher education providers can inform, inspire and attract students who can add to that institution's character and succeed in their studies. Both applicant and institution benefit from this kind of experience where ability and aspirations are accurately matched with an appropriate place. The Schwartz Report's five principles of fair admissions form the bedrock to such an applicant experience, but as the experience is valued in terms of the outcomes as a student it is a vital foundation to the whole student experience." (SPA "The applicant experience")

86. SPA urges all institutions to have an admissions policy in place and for their processes to be clear, transparent and fair to all applicants. While HEFCE and OFFA both appreciate the importance of academic autonomy and understand that freedom to determine admissions policies and entry criteria are fundamental to that autonomy, we do recommend that all HE providers ensure that those admissions policies are aligned to and informed by their WP strategies.

87. Making provision more flexible and accessible to learners can also smooth the road to HE for under-represented groups. For example, flexible provision and supported transitions to HE can be important for students with caring responsibilities: a recent report from NUS²⁷ found that student carers' choices of whether to go to HE, and what and where to study, were often intrinsically linked to their caring responsibilities.

88. Equally, partnerships between HE providers and employers can create pathways for mature students to enter HE, with a corresponding benefit to businesses in creating better-educated, more highly qualified staff. In its *Ambition 2020* report, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) argues that addressing the skills gap in the workforce will require a focus on the adult workforce, and the development of innovative and flexible provision which meets the needs of employers and their staff²⁸. The recent CBI report "*Tomorrow's growth*" says surveys have shown an increasing interest from businesses in working more closely with universities and colleges to deliver more flexible options including higher-level apprenticeships and co-designed courses²⁹.

89. The literature review identified HE-employer engagement as a growing national priority and found signs that recent developments in funding for workforce development initiatives have helped to increase participation in HE – for example the Higher Apprenticeship Fund and co-funded provision. But there are issues around the extent to which disadvantaged groups are benefiting from these programmes. For example, research cited in the literature review suggests that those from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to be supported to study by their employer and that apprentices from widening participation target areas are less likely to go into full-time university provision than those from more advantaged areas.

²⁷ [NUS "Learning with Care: Experiences of student carers in the UK" \(2013\).](#)

²⁸ [UKCES "Ambition 2020: World class skills and jobs for the UK – the 2009 report" \(2009\).](#)

²⁹ [CBI "Tomorrow's Growth" \(2013\).](#)

Our strategic approach to access

90. Addressing issues of access to HE and seizing the opportunities to improve requires the buy-in and active engagement of stakeholders across the educational sectors and employers. It also requires BIS and the Department for Education (DfE) to agree a consistent approach across schools, further and higher education to maximise opportunities for learners, facilitate the success of collaborative outreach and enable effective IAG.

91. As part of our strategic response, we will:

- a. Work with HE providers and partners to develop a national approach to collaborative outreach aimed at both young and mature students. In 2014-15 HEFCE will allocate funding to institutions to enable them to develop single points of contact for schools and other organisations seeking outreach activity. This will build on and enhance existing arrangements and enable new collaborative partnerships to be formed. It will complement the work that institutions undertake individually to maximise the impact and coverage of their access work, reduce duplication and recognise the contribution institutions make to widening access beyond their own student intake. We will also support the sector to more effectively track the progression of learners that have taken part in outreach activity.
- b. Work with Government and other national bodies to develop a more joined-up approach to the provision of effective IAG through the schools and further education sectors and into and beyond HE. Although much has been done to provide high quality information, individualised advice and guidance are essential if prospective students are to make informed and appropriate choices. Collaborative approaches to outreach will provide part of the solution but a high-level, cross-government policy response to this issue is required.
- c. Review our targeting guidance to ensure that it meets the needs of national policy aims, can securely underpin the evaluation framework and funding allocations and, while offering a strong directional lead, enable local flexibility to meet the needs of communities.
- d. Support the development of flexible study options that meet the needs of both students and employers. HEFCE will develop its understanding and knowledge of local economic and market conditions with regard to part-time and flexible HE study as part of its activity to address the decline in numbers entering HE to study part-time. This activity will inform future policy and funding responses to part-time and flexible learning.
- e. Continue to build the evidence base regarding effective outreach approaches and activity and support the development and dissemination of good practice, including the co-ordination of national research. This will include work to:
 - develop a more detailed evidence base on issues affecting part-time provision, including the impact on mature students, and use this to help shape an appropriate and co-ordinated policy response
 - develop an evidence base on how HE providers work with employers to support widening participation across the student lifecycle

- continue to research the effect of financial aid (bursaries) on student access and success, with the aim of building an evidence base to help institutions make the best use of their financial support packages.
- f. We will develop a coherent, national evaluation framework of common measures and effective evaluation practice that recognises, and is sensitive to, targeting and evaluation requirements at regional and local level. This will help universities and colleges to evaluate their own access and student success activities more effectively, and provide comparable data and evidence that can be used at a national level to inform both policy and practice.
- g. Encourage institutions to re-balance their funding from financial support towards outreach and collaborative outreach.

Chapter 2:

Retention and student success

Our objectives for retention and success

- a. Improve student retention, reducing the number of students who withdraw early from higher education.
- b. Narrow the gap between the retention rates of the most advantaged and most disadvantaged.
- c. Improve outcomes for different student groups by addressing the unexplained differentials in attainment.

Introduction

1. “Widening Participation in the English context has recognised that widening access to HE alone is not sufficient to achieve broader goals of social justice, social mobility and economic prosperity; support for students to be successful in HE and beyond is also required.”³⁰
2. The widening participation and fair access agenda has long emphasised the importance of taking a lifecycle approach – that is, supporting students not only as they access higher education, but also on their journey through and beyond it using evidenced approaches to retention and student success. This is therefore a central theme of the national strategy.
3. The lifecycle approach was reflected in the introduction of WP strategies in 2001-02 and later in the introduction of the improving retention part of HEFCE’s WP funding in 2003-04; policy makers and the sector have emphasised student retention, success and attainment, which have been included in OFFA access agreements since 2012-13 following guidance from Ministers. This focus has resulted in the continued low overall rate of non-continuation for full-time first degree entrants, which has remained at around 8 per cent since 2005-06 at a time when HE participation has continued to widen.
4. However, behind this, there is a more nuanced picture, particularly when we consider students with different characteristics. And, although retention in English higher education is generally high compared to other OECD countries, retention rates vary across the sector. This chapter will draw on a wide range of evidence to outline the challenges faced, the advances that have been made, and the strategic responses needed to build on that progress and address the issues that remain.

³⁰ [CFE/Edge Hill University “International research on the effectiveness of widening participation” \(2013\).](#)

Retention and student success issues for students with particular characteristics

5. Rates of non-continuation and levels of attainment vary between groups of students with different characteristics. It is important to understand the characteristics and diverse needs of the full student body, so that HE providers can ensure appropriate measures are in place to support and engage all their students to remain in HE and achieve their full potential.

6. Two recently published HEFCE reports provide a wealth of statistical evidence about this and are therefore referred to extensively in the following paragraphs:

- [“Non-continuation rates at English HEIs: Trends for entrants 2005-06 to 2010-11” \(HEFCE 2013/07\)](#) analyses non-continuation rates for full-time first degree entrants to HEIs in England, split by student and course characteristics, in the period 2005-06 to 2010-11.
- [“Higher education and beyond: outcomes from full-time first degree study” \(HEFCE 2013/15\)](#) examines the degree outcomes of a group of young full-time students starting degree courses in 2006-07. The report identifies four possible outcomes:
 - achieving a degree
 - achieving a first or upper second class degree
 - achieving a degree and continuing to employment and further study
 - achieving a degree and continuing to graduate employment or further study

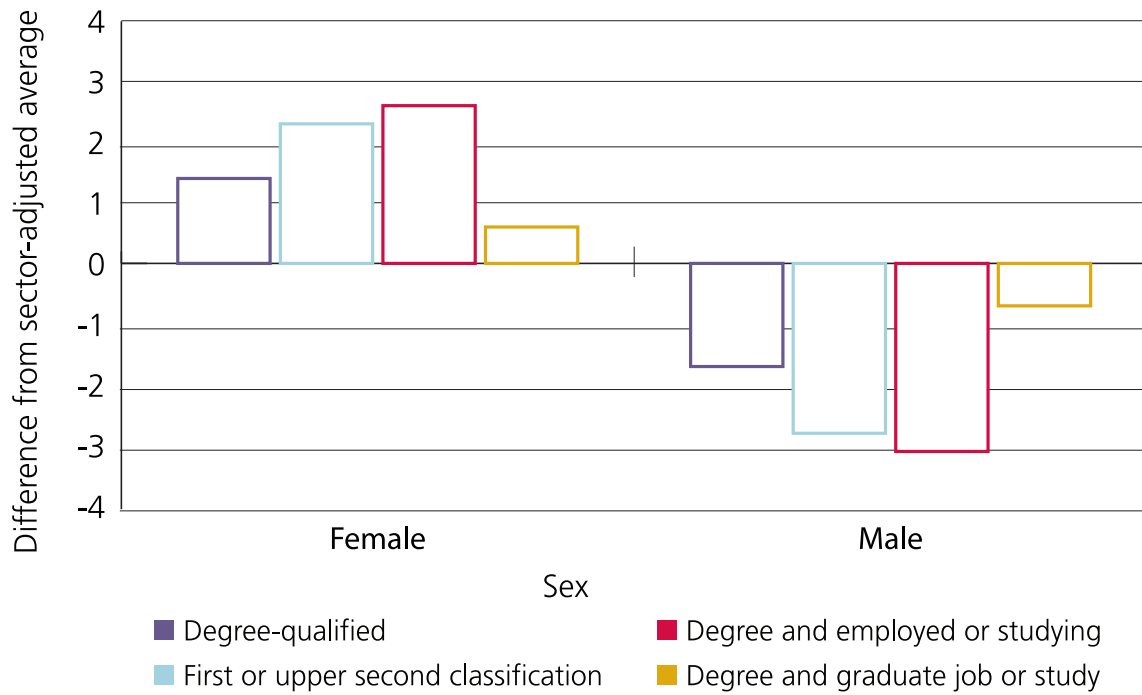
and breaks down these outcomes by students’ characteristics. The report compares the outcomes achieved by different groups of students who share a particular characteristic (for example, those who went to state schools and those who went to independent schools). But the students within these groups have other characteristics which may be statistically influencing the group’s overall result (for example, their ethnicity, sex or age). So we use a “sector-adjusted average” to tell us what outcome would be expected after accounting for these other factors. We can then see whether there is a significant gap between the group’s sector-adjusted average and actual outcome – if so, we can infer that there are other factors affecting the group’s performance, apart from those accounted for in the sector-adjusted average. Unless stated otherwise, all of the differences from the sector-adjusted average shown in the following sections are statistically significant. For a more detailed definition, see HEFCE 2013/15.

Sex

7. There are inequalities in the retention and attainment of young men and women in HE. HEFCE 2013/07 shows that young, female, full-time, first degree entrants are less likely to no longer be in HE one year after entry compared to men entering on the same basis: 6.4 per cent and 8.5 per cent respectively in 2010-11.

8. HEFCE 2013/15 shows that women are more likely (57 per cent) than men (48.9 per cent) to graduate with a first or second class degree (see Figure 10).

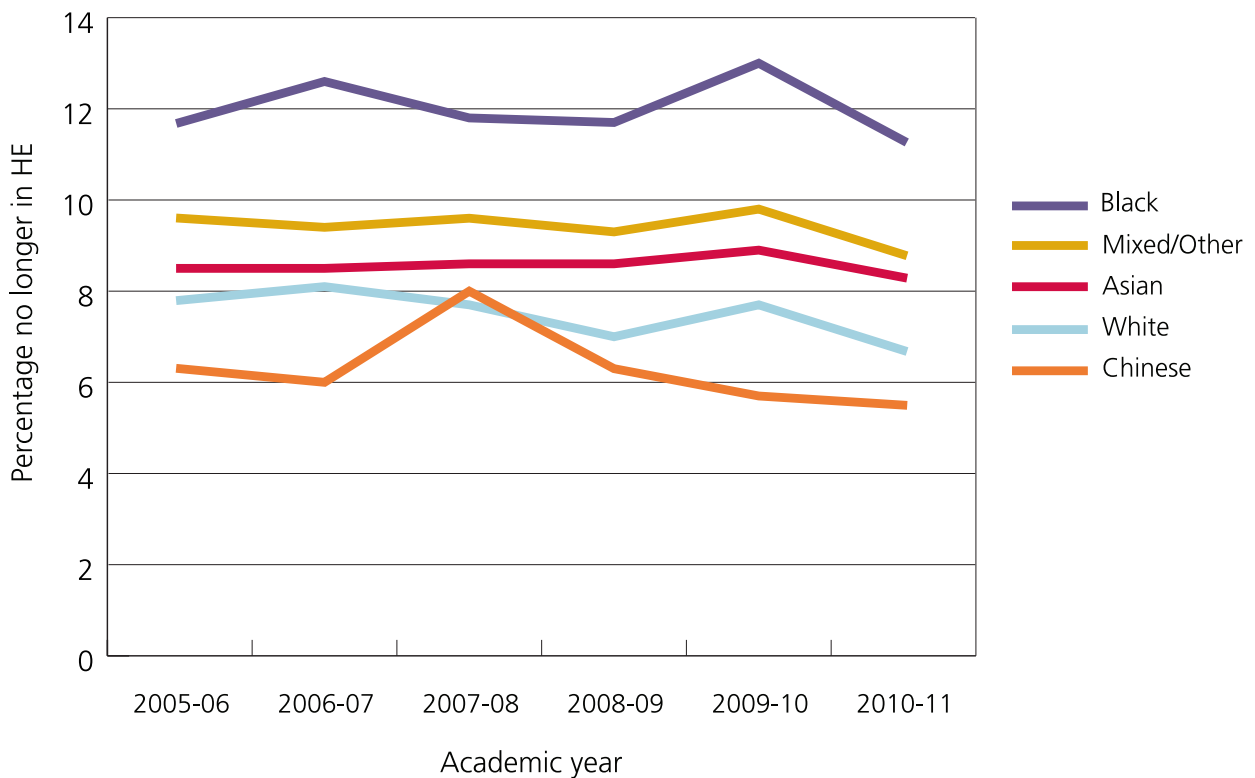
Figure 10: Percentage point difference of the outcome from the sector-adjusted average for each of the four outcomes, split by sex



Source: HEFCE 2013/15

Notes: See paragraph 6 above for an explanation of the "sector-adjusted average".

Figure 11: Percentage of entrants who are no longer in HE after one year, by ethnic background



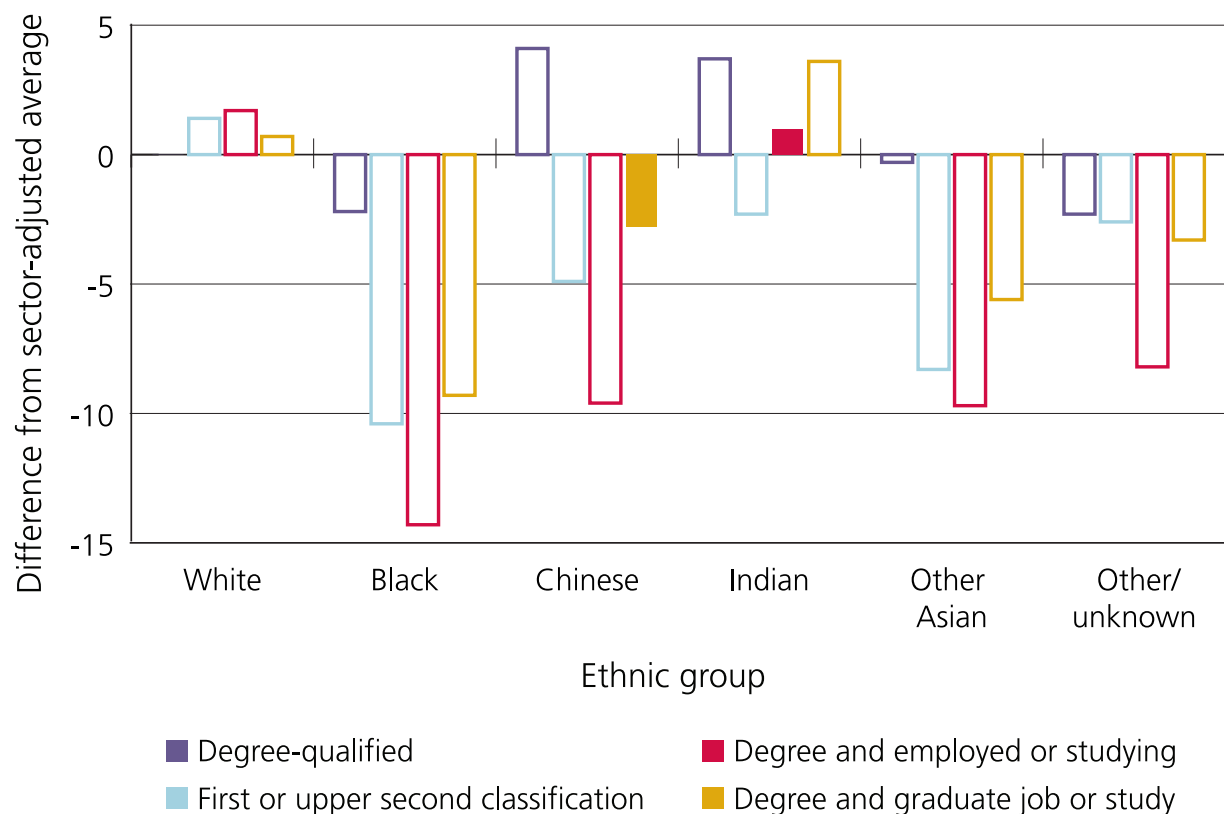
Source: HEFCE 2013/07

Ethnicity

9. For all ethnic groups analysed in HEFCE 2013/07, apart from students of Chinese ethnicity, retention rates are lower than for their White peers (see Figure 11) between 2005-06 and 2010-11. Non-continuation rates for Black entrants were the highest, with 11.3 per cent of 2010-11 entrants no longer in HE after one year, while students of Chinese ethnicity had the lowest non-continuation rate at 5.5 per cent in 2010-11.

10. Similarly, there is a pronounced difference in attainment between students from ethnic minority groups and White students. As Figure 12 shows, of students who entered in 2006-07, Black students' outcomes, of all types, are significantly below the sector-adjusted average (that is, lower than would be statistically expected when other characteristics are accounted for – for a definition of “sector-adjusted average” see the glossary at the back of this document). The same study shows that Chinese and Indian students performed above the sector-adjusted average for achieving a degree but under the benchmark for achieving a first or upper-second class degree.

Figure 12: Percentage point difference of the outcome from the sector-adjusted average for all four outcomes, split by ethnicity



Source: HEFCE 2013/15

Notes: There is no difference from the benchmark for White students in terms of being degree-qualified. Where a bar is filled in the graph, this indicates that the difference is not statistically significant. “Sector-adjusted average” is explained in paragraph 6 above.

11. However, the ethnicity categorisations in both reports are very broad and thus mask differences in completion and attainment by smaller sub-groups.

12. HEFCE's analysis "[Student ethnicity: Profile and progression of entrants to full-time, first degree study](#)" (HEFCE 2010/13), cited in research synthesis published by the Higher Education Academy (HE Academy)³¹, also addresses attainment differences between ethnic groups. It outlines that in relation to young students being awarded a first or upper second, White students had a rate 25 per cent higher than Black students, and 20 per cent higher than students of Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnicity. For mature students, 61 per cent of White students attained a first or upper second class degree, compared to 25 per cent of Black students and 29 per cent of students of Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnicity.

13. There are also disparities in the progression of different ethnic groups from undergraduate study to either employment or further study (this is discussed in chapter 3).

14. Overall, it is clear that attainment by Black students, in particular, is significantly below their sector-adjusted benchmark, suggesting that this group faces specific barriers to success.

15. The HE Academy and the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), supported by HEFCE funding, have gathered and considered evidence about the contribution of the curriculum (in the broadest sense) to Black and minority ethnic (BME) student retention and success, and the implications for policy, practice and further research. This work highlighted multiple and complex issues, finding that there is no universal approach to reducing the attainment gap. They offered a set of guiding principles designed to underpin policy and practice (for more information, see www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/retention/black_minority_ethnic_student_resources#publications). The HE Academy is working with institutions to develop best practice in this area, and has provided strategic development grants to eight institutions to enhance BME attainment, based on recommendations flowing from this work.

Disability

16. HEFCE 2013/07 shows that entrants to full-time first degrees in 2010-11 who are known to be disabled are less likely to remain in HE (8.2 per cent non-continuation) at the end of year one when compared to those not known to be disabled (7.4 per cent non-continuation).

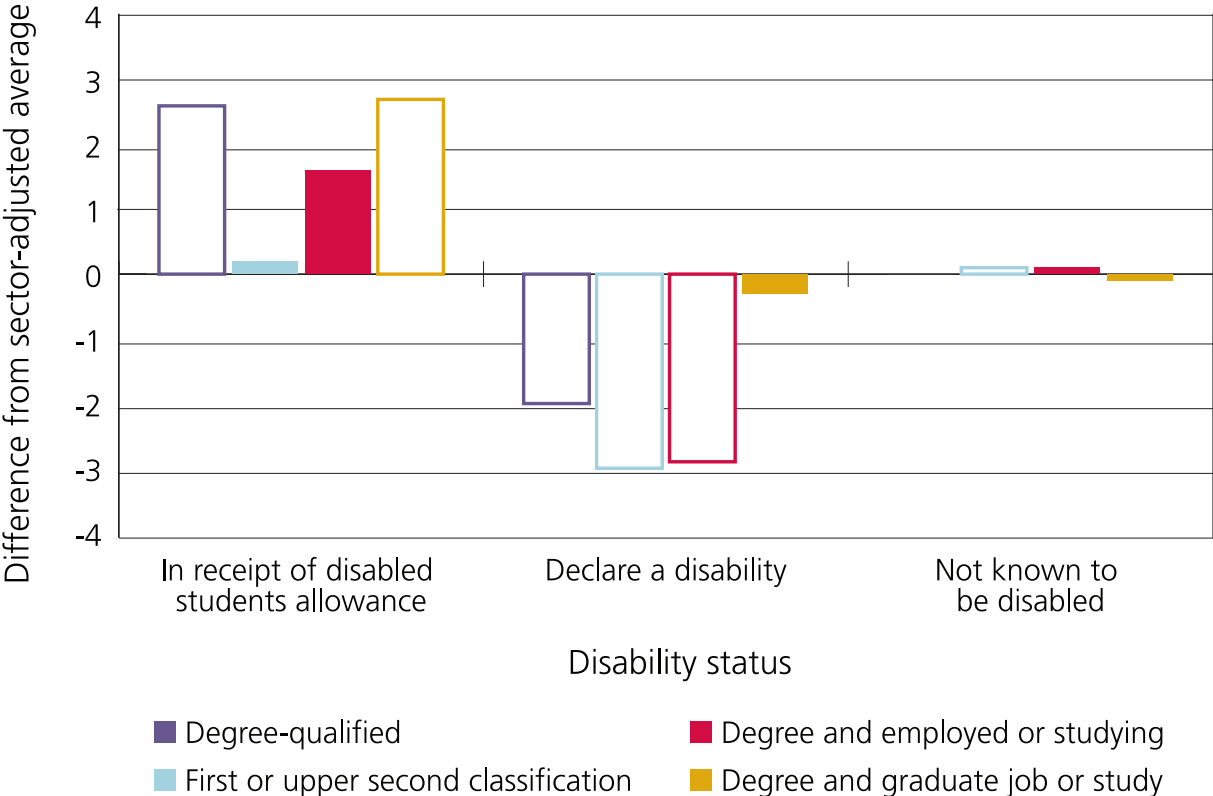
17. There are also disparities in student success between those who receive Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), those who declare a disability but do not receive DSA, and those not known to be disabled. Figure 13 shows that students who received DSA performed above the sector-adjusted average, whereas disabled students not receiving DSA performed below it. To put this in context, the ECU's 2012 statistical report³² shows that in 2010-11, 8 per cent of all students were classified as disabled, but of these students less than half claimed DSA. In first year students this statistic is even lower: in 2010-11, 6.9 per cent were known to be disabled, but only 33 per cent of them claimed DSA.

18. HE students living in England can apply for DSA if they have a disability, long-term health condition, mental health condition, or specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia. The support an individual student receives is calculated on their individual needs and not on income. DSA helps with the costs of specialist equipment, such as computer software, as well as non-medical helpers, for example a note-taker or reader. It is important to ensure that the support provided through the DSA is appropriate and useful to disabled students. The allowance provides significant support at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.

³¹ Gurnam Singh "[Black and minority ethnic \(BME\) students' participation in higher education: improving retention and success](#)" (2011).

³² Equality Challenge Unit "[Equality in higher education: statistical report 2012](#)" (2012).

Figure 13: Percentage point difference of the outcome from the sector-adjusted average for the four outcomes, by disability status



Source: HEFCE 2013/15

Note: Where a bar is filled in the graph, this indicates that the difference is not statistically significant. "Sector-adjusted average" is explained in paragraph 6 above.

19. There is a need for more detailed data, for example, more evidence could be collated about the nature of a student’s disability and the impact that this may have on his or her integration and success in HE. Although progress has been made in this area, further data would enable HE providers to tailor support more effectively to the specific needs of their disabled students.

Care leavers

20. Students who have been in care continue to be significantly disadvantaged and under-represented in higher education. DfE data shows that around 430 care leavers were in HE in 2012 at the age of 19, which represents 7 per cent of all 19-year-old care leavers (this compares to 1 per cent of care leavers going to HE in 2003, according to a Social Exclusion Unit estimate³³).

21. The difficulties faced by care leavers with regard to applying for and being at university include:

- lack of information and advice at the point of application to university
- difficulty accessing the necessary financial support
- problems with accommodation
- lack of support from foster carers
- low levels of personal and emotional support from local authority personal advisors³⁴.

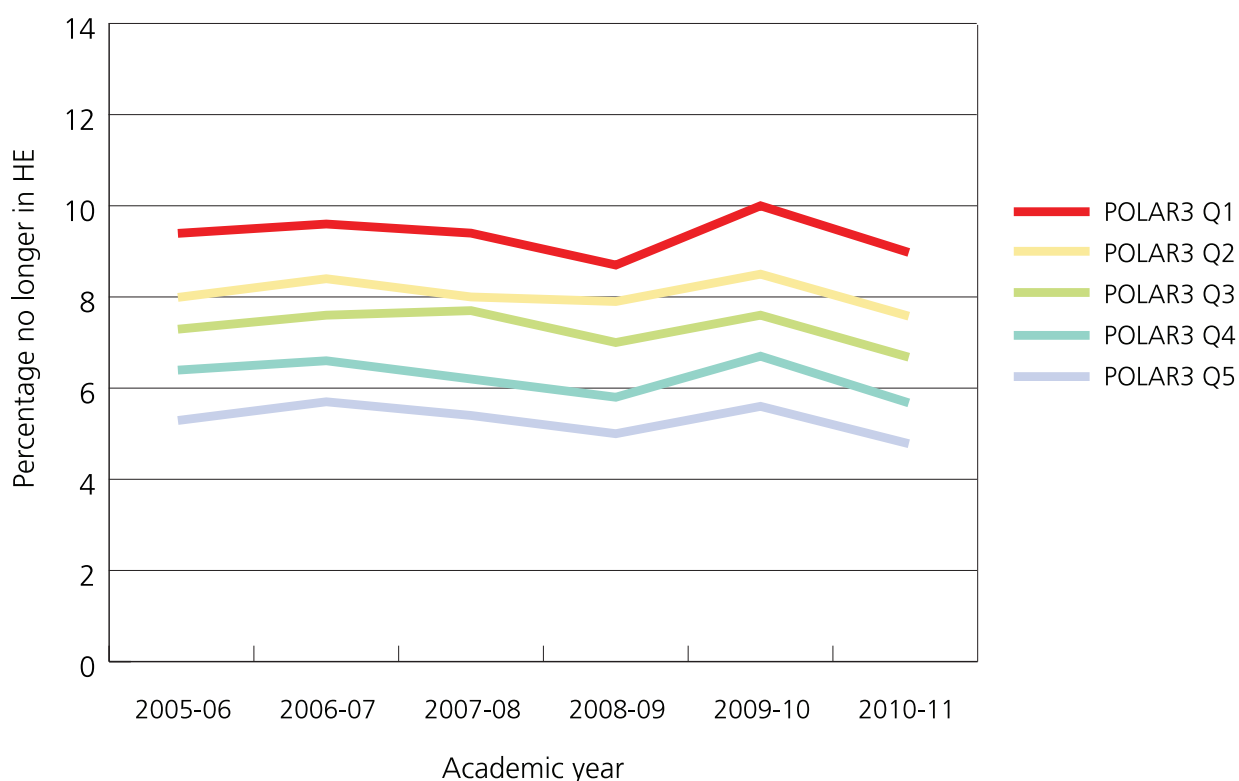
³³ Social Exclusion Unit "A Better Education for Children in Care" (2003).

³⁴ [S Jackson, S Ajayi and M Quigley "Going to University from Care" \(2005\).](#)

Low participation neighbourhoods

22. HEFCE 2013/07 highlights disparities in retention between entrants from areas where there is low participation in HE and those from high participation areas (using the POLAR classification, which divides small neighbourhood areas into quintiles that reflect their relative level of advantage or disadvantage – for more information, see the glossary at the back of this document). Figure 14 shows clearly that those from the lowest participation neighbourhoods (POLAR3 quintile 1) are significantly more likely to no longer be in HE after one year than those from areas with higher participation rates (POLAR3 quintile 5): around 9 per cent, compared to around 5 per cent.

Figure 14: Percentage of young entrants who are no longer in HE after one year, by POLAR3 classification



Source: HEFCE 2013/07

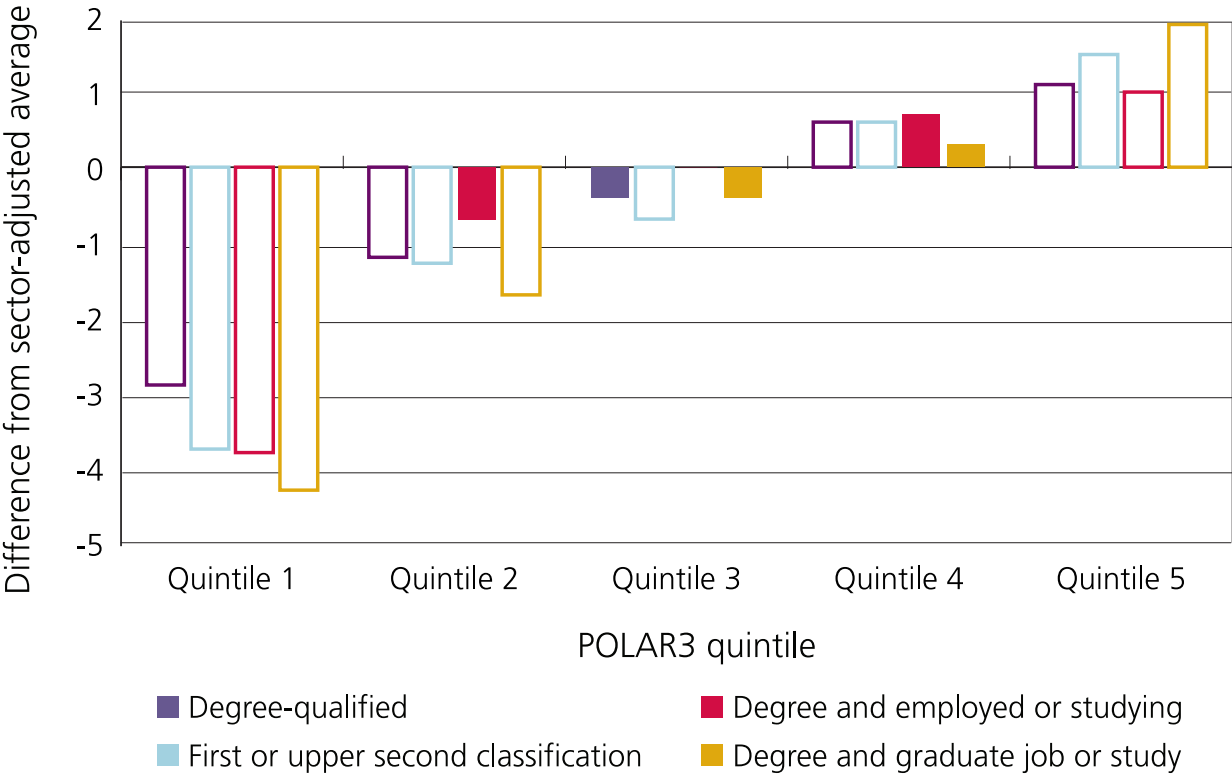
23. Furthermore, HEFCE 2013/15 shows that students from low participation neighbourhoods (quintile 1) performed significantly below the sector-adjusted benchmark over all four outcomes, as shown in Figure 15. There is an upward trend in all four outcomes from the lowest participation neighbourhoods (quintile 1) through to the highest participation neighbourhoods (quintiles 4 and 5).

24. The ARC Network literature review presents further evidence that there is a correlation between being from a low participation neighbourhood and leaving HE early. However, fully establishing the underlying cause of these disparities is complicated, and more work is needed to understand what other factors may be contributing.

Students from low participation neighbourhoods at FECs

25. The report [“Higher education indicators for further education colleges: Overview of trends for the widening participation, non-continuation and employment indicators”](#) (HEFCE 2013/18)

Figure 15: Percentage point difference of the outcome from the sector-adjusted average for each of the four outcomes, split by POLAR3 quintile



Source: HEFCE 2013/15

Note: Where a bar is filled in the graph, this indicates that the difference is not statistically significant. "Sector-adjusted average" is explained in paragraph 6 above.

shows that, of full-time first degree entrants registered at FECs, 13.6 per cent did not continue their studies after the first year. This was slightly lower than the sector-adjusted average of 13.9 per cent. The proportion of students from this group who did continue after the first year was also below the sector-adjusted average.

Mature students

26. HEFCE 2013/07 shows that mature entrants were more likely to have left HE one year after entry (11.6 per cent for mature entrants and 6.3 per cent for young entrants). However, the rate of non-continuation for mature students dropped over the period observed, from 14.3 to 11.6 per cent, while the rate for young students remained constant.

27. The NUS and Million+ report "Never Too Late To Learn"³⁵ shows that the two main reasons given by mature students contemplating suspending or leaving their studies were difficulties in balancing study with other commitments, and financial difficulties. As this research also outlines, mature students are more likely (13.6 per cent) to obtain first class degrees than young entrants (13.2 per cent) but less likely to obtain a 2:1 (35.9 per cent for mature students as opposed to 48.4 for young entrants) and more likely to graduate with third class or unclassified degrees.

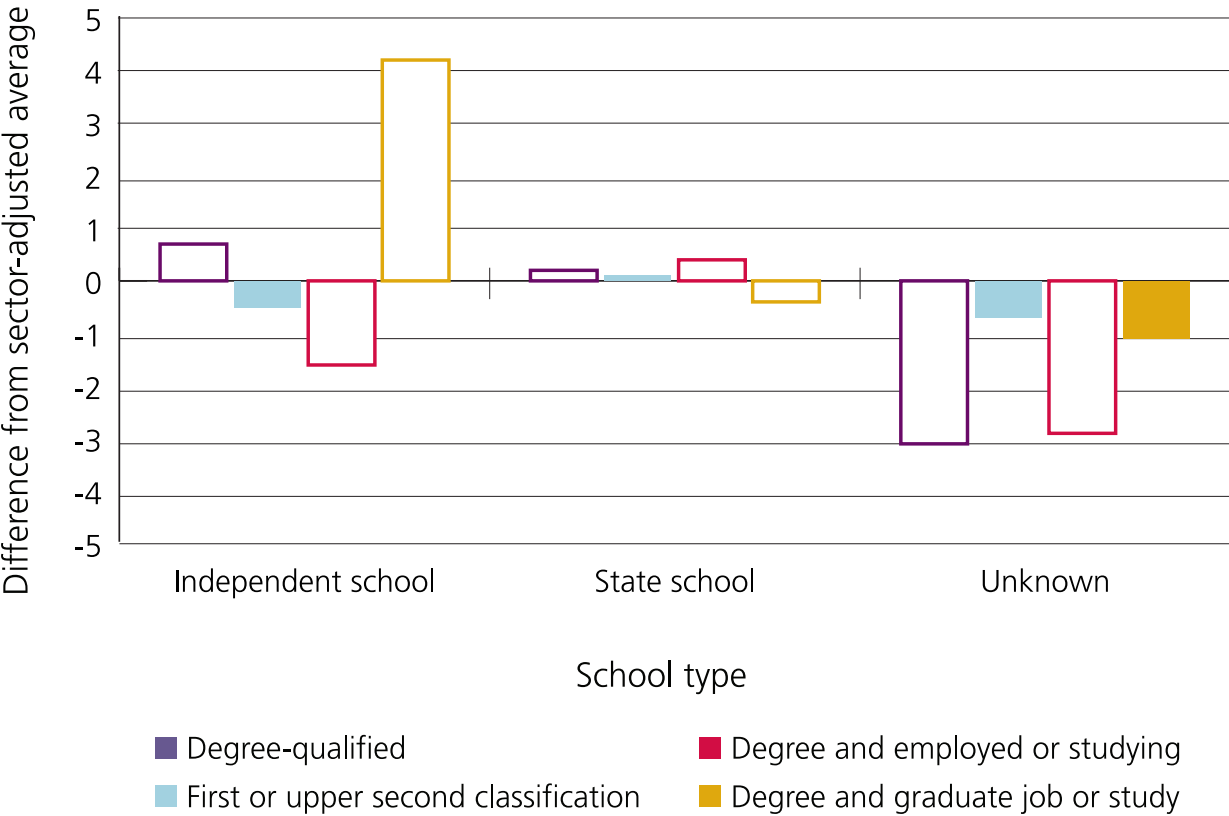
³⁵ [NUS/Million+ "Never Too Late To Learn: Mature students in higher education" \(2012\).](#)

28. The same report also shows that mature students are slightly more likely than younger entrants to be from ethnic minority groups (in 2009-10, 23.1 per cent of all UK-domiciled mature students and 20.5 per cent of young students were from BME groups) and that mature entrants are more likely to have a known disability (10.5 per cent compared to 7.8 per cent of young students, in 2009-10). Given the issues around the retention and attainment rates for students from ethnic minority backgrounds and for those with disabilities, discussed above, there are likely to be similar issues around retention and success for mature students.

School type

29. HEFCE 2013/15 shows that students who attended state school achieve very slightly above the sector-adjusted average in terms of achieving first or upper second class degrees, while students who went to independent schools achieve very slightly below the sector-adjusted average (see Figure 16). However, graduates who went to state schools are less successful at securing graduate jobs – we discuss this further in chapter 3.

Figure 16: Percentage point difference of the outcome from the sector-adjusted average for the four outcomes, by school type



Source: HEFCE 2013/15

Notes: Where a bar is filled in the graph, this indicates that the difference is not statistically significant. "Sector-adjusted average" is explained in the glossary at the back of this document.

Part-time study

30. ["Part-time first degree study: Entry and completion"](#) (HEFCE 2009/18) analysed completion rates for part-time first degree study, tracking a cohort of 1996-97 part-time first degree entrants. This revealed that just 39 per cent of these students who entered UK HEIs other than the Open University

(OU) had been awarded a first degree within 11 years of entry (see Table 1). The majority (59 per cent excluding the OU, 75 per cent including it) were no longer active on their course after 11 years.

Table 1: Outcomes of part-time first degree entrants in 1996-97 after 11 academic years

Cohort	First degree awarded		Still active on degree course		No longer active	
	Number of entrants	% of entrants	Number of entrants	% of entrants	Number of entrants	% of entrants
UK HEIs (non-OU)	6,490	39%	350	2%	9,745	59%
Open University	10,025	22%	1,745	4%	34,420	75%
Total	16,515	26%	2,100	3%	44,165	70%

Source: HEFCE 2009/18

31. BIS research³⁶ established that the difference in retention rates between part-time students and their full-time counterparts differs between institution and intensity of study. HEFCE 2009/18 also found a significant link between study intensity and completion, in that 44 per cent of students commencing programmes at UK HEIs (other than the OU) at intensities of 30 per cent or higher go on to complete that programme within seven academic years (rising to 48 per cent within 11 academic years). For those studying at below 30 per cent intensity, 18 per cent have completed after seven academic years (rising to 22 per cent within 11 academic years).

32. The BIS research also confirms that part-time students have lower attainment than full-time students. It shows that part-time students are more likely to qualify with a sub-degree qualification than with a first degree, and that when part-time students get a degree, it is less likely to be a first or a 2:1 (43 per cent for part-time students compared to 63 per cent of full-time).

33. However, the situation relating to part-time study is complex and not currently fully understood so, as the researchers caution, more information is required to draw reliable conclusions about part-time study.

Part-time student characteristics

34. Any discussion of outcomes for part-time students has to recognise that part-time students are more likely to have added complexities in their lives that may contribute to lower completion and attainment rates. HEFCE analysis of HESA student data returns from 2011-12 shows that 90 per cent of part-time students are mature (compared to 19 per cent of full-time students); meanwhile the Futuretrack work on part-time student career decisions highlights that “two-thirds of part-time students have family commitments and over two in five have children whereas the majority of full-time students are single and childless”³⁷.

³⁶ BIS “Expanding and Improving part-time Higher Education” (BIS research paper 68) (2012).

³⁷ C Callender, R Hopkin and D Wilkinson “Futuretrack: part-time students: Career decision-making and career development of part-time higher education students” (2010).

35. Furthermore, the initial study intentions of part-time students are complex: some only intend to complete a few modules, rather than aiming for a full degree, and in doing so will be recorded as a non-completion even though they have achieved their personal study intentions.

36. Roundtable discussions with stakeholders³⁸ suggested that structural matters could contribute to appropriate student support and thus facilitate success. This could include the structure of the academic year, the division of study into modules, providing student support services out of office hours, giving access to childcare, and arranging timetabling to fit in with childcare/caring/work commitments. There was also discussion of how specific changes to the curriculum (including modes of delivery) and the way that modules are taught could help part-time students and mature students to navigate their way through a coherent course of study.

Other groups

37. It should be noted that we do not have evidence of participation, retention or attainment for all groups. It was suggested at the roundtable discussions that some characteristics, such as sexual orientation and religion, may not always be considered by institutions as frequently as they consider issues around ethnicity, gender and disability. One reason for this is that information about religion and sexual orientation is not routinely collected from students and this might be something that we should work with institutions to examine further.

Financial pressures and part-time working

38. The ARC Network literature review references the Leese report of 2010 which suggests that: "Students' relationships with HEIs are changing. Individual institutional data shows that 70 per cent of students work at the same time as studying."

39. Research by CHERI and London South Bank University for UUK and HEFCE³⁹ found that term-time working negatively affected attainment and that this increased according to the number of hours worked. Similarly, one student involved in the University of Bristol and University of the West of England Paired Peers project said:

"Every weekend I worked [to earn money] both days, maybe like 16 hours or something over the weekend... you're just thinking 'oh I could be practising my violin' or 'I could be reading'." (Paired Peers Project, "A Degree Generation?"⁴⁰)

40. At the roundtable discussions to inform the strategy it was suggested that additional course costs may contribute to disparities in outcome. Students with less income may not be able to take part in additional activities or to afford specialised equipment, thereby reducing their learning experience.

41. "A Degree Generation?" also outlines that there are additional costs to consider such as accommodation and living expenses which can be a factor for students with reduced incomes who are not eligible for maintenance loans.

³⁸ A report synthesising the series of roundtable discussions that took place to inform the national strategy for access and student success is available at www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/currentworktowidenparticipation/natstrat/research/.

³⁹ John Brennan et al "Survey of higher education student's attitudes to debt and term-time working and their impact on attainment" (2005).

⁴⁰ [The Paired Peers Project "A Degree Generation? The Paired Peers Project year 3 report" \(2013\)](#).

Key evidence on retention and student success

The importance of belonging

42. There is a broad emerging consensus that issues of engagement and developing a sense of belonging lie at the heart of both retention and success. The ARC Network literature review and the HE Academy's "Compendium of effective practice in higher education retention and success"⁴¹, which brings together some of the areas of good practice from across the sector, both reflect this, the latter describing the objective as "creating an environment in which students feel they belong".

43. The HEFCE- and Paul Hamlyn Foundation-funded programme "What Works?: Student retention and success" ran seven projects between 2008 and 2011 which generated robust, evidence-based analyses and evaluation of the most effective practices to ensure high continuation and completion rates. The programme concluded that all interventions or activities should aim to nurture a culture of belonging through:

- supportive peer relations
- meaningful interaction between staff and students to develop the knowledge, expectations and confidence to be successful HE learners
- providing an HE experience that is relevant to interests and future goals⁴².

It further identified a set of principles to inform interventions and approaches to student retention and success:

- Interventions and approaches should as far as possible be embedded in mainstream provision to ensure that all students participate and benefit from them. All too often, students at risk of dropping out or not achieving as highly are the ones do not take advantage of optional activity and support.
- Activities should actively seek to engage students for the reason given above.
- Activities need to be informative, useful and relevant to students' current academic interests and future aspirations; the potential benefit of engaging in the activity should be explicit.
- Early engagement is essential and information should be delivered using a range of media.
- Activities should encourage collaboration and engagement with fellow students and staff.
- The extent and quality of student engagement should be monitored.

44. Buckinghamshire New University's buddying scheme is an example of targeted support to help students "fit in" to university life. Evaluation of the scheme has shown a significant increase in good degree outcomes for those who have taken part in the study. This is explained further in the case study.

⁴¹ [Higher Education Academy "Compendium of effective practice in higher education retention and success" \(2012\).](#)

⁴² [Liz Thomas "Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What works? Student retention and success programme" \(2012\).](#)

Case study: Buckinghamshire New University – Buddying programme

What is it?

Buddies provide a text message service offering help and advice to applicants, from the point of their acceptance of a place at Bucks through their first term. Delivered by the students' union, the buddying programme is designed to aid transition to higher education and to support retention and student success.

Who is it for?

More than a third of Buckinghamshire New University students qualify for full state financial support. In order to ensure they are appropriately supported, all applicants who have accepted places are assigned buddies. The programme responds to individual need. So, for example, those students who might be especially vulnerable, or have very specific needs, are given buddies from similar backgrounds.

Activities

Buddies are volunteers who are trained and supported by the Project Coordinator. They come from the same academic school as the applicant, ensuring that they are able to share their own experiences, and have the knowledge to respond to concerns. Where specialist information or advice might be required, buddies can refer students to those who are most able to support them.

Buddies send several scripted messages to their contacts at critical times, such as before A-level results are due, a week before they arrive, after the welcome week and at the end of the first term. All other communication is on an ad hoc basis. Buddies record their communications and report back at the end of the project. They also submit an evaluation report to reflect how they felt they supported their students, and are encouraged to offer suggestions and areas of improvement for future years.

Impact

Evaluation of the buddying programme indicates that students who have engaged with a buddy are more likely to achieve a good degree, with 43 per cent of full-time undergraduate students achieving a first class or upper second class honours degree in 2011-12. This compares to 24 per cent among those students who did not engage with the scheme.

Further qualitative information suggests that messages are received positively which helps build the common perception that Bucks is a "caring institution". For a number of new students buddying has played a significant part in their decision to stay with Bucks and progress, and students who are buddied are more likely to engage with university and students' union initiatives.

45. The final phase of the 2008 Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) also looked at the issue of belonging. Funded by HEFCE through the Economic and Social Research Council, the suite of research included work on the experiences of working-class students in higher education which found that the theme of belonging and fitting in is much more nuanced than had been thought, involving students' identities both as learners and socially.

The report states:

“Students can succeed without participating in university social life. But the social opportunities provide the opportunity for students to access information from peers, and increase their dispositions to learn and progress in new ways. For middle-class students, the social experience appears to be central to their motivation for going to university. The university experience is more holistic for them than for working-class students. For this group, university is about opening up opportunities; meeting new and different people and developing their identity. ... By contrast, many of the working-class students do not have the time for this, don't have the opportunity, or don't perceive the merits.” (TLRP analysis)

46. The international research suggests that “socio-cultural incongruity and differential cultural capital” may be part of the reason behind higher dropout rates for WP target groups. However, it hypothesises that advances in technology and social media may make information about the whole higher education experience (including the study and social life aspects) more readily available and accessible to prospective students, helping them understand and gain the social capital required.

47. One of the most important lessons from this body of research on retention and attainment is the importance of curriculum design, and learning, teaching and assessment practice. The research shows that provision needs to be inclusive and relevant to the full diversity of the student body and that institutions need to ensure that their students are fully engaged, active partners in the learning contract. Keeping students informed about their progress and attainment throughout their course is central to this.

Combining universal and targeted support

48. Evidence from other countries demonstrates the use of approaches that combine mainstreamed support for the whole student population, and targeted interventions for specific students or groups of students. The international research found that, within the six case studies observed, the following interventions were effective:

- **National performance and excellence targets:** In Australia, institutions agree to mission-based compacts in which institutions can continue to work autonomously but contribute data to national performance indicators which are linked to their funding. The Netherlands has a similar system whereby institutions' funding reflects their performance against indicators such as student retention and contact hours.
- **Selection and matching schemes:** In the Netherlands, following research that showed a connection between late applications and lower levels of retention and success, application dates were brought forward, accompanied by student information campaigns, intake interviews and a programme of (mainly online) matching activities to help students determine whether the university they were applying for would meet their needs.
- **Student support services:** In the USA, HE providers receive federal grants to support retention and attainment among disabled students, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and first generation entrants to HE. Evaluation has found that the programme increased student retention, with a seven percentage point increase in graduation for those students receiving student support services compared to those not receiving them.

- **Study skills development:** Nearly all Australian universities provide learning support to students. This includes Academic Language and Learning staff who assist with study skills and work with academics to develop the curriculum, and peer-assisted learning in which students are supported by a student who has recently completed the course.
- **Broader learning and teaching strategies:** Research in the USA has shown that some students who enter HE are unable to keep up with the required levels of maths and English and that this is a factor in non-completion. Additional courses and resources have been identified to help support students, and evaluation indicates that they are most effective if part of the mainstream educational offer. In Ireland, Teaching and Learning Centres have been established to offer training for academic staff in developing inclusive approaches to their learning and teaching, assessment and student support.
- **Advising, coaching, mentoring:** Research from the USA has shown that students who received a weekly telephone call from a coach were 12 per cent more likely to remain on their course and 13 per cent more likely to graduate than a control group.

However the report stresses that not all of the activities have been fully evaluated and that evaluation is crucial to successful interventions. It also adds that what works in one culture may not necessarily work in others.

49. In England, the issue of whether to use mainstream or targeted interventions is complex, as highlighted during the roundtable discussions on this theme. But, overall, evidence suggests that the most effective approach appears to be combining universal and targeted support. The CFE/ Edge Hill University international research describes this as: “initially taking a universal approach and then using targeted approaches once students’ behaviour or performance indicate a greater risk of underachieving or withdrawing”.

50. Although these types of issues and approaches are not new to the English HE sector or to HEFCE and OFFA, a new, more co-ordinated approach to retention, attainment and indeed the whole student lifecycle is required.

51. Institutions need to ensure that support systems, including targeted support, are well advertised so that students know how and where to access support should they need it.

52. Birkbeck College’s Get Ahead: Stay Ahead programme is an example of support for students who have been identified as most at risk of not completing their studies – in this case, those transitioning from the first to the second year of their courses.

Case study: Birkbeck, University of London – Get Ahead: Stay Ahead

What is it?

Get Ahead: Stay Ahead supports the transition and retention of first-year undergraduates at Birkbeck.

Who is it for?

Of all students, part-time first-year undergraduate degree students are least likely to complete their courses, so the programme focuses on their student journey from the first point of contact with the college to the end of the first year. In 2011 over 240 students attended the start of the programme, with 219 accessing the support for transition to the second year.

Activities

Get Ahead starts with a series of drop-in workshops in the summer, asking students about their expectations and concerns, and explaining the academic skills necessary for degree study.

Stay Ahead follows in the autumn to address the academic and personal challenges that students face towards the end of the first term. It covers how to approach the first assessment as well as any associated anxieties, worries and concerns.

To support transition to the second term a session in the new calendar year addresses the “January blues”. This focuses on the students’ confidence and motivation, and helps students to keep focused on their goals. Further support is available in March to address student isolation and lack of time for peer learning and covers collaborative learning, interacting successfully in study groups and preparing for exams.

At the end of the first year two further sessions take place in June and September to support transition to the second year. This allows the students to reflect on their learning and any setbacks, audit their academic skills and consider the importance of critical thinking.

Underpinning these sessions is the Get Ahead: Stay Ahead website (www.bbk.ac.uk/ahead), which offers 45 short online tutorials. Between July 2011 and July 2012 the website had over 13,000 unique visitors and 68,000 page views with tutorials focused on writing, referencing, critical thinking and getting organised being the most popular. Further tutorials have recently been added focusing on affective issues for students such as dealing with setbacks, staying motivated and addressing issues around self-esteem and confidence.

Impact

In 2011, 90 per cent of Get Ahead students were retained at Birkbeck, which compares to 79 per cent for the college overall. This is reflected in the survey, where 90 per cent of the summer programme participants reported back that they felt more confident at starting their course after having attended the programme.

After Stay Ahead, 94 per cent of respondents to a survey said that they felt more confident about their studies.

Following the sessions in June and September 96 per cent of respondents felt more prepared for the second year.

“The seminar still gave me a more calm sense of ability to plan ahead and deal with the situation (rather than just be dominated).”

“I thoroughly enjoyed all aspects of that seminar and would of [sic] wished there was more of it. I gained a lot from it and about myself. It is very beneficial. It has certainly motivated me!”

“It made me realise the depth and thoroughness of academia which has shown me how much commitment I will need. Quite an eye opener!”

The role of bursaries

53. As well as measures such as pastoral support which are specifically aimed at improving student success, it is also possible that institutional bursaries help to tackle non-completion by counteracting financial difficulties.

54. CFE's formative evaluation of the NSP is careful in its conclusions on whether an NSP award can support retention. Institutions are not certain that the award will make a substantive difference, but students themselves do perceive a real benefit. Of those surveyed, 64 per cent agreed that they would have found it more difficult to stay on the course without the financial aid and 77 per cent agreed that they are more likely to continue and complete their studies as a result of receiving financial aid.

55. New OFFA analysis (“An interim report: Do bursaries have an effect on retention rates?” (OFFA 2014/02)) of pre-2012 data has not been able to find any evidence that institutional bursary schemes in operation between 2006-07 and 2010-11 had an observable effect on the continuation rates of young full-time first degree students. Efforts to build student engagement, inclusive curricula and non-financial support for students may be more important to retention than the size of bursary.

56. There is a need to expand the evidence base around the impact of bursaries under the new system of fees and student finance, and OFFA will be exploring this with institutions. Some institutions tell OFFA that bursaries aid retention at their particular institution. OFFA are encouraging these institutions to provide them with evidence of any such impact to help them build their understanding of the impact of institutional bursaries.

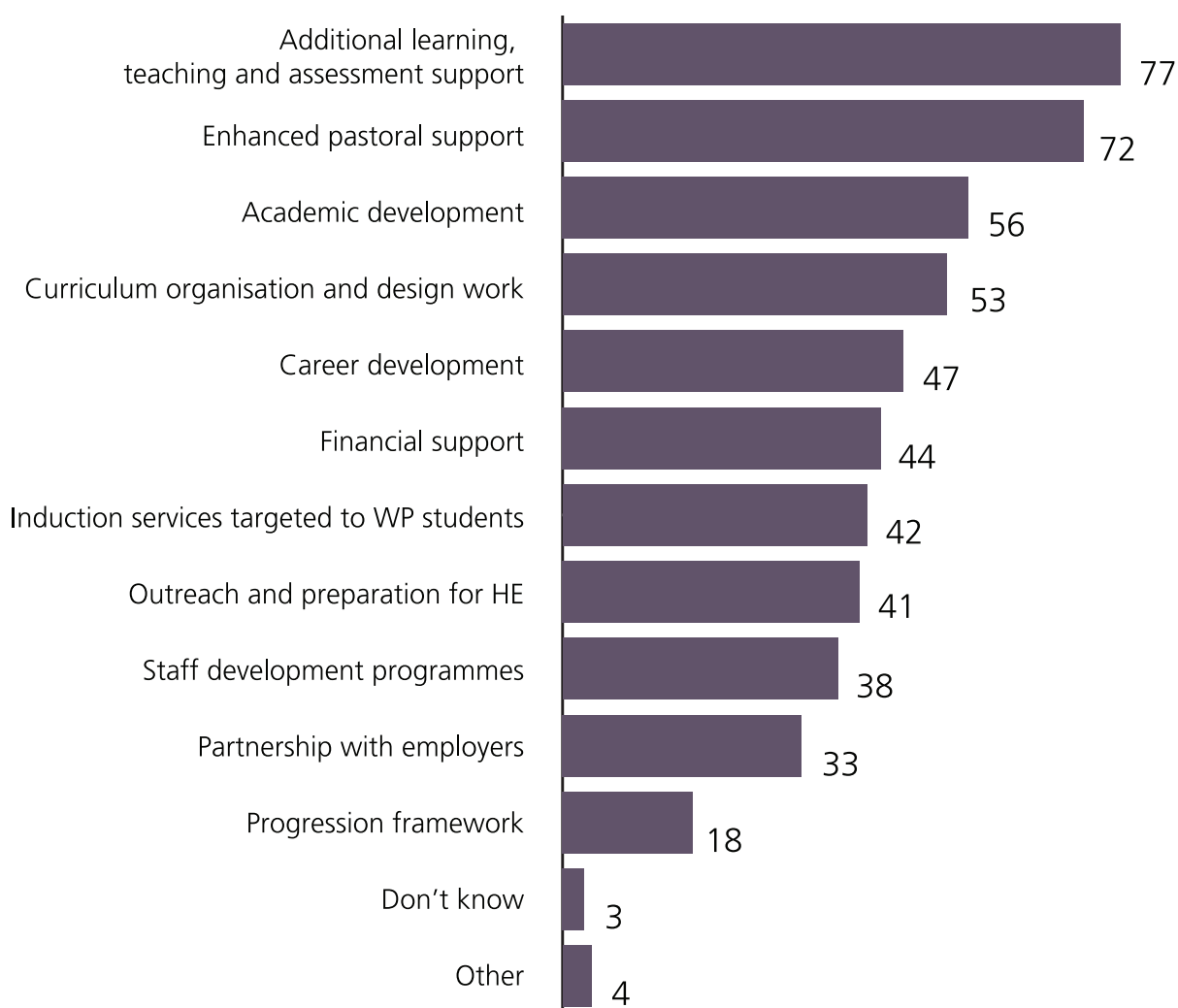
57. Improvement to the HESA student record from 2013-14⁴³, giving us individual level data on the amount of support actually received by each student, will represent a much more robust data set than that used within this preliminary analysis and enhance any future work on this issue. It is possible that future work using this data will establish a relationship between financial support and retention.

⁴³ For more information see www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_studrec&Itemid=232&menl=13051 www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_studrec&Itemid=232&menl=13051.

Investment in student success

58. HEFCE has been delivering funding to institutions since 2003-04 which specifically recognises the additional costs to institutions of supporting students from diverse backgrounds to continue and succeed in HE. This element has always been the larger stream of HEFCE’s allocations for widening participation and in 2013-14 amounted to £228 million. Analysis by CFE and Edge Hill University⁴⁴ found that the vast majority of institutions use this money for additional learning, teaching and assessment support and enhanced pastoral support (see Table 2 below). Over half also offer support with academic development, have undertaken curriculum organisation and design work and offer career development.

Table 2: Number of institutions delivering listed activities using HEFCE improving retention funding (base = 89)



Source: CFE/Edge Hill University “The uses and impact of HEFCE funding for widening participation” (2013)

⁴⁴ [CFE/Edge Hill University “The uses and impact of HEFCE funding for widening participation” \(2013\).](#)

59. Institutions' expenditure on retention and student success has also been specifically included in access agreements since 2012-13. For 2014-15 agreements, OFFA's guidance was strengthened, encouraging institutions to invest even greater proportions of their fee income in activity to improve retention and success if they already have relatively high proportions of entrants from disadvantaged groups. As a result, since the 2012-13 access agreements, predicted expenditure on retention and student success has increased by 43.9 per cent from £82.4 million to £118.6 million. Meanwhile, investment in financial support – which some believe may enhance retention and success by easing students' financial difficulties – is predicted to rise by 5.6 per cent by 2017-18 from £439.7 million to £464.5 million (excluding the Government's NSP allocation).

Support for disabled students

60. Research carried out for HEFCE and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales in 2009 found that: "The climate of thinking about disability in HE has been transformed over the last 10 to 15 years where disability issues are now acknowledged regularly with support work, site planning, admissions, learning and teaching and assessment"⁴⁵.

61. HEFCE has provided specific funding to institutions to assist with the costs of delivering provision accessible for disabled students since 1997. In 2013-14 £15 million was delivered by HEFCE through its mainstream disability allocation, i.e. around 4.5 per cent of the total 2013-14 HEFCE targeted allocations for widening participation and improving retention, which was £332 million.

62. The CFE/Edge Hill University "Uses and impact of HEFCE funding" report found that institutions provide support for a range of activities from the mainstream disability allocation (see Table 3). While some institutions have developed a targeted approach focusing on the specific needs of the individual student, others are adopting an inclusive model that seeks to ensure all aspects of the institutional offer are accessible to disabled students.

63. The same report indicates that HEFCE mainstream disability funding has also acted as an incentive for additional funding from institutions to support students with disabilities.

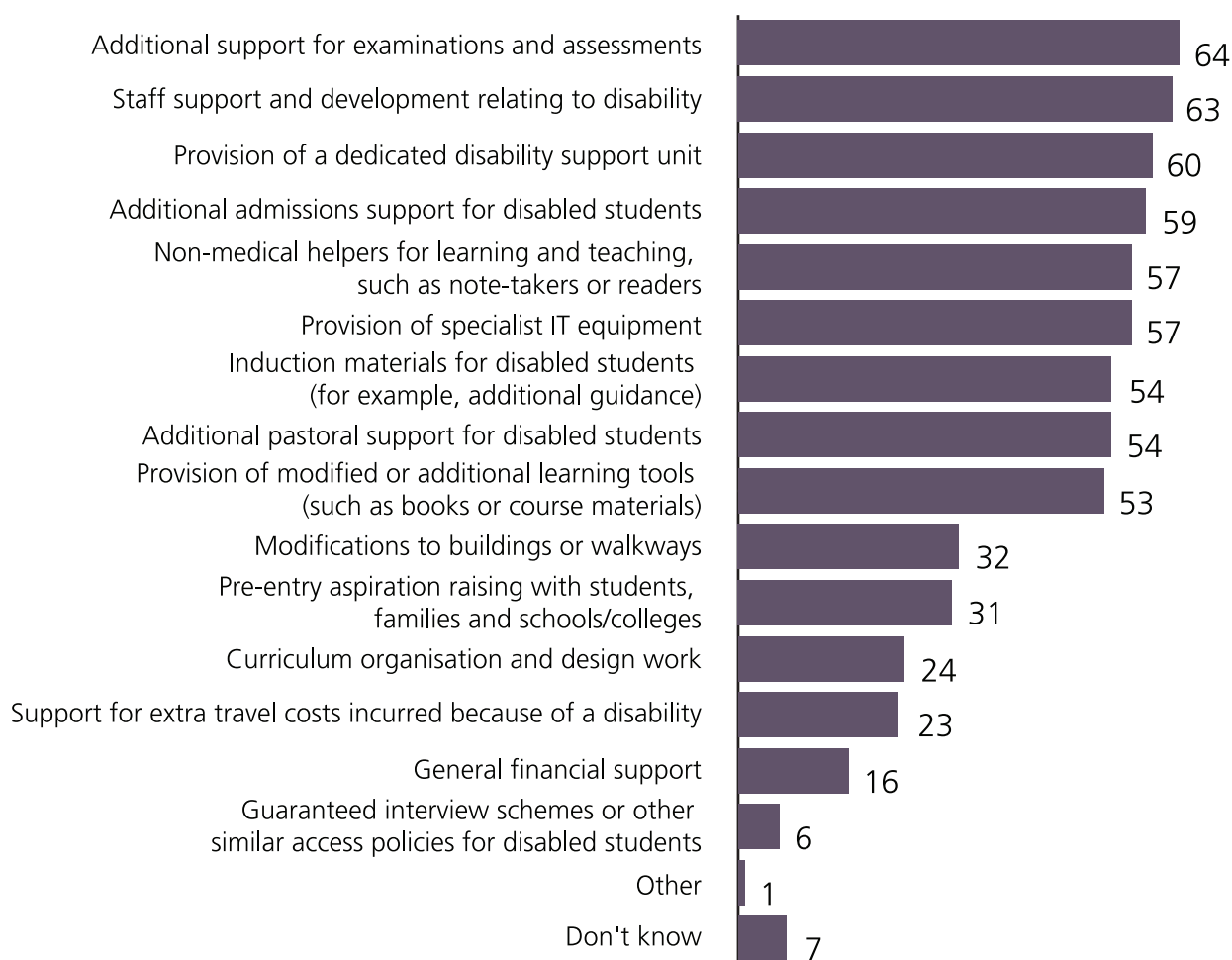
64. OFFA encourages institutions to provide bursaries to help disabled students with the costs of studying. In 2013-14 access agreements, one in five institutions mentioned disability among their NSP bursary eligibility criteria, and a further 7 per cent of 2013-14 access agreements included non-NSP bursaries directed at students with disabilities.

Support for students who have been in care

65. The educational disadvantage of students from care backgrounds has been a focus of Government policy in recent years. However, care leavers continue to be significantly disadvantaged and under-represented in higher education as discussed in chapter 2 paragraphs 20-21.

⁴⁵ [Centre for Disability Studies and School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds "Evaluation of provision and support for disabled students in higher education" \(2009\).](#)

Table 3: Number of institutions delivering listed activities using the HEFCE mainstream disability allocation (base = 89)



Source: CFE/Edge Hill University "The uses and impact of HEFCE funding for widening participation" (2013)

66. OFFA has supported this agenda in recent years by encouraging institutions to develop bursaries for care leavers. In 2006, only one institution offered a care leaver bursary as part of its access agreement; in 2011-12, 31 institutions offered additional bursaries specifically aimed at care leavers. This rose still further to 52 in the latest batch of agreements (for 2014-15), alongside 39 institutions setting targets and milestones relating to care leavers and 49 specifying outreach activity targeted at this group.

67. The Buttle UK Quality Mark is awarded to further and higher education providers who demonstrate their commitment to young people in and leaving care. Currently, 71 English HEIs (56 per cent) hold the Buttle UK Quality Mark, 15 of which hold an "exemplary" performance rating.

68. OFFA will continue to review and refine its guidance on care leavers in light of its annual review of access agreement commitments and work with the sector to understand better how to support care leavers. Its recent work with HESA to establish a Care Leaver identifier as part of the HESA record from 2013-14 will support the need for better analysis, research and evaluation around care leavers.

Our strategic approach to retention and student success

69. The fact that retention rates have remained high despite increased volume and diversity of students is testament to the responsiveness and expertise of universities and colleges, and the stability of investment in WP over the past decade, which allowed students to be supported throughout their courses, and beyond them into further study or employment. However, there is still progress to be made.

70. As indicated in the interim report, HE providers will be expected to give particular consideration to differences in attainment for different groups of students (particularly those from ethnic minority backgrounds and students with disabilities), and how they engage with the full opportunities that their programme of study might offer. This will include consideration of the needs of part-time and mature students through flexible provision and other mechanisms.

71. HEFCE and OFFA are supporting the development of evidence and measures to support universities and colleges in improving retention and success for all groups, through:

- a. Supporting national activity to address issues of student retention and success. We will work with the HE Academy, NUS, QAA and others to develop knowledge, expertise and good practice that addresses non-continuation and disparities in attainment.
- b. Funding and supporting the Student Engagement Partnership. HEFCE, NUS and GuildHE fund the partnership to work with students' unions and HE providers to help them develop more effective and comprehensive student engagement and partnership approaches. By engaging with all aspects of their learning experience, students will be active partners in securing the best outcomes within HE, and successful progression to postgraduate study or to/within graduate employment.
- c. Supporting the development of flexible, inclusive provision that is sensitive and responsive to individual learners' needs and offers targeted support where needed.
- d. Continuing to build the evidence base regarding effective retention and student success approaches/activity, and supporting the development and dissemination of good practice including the co-ordination of national research.
- e. HEFCE and OFFA will adopt a coherent approach when requesting information and data from institutions, ensuring as far as possible that their requests do not overlap and that we share information to meet our respective needs. Through sharing information we will expect to build a full picture of how institutions are approaching widening participation across the student lifecycle, and how the actions proposed through their strategies meet the goals of this strategy both in an institution's own sphere and, through aggregation, at the national level.
- f. The evaluation framework, which will help universities and colleges evaluate their own access and student success activities more effectively, and feed into national evaluation and understanding of effective practice.

Chapter 3:

Progression to further study or to/within employment

Our objectives for progression to further study or to/within employment

- a. Improve progression to postgraduate study for people from disadvantaged groups.
- b. Narrow the gap in progression to postgraduate study in and across higher education between advantaged and disadvantaged groups.
- c. Reduce inequalities in employment outcomes for graduates from different groups.
- d. Narrow the gap in employment outcomes between graduates from advantaged and disadvantaged groups.

Introduction

1. In the post-2012 system of fees, funding and student finance, progression to further study or to/within graduate employment is coming under increased scrutiny. It is important that everyone who completes a higher education course, whatever their background or characteristics, has equal opportunity to progress to work or further study that is appropriate to their achievements and potential.
2. Most students enter HE to pursue career aspirations. The top three reasons cited in the 2010-11 NUS student experience survey were: “to gain qualifications” (45 per cent), “it is necessary to have a university degree for the career I want to follow” (36 per cent) and “improve my earning potential” (27 per cent). Four out of five students state that improving their career opportunities is one of the main goals in entering HE, according to the 2011 CBI and NUS publication “Working towards your future”⁴⁶.
3. It is not only individuals who benefit from achieving these goals. Graduates contribute to economic growth by providing a highly qualified workforce, and the research, innovation and entrepreneurship that make the UK globally competitive. HE is key to developing the high-level skills base of the population to meet the needs of businesses, industry and the professions.
4. As a recent report from the CBI argues, this not only improves economic success, but also helps to tackle inequality and promote social mobility: “We have to think more strategically about getting

⁴⁶ [CBI/NUS “Working towards your future: making the most of your time in higher education” \(2011\).](#)

the fundamental drivers of growth right. This means putting a high skill workforce centre stage – investing in human capital not only promotes long-term growth but is also the single most effective way of distributing its benefits more fairly”⁴⁷.

5. The popular discourse around social mobility often assumes that there is a consensus on what it means and, in the UK, much emphasis has been put on increasing access to the professions⁴⁸ as a prime mechanism for increased social mobility. This has often been translated at the HE level to securing greater access to more selective institutions for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. But social mobility is broader and more fluid than this, and the wider sector and students, as well as highly selective universities, all contribute. Professor Chris Brink (Vice-Chancellor, Newcastle University, UUK Board member and co-chair of the ECU) told the HE Academy’s social mobility conference in March 2013⁴⁹ that social mobility could be viewed in a more lateral way whereby people could move from one socio-economic group to another without necessarily moving up or down a “status ladder”. And, as Brink also points out, HE’s contribution to social mobility is not just as a destination, but as a point of departure. In this, employers, Government and individuals, as well as HE providers, all have a part to play in improving progression to/within employment and careers, as the 2012 Milburn report⁵⁰ discusses.

6. We also need to understand that the “professions” are not fixed. New professions are created as industries expand. The final report of the Panel On Fair Access To The Professions cites the growth in the UK creative industries which was expected to grow much faster than the rest of the UK economy and employ around 1.3 million people by 2013 many of whom would be in new professional roles. This suggests that graduates from across the broadest range of institutions and subject areas will be seeking to enter professional careers upon graduation.

7. Meanwhile, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to progress into postgraduate study which is a key route to many professions (including HE itself). Students who cannot overcome barriers to entering postgraduate study could be at a disadvantage when entering a labour market in which postgraduate qualifications are becoming increasingly common.

8. This strategy therefore addresses the representation of students from different groups both in postgraduate study, and in graduate-level employment (by which we mean, jobs for which a degree is required by the employer or in which graduate-level skills are used).

Progression issues for students with particular characteristics

Type of institution attended

Progression from HEIs

9. [“Higher education and beyond: Outcomes from full-time first degree study” \(HEFCE 2013/15\)](#) analyses trends in degree attainment and progression to employment or further study shortly after qualifying, for young UK-domiciled students who started a full-time first degree course at a UK HEI in the academic years from 2002-03 to 2006-07.

⁴⁷ [CBI “Tomorrow’s Growth” \(2013\).](#)

⁴⁸ [Alan Milburn “University Challenge: How higher education can advance social mobility” \(2012\).](#)

⁴⁹ [Chris Brink “What can higher education contribute to improving social mobility in the UK?” HE Academy conference \(2013\).](#)

10. The percentage that achieved a degree and were in employment (both graduate and non-graduate) or further study six months after graduation decreased over these years to a low of 54.9 per cent for the 2005-06 starting cohort, as shown in Table 4, albeit increasing again slightly for 2006-07 entrants. Meanwhile the percentage who were unemployed six months after graduation increased, from 4.2 per cent for the 2002-03 cohort to 6.2 per cent for the 2006-07 cohort. This may be linked to the overall economic climate, as the biggest increase in unemployment is seen from the 2004-05 cohort (who began to graduate in 2007) to the 2005-06 cohort (who began to graduate in 2008).

Table 4: Employment circumstances of degree qualifiers from UK HEIs as a percentage of the starting cohort

Qualified with a degree and:	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Employed or studying	57.5%	55.7%	55.6%	54.9%	56.2%
Unemployed	4.2%	4.0%	4.4%	5.8%	6.2%
Unavailable	3.4%	3.1%	2.9%	2.8%	2.4%
Unknown/Non-response	14.9%	17.4%	17.4%	17.1%	15.8%
Not surveyed	1.6%	1.5%	1.7%	1.6%	1.7%
Not qualified with a degree	18.5%	18.4%	17.9%	17.9%	17.7%

Source: HEFCE 2013/15

11. Meanwhile, there was an overall decrease in the percentage of graduates who went on to graduate employment or further study (Figure 17), despite an initial rise.

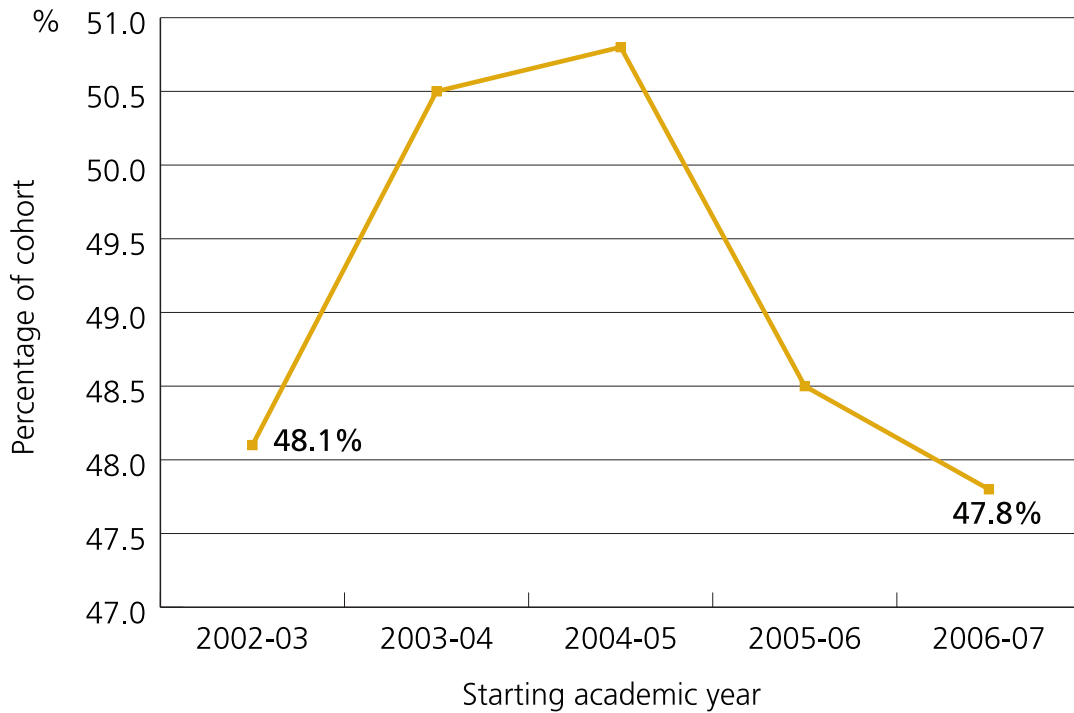
Progression from further education colleges

12. [“Destinations of leavers from higher education in further education colleges – Key findings: leavers up to academic year 2010-11” \(HEFCE 2013/01\)](#) examines outcomes for those graduating with HE qualifications from FECs – that is, foundation degrees or first degrees. It shows that, within FECs, employment figures remained broadly similar between 2008-09 and 2010-11, although unemployment rose from 14 per cent to 16 per cent between 2009-10 and 2010-11, possibly due to the recession (Figure 18).

13. A notable difference between full-time first degree qualifiers at HEIs and FECs was that fewer FEC graduates overall progressed to further study: 15 per cent in 2010-11 (when looking at both further study only and further study and employment combined), compared to 24 per cent of those from HEIs.

14. There was greater consistency of outcomes among part-time first degree qualifiers from FECs and HEIs than among those who had studied full-time (see Figure 19). In contrast with the full-time population, the proportion of part-time qualifiers in further study was higher at FECs: 25 per cent in 2010-11 (when looking at both further study only and further study and employment combined), compared with 19 per cent of part-time first degree qualifiers from HEIs.

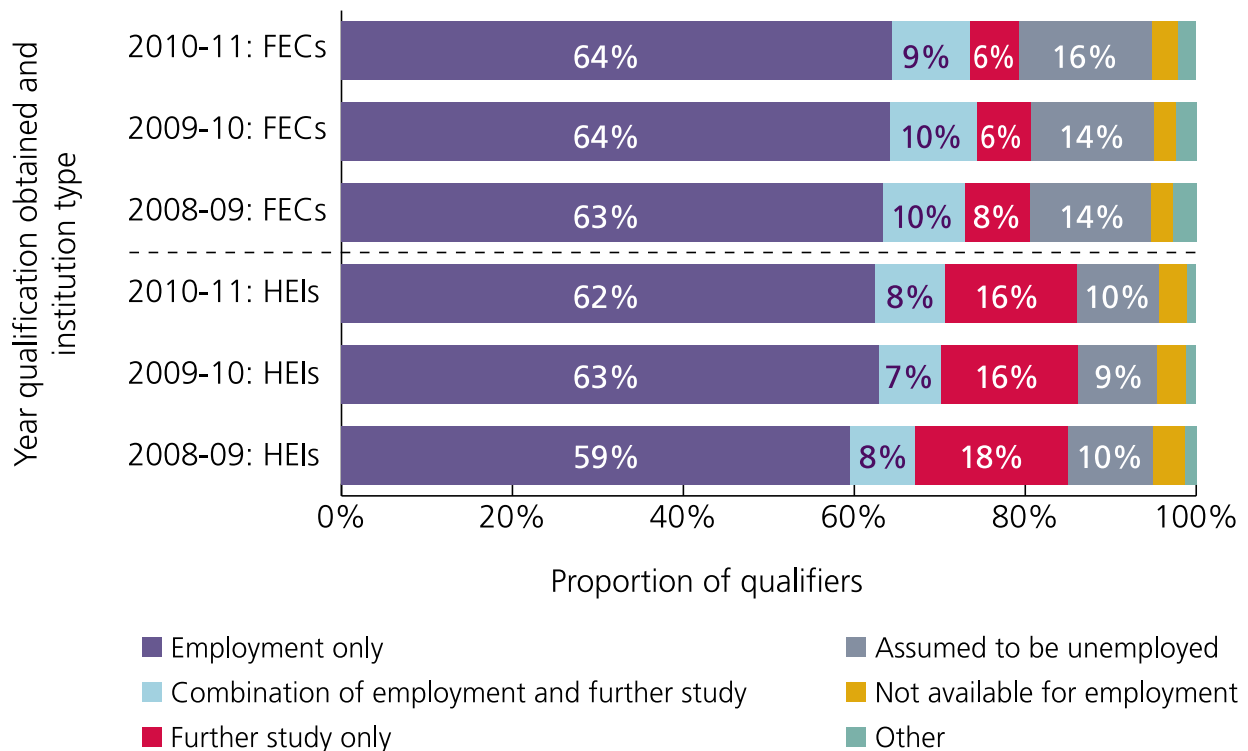
Figure 17: Percentage of each UK starting cohort who achieved a degree and continued to graduate employment or further study



Source: HEFCE 2013/15

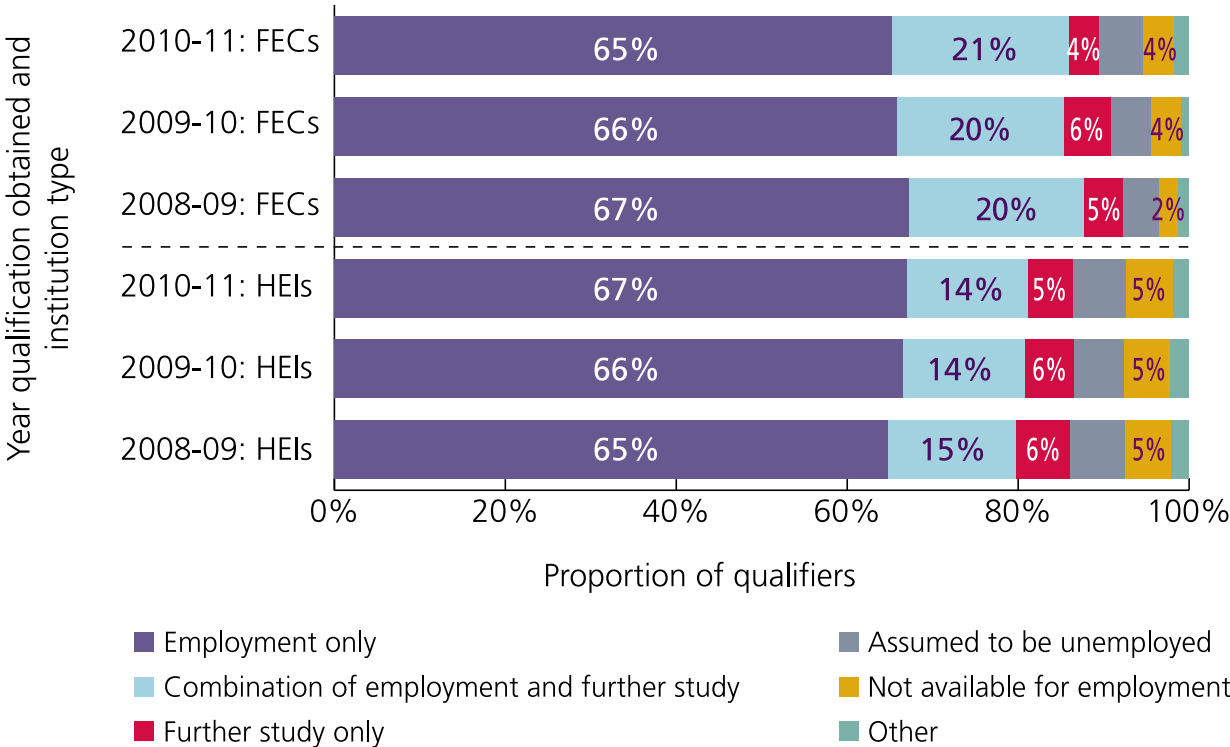
Note: The percentage of the cohort who achieved a degree and continued to graduate employment or further study is calculated to include a proportion of those whose job classification and employment circumstance are both unknown. This is done using the proportion of the population known to be in graduate employment or further study following graduation. "Cohorts" and the notation used to describe them are explained in the glossary at the back of this document.

Figure 18: Destinations of full-time first degree qualifiers from English HE providers by academic year and institution type



Source: HEFCE 2013/01

Figure 19: Destinations of part-time first degree qualifiers from English HE providers by academic year and institution type



Source: HEFCE 2013/01

15. The proportions of part-time first degree qualifiers who were in employment only were consistently similar for qualifiers from FECs and HEIs. Figure 19 shows that six months after qualifying, around two-thirds of each part-time first degree cohort went into employment only. However, any statistical analysis of employment outcomes for part-time students has to be treated with caution: most part-time students are mature and have jobs while studying, but the data will not record whether their job after graduation is the same or a new one.

Low participation neighbourhoods

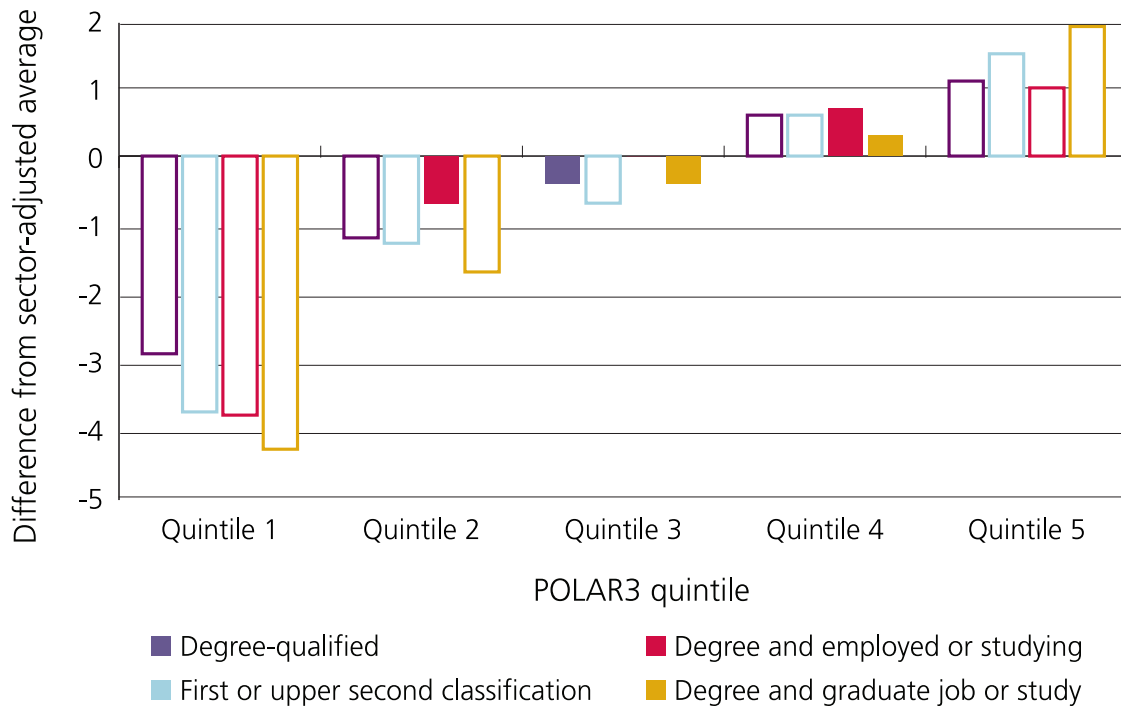
16. More detailed analysis of the 2006-07 starting cohort in HEFCE 2013/15 shows there are very different outcomes after graduation for students from the various POLAR3 quintiles (where quintile 1 represents those students from areas with lowest HE participation rates and quintile 5 represents those from areas with the highest – for more information about the POLAR classification system, see the glossary), as Figure 20 shows.

17. These differences cannot be explained by the profiles of the students within these groups, suggesting that there are other factors affecting attainment and success for more disadvantaged quintiles. Further investigation is needed to understand the reasons for these differences if they are to be successfully addressed.

School type

18. When we look at graduates who had attended independent schools and those from state schools, and whether they entered further study or graduate employment, we see a complex picture (see Figure 21).

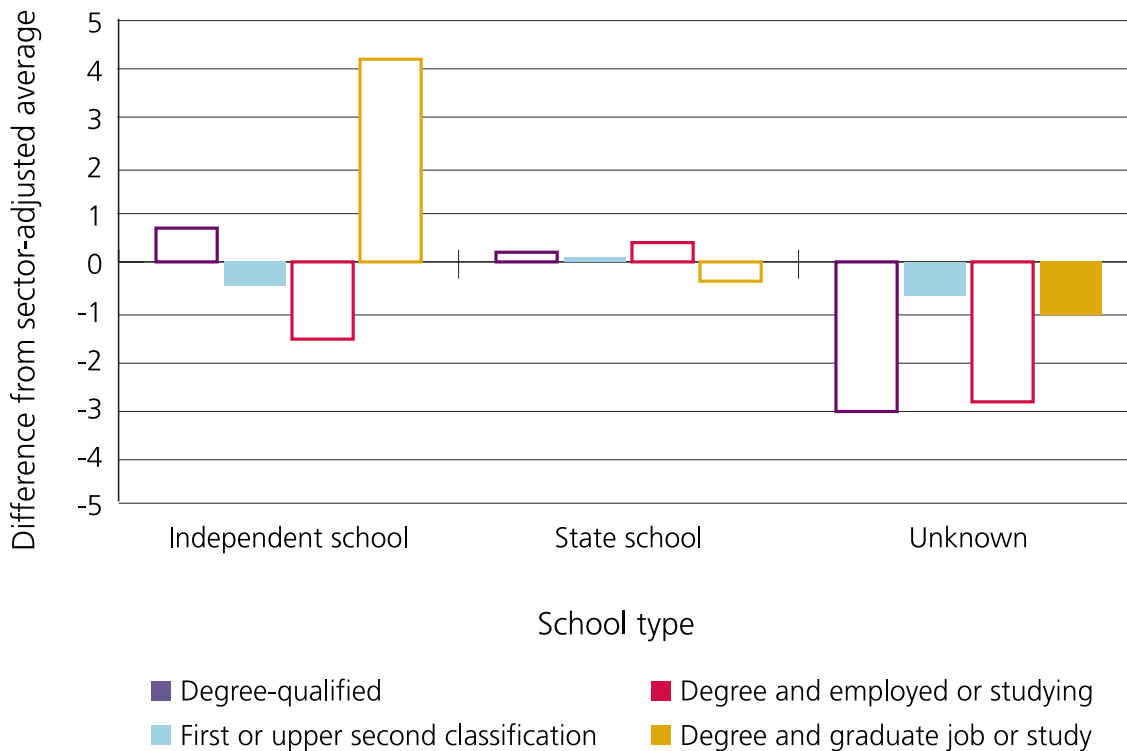
Figure 20: Percentage point difference of the outcome from the sector-adjusted average for each of the four outcomes, split by POLAR3 quintile



Source: HEFCE 2013/15

Notes: "Sector-adjusted average" is explained in the glossary at the back of this document. Where a bar is filled in the graph, this indicates that the difference is not statistically significant.

Figure 21: Percentage point difference of the outcome from the sector-adjusted average for the four outcomes, by school type



Source: HEFCE 2013/15

Notes: "Sector-adjusted average" is explained in the glossary at the back of this document. Where a bar is filled in the graph, this indicates that the difference is not statistically significant.

19. Graduates from state schools perform above their sector-adjusted average on every outcome apart from securing graduate employment or undertaking further study. In marked contrast, their independent school peers perform significantly above sector-adjusted average for this outcome.

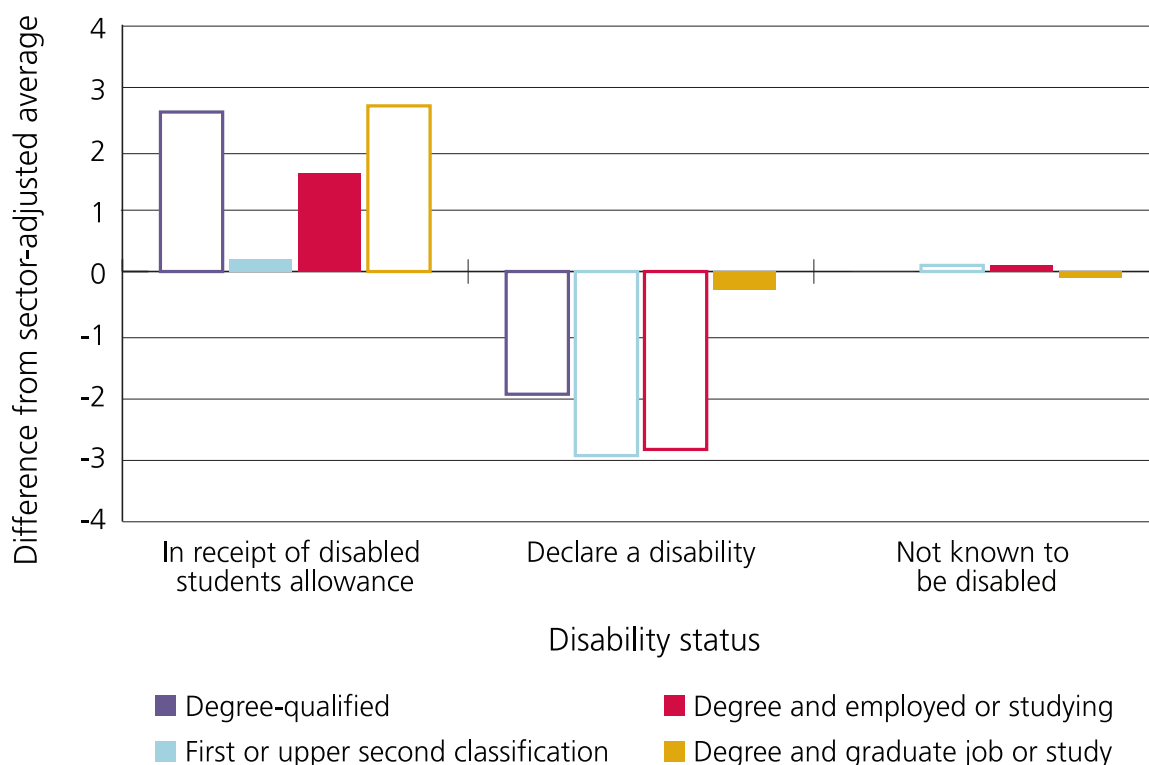
20. However, students who went to state schools exceed the sector-adjusted average in terms of continuing to any employment or further study, while students from independent schools are below it. This is reversed, though, for graduate-level employment. Furthermore, even for those that do secure graduate employment, students from independent school backgrounds enjoy higher earnings six months after graduation than those from state schools⁵¹.

21. More work is needed to understand the reasons for these differences if they are to be successfully addressed.

Disability

22. For students that are known to have disabilities, those claiming DSA perform significantly above the sector-adjusted average and those not claiming DSA perform below it (see Figure 22).

Figure 22: Percentage point difference of the outcome from the sector-adjusted average for the four outcomes, by disability status



Source: HEFCE 2013/15

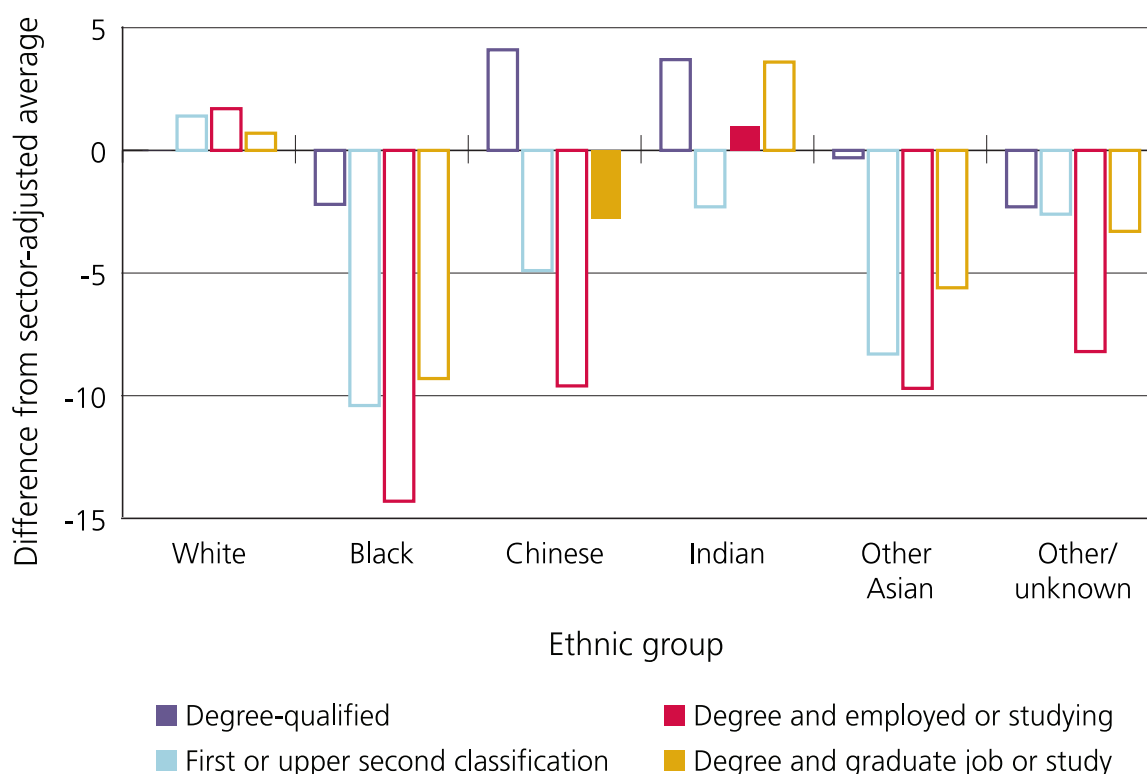
Notes: "Sector-adjusted average" is explained in the glossary at the back of this document. Where a bar is filled in the graph, this indicates that the difference is not statistically significant.

Ethnicity

23. HEFCE 2013/15 shows that for the possible outcomes after graduating, White students are above or on sector-adjusted average for all four outcomes, but minority ethnic groups mostly do not go on to achieve as highly as would be expected (see Figure 23). This suggests that other factors are affecting the outcomes for people in minority ethnic groups.

⁵¹ upReach "Access to the professions for undergraduates from less-privileged backgrounds – The Issue" (2012).

Figure 23: Percentage point difference of the outcome from the sector-adjusted average for all four outcomes, split by ethnicity



Source: HEFCE 2013/15

Notes: “Sector-adjusted average” is explained in the glossary at the back of this document. Where a bar is filled in the graph, this indicates that the difference is not statistically significant. All of the differences from the sector-adjusted average shown here are statistically significant.

24. By far the largest difference from the sector-adjusted average is the rate of Black graduates attaining a degree and continuing into employment or further study.

25. It is also notable that all of the ethnic minority groups (with the exception of students of Indian ethnicity), perform significantly below the sector-adjusted average when it comes to qualifying with a degree and continuing to graduate employment or further study.

Sex

26. Women perform better than men across all outcomes, with the smallest gap being those who qualify with a degree and go on to graduate employment or study (49 per cent for women and 46.4 per cent for men), as shown in Figure 24.

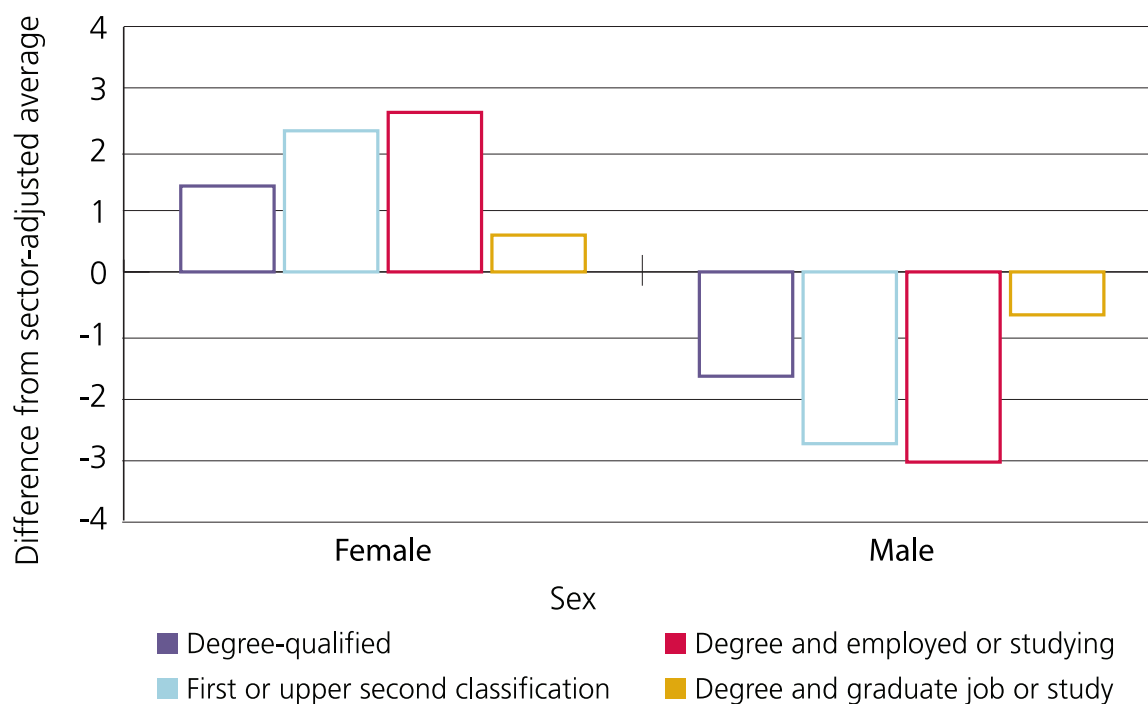
27. Discussion of gender in the HE student body has tended to focus on the lower participation rate of men in HE. However, this analysis demonstrates the need to investigate why men are not achieving the expected outcomes shortly after graduation, while women continue to perform better at this stage.

Progression to postgraduate study

28. Most postgraduate study is undertaken a number of years after the completion of a first degree. Only around 10 per cent of first-degree graduates progressed directly into study for a higher qualification between 2004-05 and 2008-09, according to a study by the Spatial Economics Research Centre⁵², so measuring progression into postgraduate study for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is difficult.

⁵² Philip Wales “Access all areas? The impact of fees and background on student demand for postgraduate higher education in the UK” (2013).

Figure 24: Percentage point difference of the outcome from the sector-adjusted average for each of the four outcomes, split by sex



Source: HEFCE 2013/15

Note: "Sector-adjusted average" is explained in the glossary at the back of this document. All of the differences from the sector-adjusted average shown here are statistically significant.

29. Nonetheless, since 2012-13, HEFCE has undertaken a programme of work to better understand the postgraduate environment and how the fees and funding reforms might impact upon it. Part of this has involved a more detailed analysis of postgraduate progression data which indicates the trends that we discuss below, giving comparators for different student groups that help guide our strategic focus.

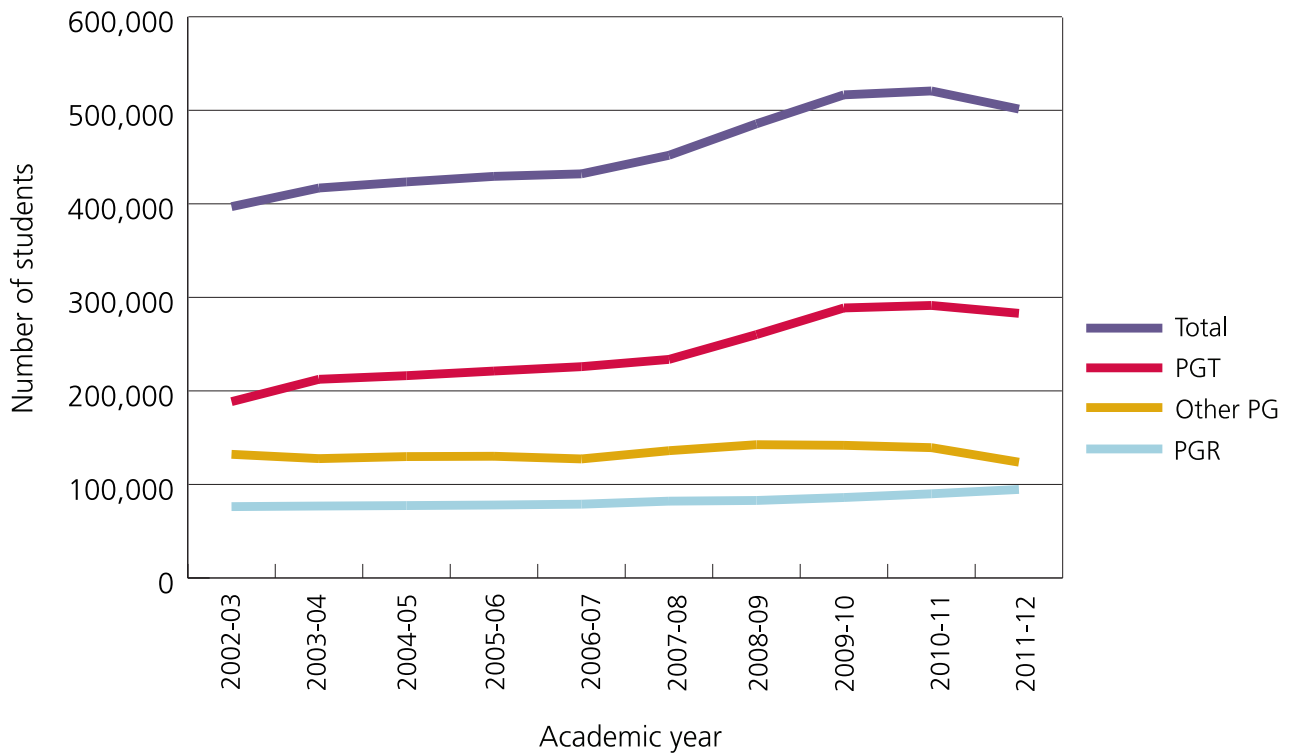
General trends

30. Total postgraduate (PG) student numbers have risen by 18 per cent in the last 10 years (which correlates with a 16 per cent rise in undergraduate study), with the greatest increases being in taught courses (PGT), as shown in Figure 25. For full-time students, most of this growth has been from international students. Figure 25 also shows that total postgraduate numbers declined between 2010-11 and 2011-12 due to drops in both PGT and 'other postgraduate' student numbers.

31. Figure 26 breaks this down in more detail by showing mode of study (i.e. whether full-time or part-time) as well as course type. It reveals that in 2011-12, 46 per cent of all postgraduate students studied part-time, compared with 28 per cent of undergraduates. But there are differences according to course type: 70 per cent of postgraduate research (PGR) students are full-time, whereas 70 per cent of "other PG" study is part-time. For taught masters degrees, the number of full-time and part-time students is roughly equal over the 10-year period, but full-time numbers are growing faster (by 78 per cent over the period) and comprised about 60 per cent of taught masters students in 2011-12.

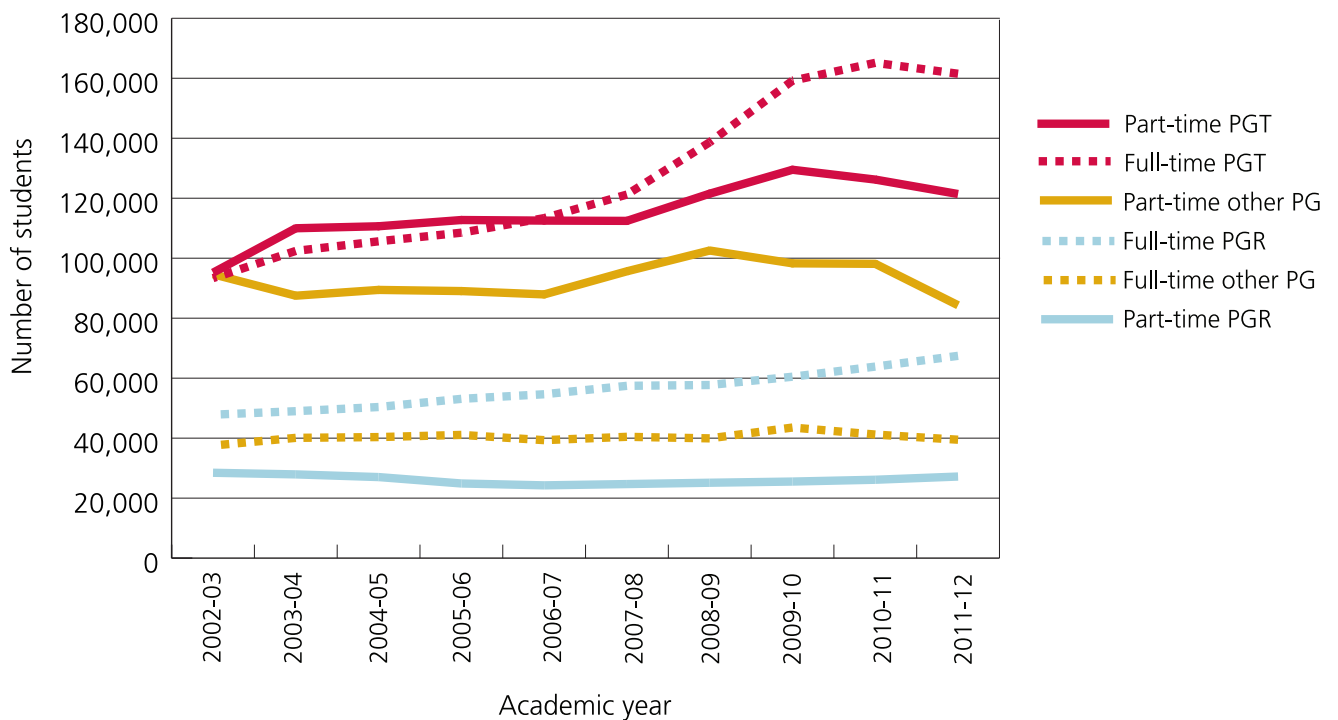
32. As indicated in ["Postgraduate education in England and Northern Ireland: Overview report 2013" \(HEFCE 2013/14\)](#), a number of factors could be behind the recent declines shown in Figure 26. For example, it may simply reflect stabilisation after a period of growth, or – given that on "other PG" programmes, many students study part-time – it may share some drivers with the significant

Figure 25: Number of students enrolling on postgraduate courses at HEIs in England and Northern Ireland between 2002-03 and 2011-12, split by type



Source: "Postgraduate education in England and Northern Ireland: Overview report 2013" (HEFCE 2013/14)

Figure 26: Number of students enrolling on postgraduate courses at HEIs in England and Northern Ireland between 2002-03 and 2011-12 split by type and mode of study



Source: HEFCE 2013/14

reduction in part-time student entry to undergraduate study since 2010, as discussed in [“Higher education in England: Impact of the 2012 reforms” \(HEFCE 2013/03\)](#). In the case of part-time “other PG”, the withdrawal of funding from some large-scale public service development programmes may be significant. Further work is needed to develop a fuller understanding of this area.

Progression outcomes for students with particular characteristics

Prior attainment level

33. Research undertaken by the Higher Education Academy⁵³ and the HEFCE analysis [“Trends in transition from first degree to postgraduate study: Qualifiers between 2002-03 and 2010-11” \(HEFCE 2013/13\)](#) has established that rates of progression to further study are interlinked with attainment at undergraduate level: people who are awarded a first class honours degree have the highest rate of progression to further study.

34. Given the entry requirements for postgraduate courses this pattern is to be expected, but it has implications for access, especially given the attainment gaps for different student groups such as minority ethnic groups, discussed in chapter 2.

Age

35. HEFCE 2013/13 identifies that people are beginning postgraduate studies at a younger age than they did 10 years ago, perhaps to gain an advantage in the jobs market where an increasing number of people have degrees. However, the majority of all postgraduate students are still over 25 when they start postgraduate study.

36. Figure 27 shows the rates at which students transition to postgraduate study, split by whether they were mature (aged 21 or over) or young (under 21) on enrolment to their first degree course. It shows that young transition rates were very slightly higher for all types of postgraduate course, and the difference in transition to taught masters degree by age group has widened since 2008-09. However, as discussed above, most students take a break of at least a year between undergraduate and postgraduate study.

37. HEFCE 2013/13 also considers the relationship between age, prior attainment, and type of postgraduate study. As shown in Table 5, young transition rates were higher than mature rates for all postgraduate types and degree classifications, except for transition to other postgraduate courses for those with first class degrees.

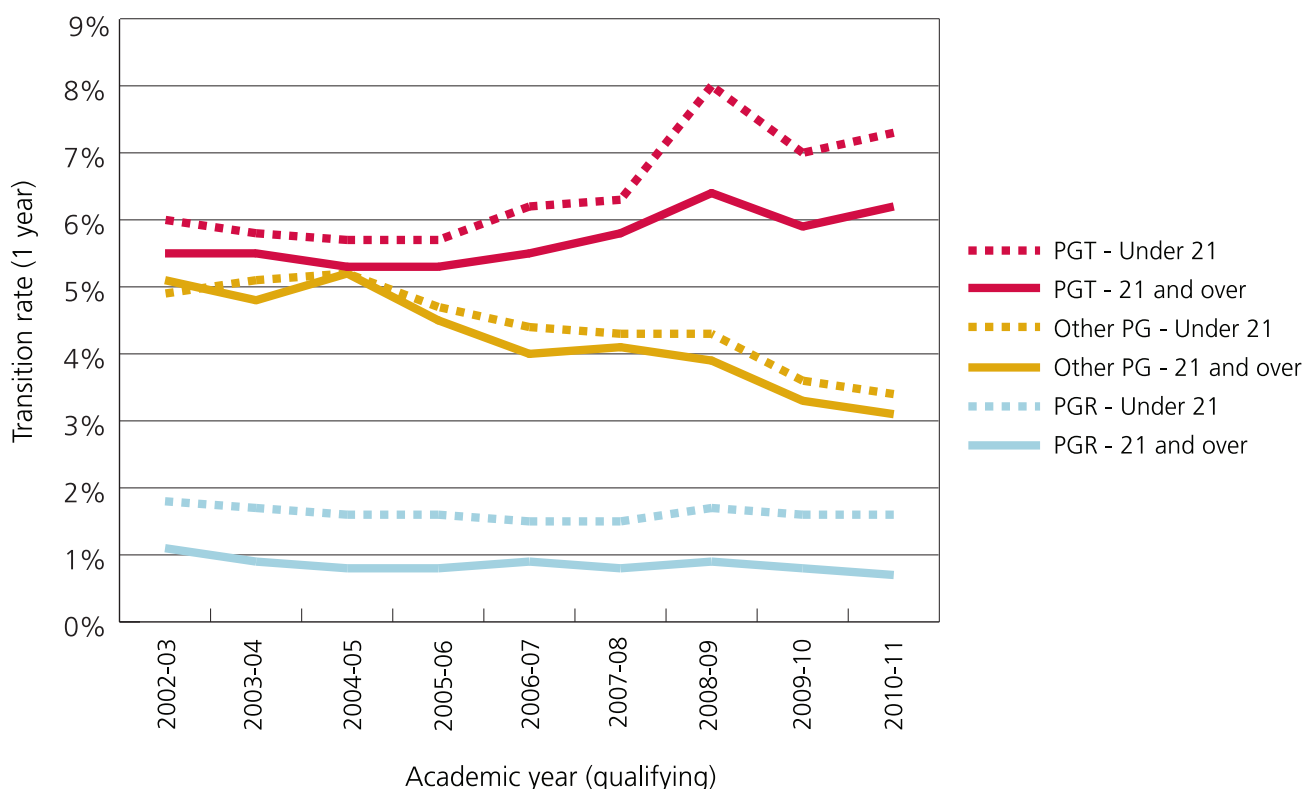
38. The likelihood of studying part-time increases with age: in 2011-12, part-time students aged over 25 accounted for 26 per cent of PGR entrants, 35 per cent of PGT entrants and 57 per cent of ‘other postgraduate’ entrants.

Low participation neighbourhood

39. Figure 28 shows the proportion of the first degree cohort who progress to postgraduate study within one year of graduation, for areas with the least and the most young participation in undergraduate HE (POLAR3 quintiles – for more information, see the glossary). Those from high undergraduate participation areas were more likely than those from low undergraduate participation areas to go on to study PGT or PGR courses, although the difference is small for PGR. However, ‘other postgraduate’ study attracted more students from low undergraduate participation areas.

⁵³ [Higher Education Academy “Transition to higher degrees across the UK” \(2013\)](#).

Figure 27: One-year transition rates of full-time first-degree UK qualifiers at English HEIs to postgraduate courses, split by age group and type of postgraduate study



Source: HEFCE 2013/13

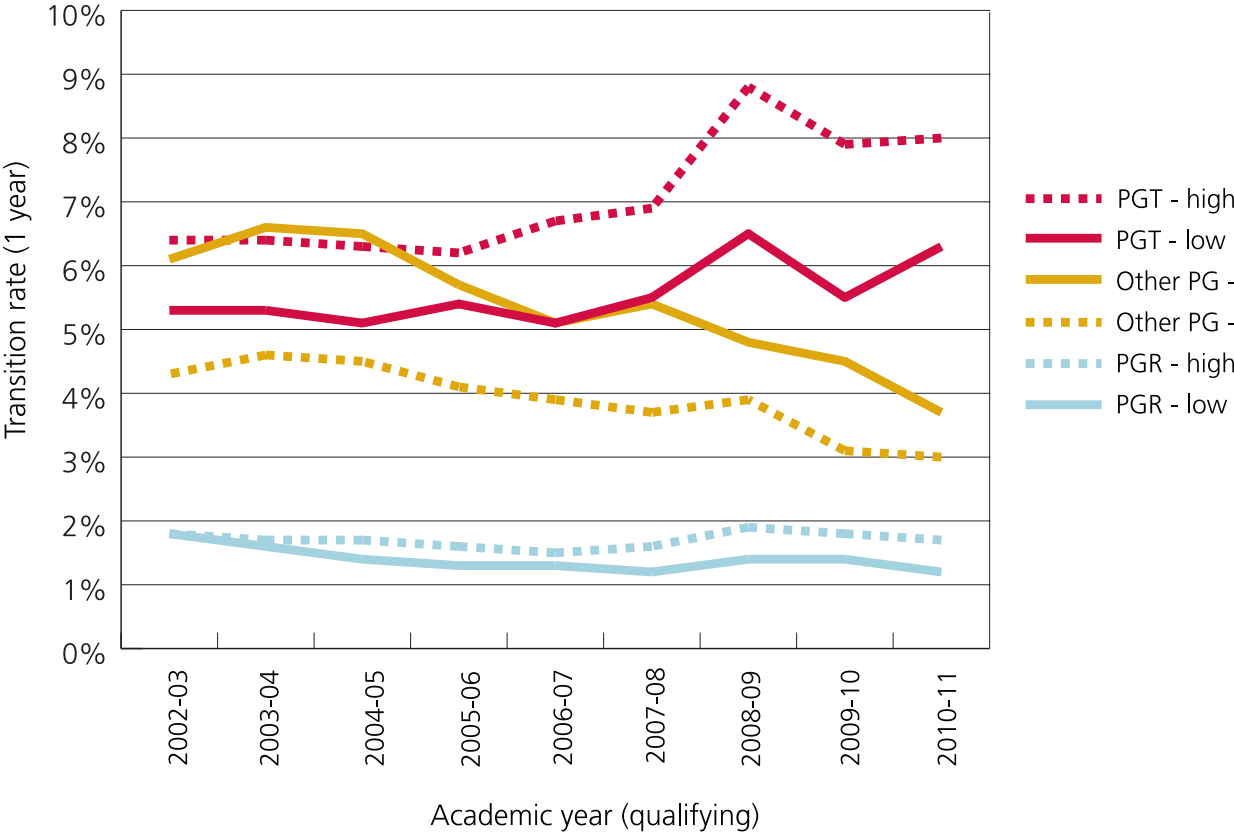
Table 5: One-year transition rates of full-time first-degree UK qualifiers at English HEIs in 2010-11 to postgraduate courses, split by first degree classification and age group

Classification of first degree	Age group	Total qualifying	One-year transition rates			
			PGR	PGT	Other PG	Total PG
First	Young	26,760	6.0%	11.0%	3.7%	20.7%
	Mature	7,695	2.8%	10.9%	4.4%	18.0%
2.1	Young	94,710	1.2%	8.3%	4.0%	13.4%
	Mature	18,260	0.5%	6.7%	3.7%	10.9%
2.2 or below	Young	62,705	0.2%	4.4%	2.5%	7.1%
	Mature	18,255	0.1%	3.8%	2.0%	5.9%
Total		228,390	1.4%	7.1%	3.4%	11.9%

Source: HEFCE 2013/13

Note: Qualifiers of unknown age are excluded from the analysis but included in the total, so the total is not necessarily equal to the sum of its parts.

Figure 28: One-year transition rates of young full-time first-degree UK qualifiers at English HEIs to postgraduate courses split by high and low POLAR quintiles and type of postgraduate study



Source: HEFCE 2013/14

40. Significantly, HEFCE 2013/14 shows that even where students achieve the same undergraduate degree classification, participation in postgraduate study still varies according to neighbourhood background. At each classification level, progression to a masters degree is more likely for those from the highest participation neighbourhood group, and progression to 'other postgraduate' study is more likely for those from a lower participation background. While progression to PGR is the same for those who have a first class degree regardless of neighbourhood background, those with a 2:1 are more likely to progress if they are from a high participation area.

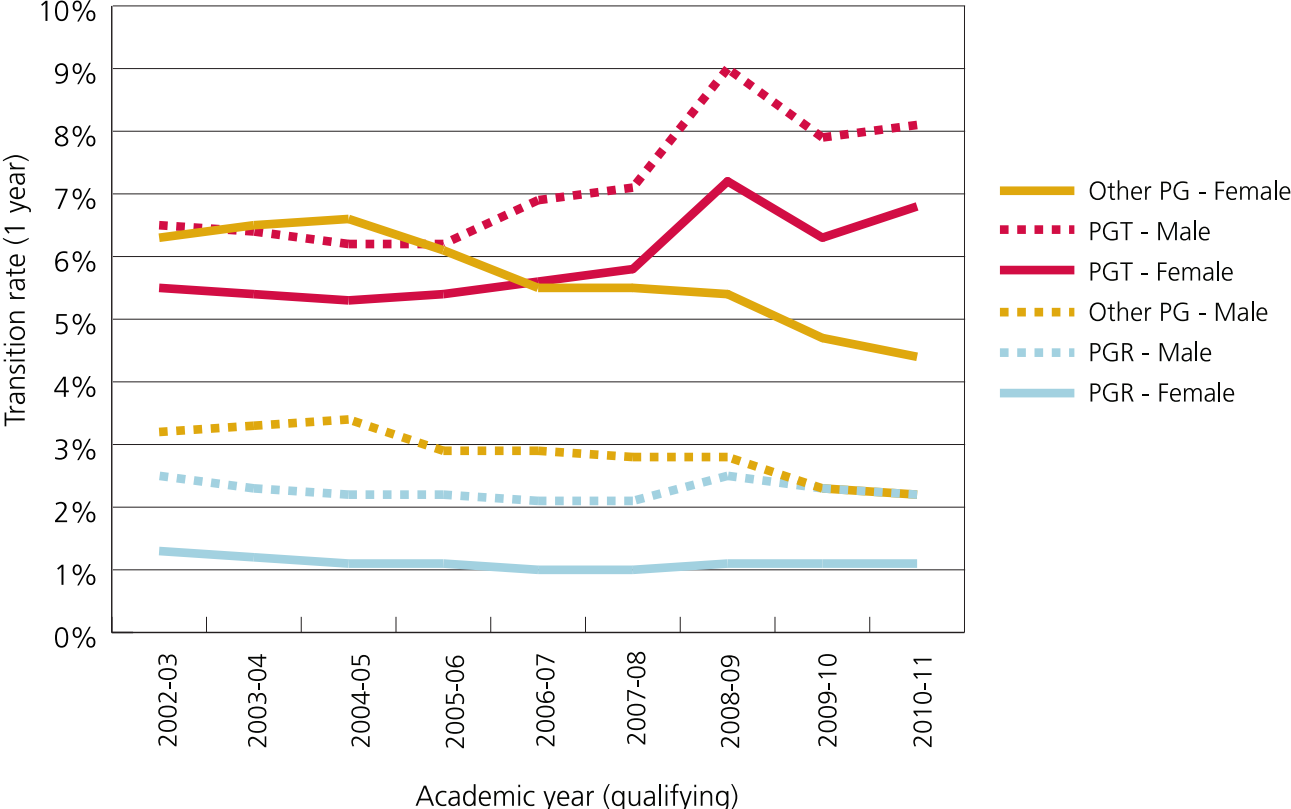
41. HEFCE 2013/14 also shows that young first-degree qualifiers from a low participation background were more likely to stay at the same institution for their postgraduate study (50 per cent) than those from a high participation background (44 per cent).

42. This work is still in the early stages, but already shows that disparities in participation at undergraduate level are continued and even compounded at postgraduate level.

Sex

43. The Higher Education Academy's "Transition to higher degrees across the UK" analysis found that men are more likely than women to enter both PGR and PGT programmes, as shown in Figure 29, and that this gap is particularly wide for PGR. This contrasts with patterns at undergraduate level (see chapter 1, paragraphs 15-20). However, men were less likely to progress to 'other postgraduate'.

Figure 29: One-year transition rates of young full-time first-degree UK qualifiers at English HEIs to postgraduate courses, split by sex and type of postgraduate study



Source: HEFCE 2013/13

44. These gender differences are marked for almost all disciplines: women have lower rates of progression to higher degrees in arts, humanities, social sciences and STEM disciplines. This could have subsequent impacts on the diversity of the HE workforce – for example, ECU reports that although men make up 61.4 per cent of the total full-time academic staff in the UK, this rises to 84.9 per cent for full-time professorial roles in science, engineering and technology⁵⁴.

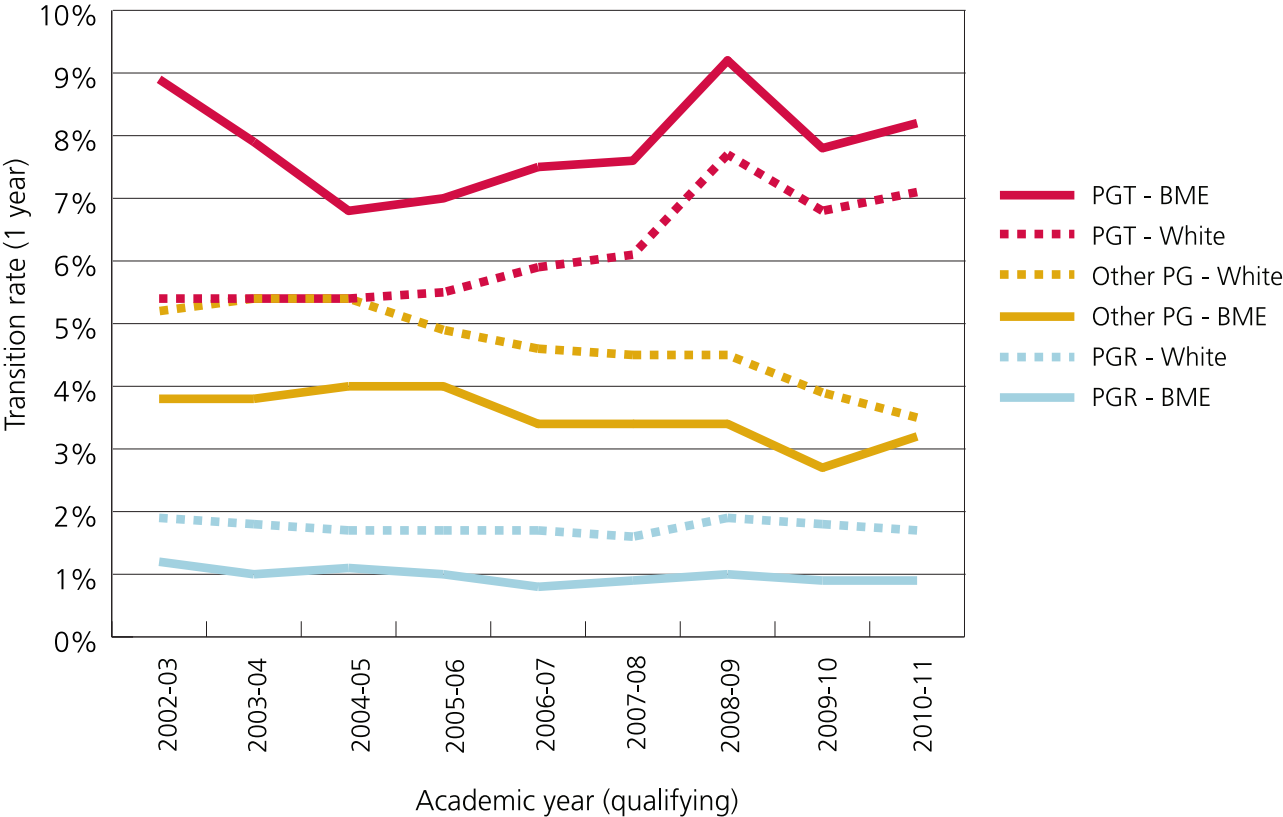
Ethnicity

45. HEFCE 2013/13 found that students from ethnic minority groups were more likely than White students to transition to taught masters degree courses but less likely to go on to “other postgraduate” or PGR (see Figure 30). Figure 30 also shows that the difference between these groups’ rates of transition to taught masters courses fell from 3.5 per cent for 2002-03 qualifiers to 1.1 per cent for 2010-11 qualifiers.

46. The report concludes that these transition rates are likely to be affected by the subject area of study and the region of the institution. HEFCE 2010/13 showed that students from ethnic minority groups are likely to study at London institutions, and the “Transition to higher degrees across the UK” research showed that those originally from London are more likely to progress to taught masters study.

⁵⁴ [Equality Challenge Unit “Equality in higher education: statistical report 2012” \(2012\).](#)

Figure 30: One-year transition rates of young full-time first-degree UK qualifiers at English HEIs to postgraduate courses split by broad ethnic group and type of postgraduate study



Source: HEFCE 2013/13

47. HEFCE 2013/13 found that for all types of postgraduate study, there is much variation in transition rates between different ethnic minority groups (see Annex G of HEFCE 2013/13 for a detailed analysis of the variation between ethnic groups). Students of Chinese ethnicity were consistently the most likely to progress to a taught masters degree (11.7 per cent in 2010-11) while those of Black Caribbean ethnicity were consistently the least likely (3.9 per cent in 2010-11) and consistently lower than White students. For PGR transition, however, there was less consistency over time. In 2010-11 students with Chinese ethnicity had the highest transition rate and those of Bangladeshi heritage the lowest (2.4 per cent and 0.1 per cent respectively). For ‘other postgraduate’ transition, students with Pakistani heritage had the highest transition rate (5.6 per cent in 2010-11) and the lowest rate was among students of Chinese heritage (2.0 per cent in 2010-11).

Disability

48. HEFCE 2013/14 demonstrated that 94 per cent of all postgraduate students in 2011-12 had no known disability but that the numbers claiming DSA had increased over the previous 10 years in line with the increases seen at the undergraduate level.

49. Further information relating to types of impairment would enable us to develop our understanding of the complexities behind these figures and identify which interventions and approaches have most impact.

Current issues in progression to postgraduate study

Complexity

50. HEFCE discussions with institutions have revealed that access is an important concern for HE providers, but that there is a lack of clarity in defining “widening participation and access” for a postgraduate student⁵⁵.

51. This is compounded by the diversity and complexity of the postgraduate sector which makes generalisations difficult. There are many different postgraduate study programmes and qualifications on offer, ranging from doctorates to diplomas, all with distinct entry requirements, costs and study patterns.

52. Progression rates are linked strongly to prior undergraduate experiences of study and the institution at which it was done, as shown in the literature review. Thus inequalities are potentially carried through from undergraduate entry and study.

53. But, since most postgraduate students enter a number of years after graduating from their first degrees, there are likely to be very different factors at play in terms of their take-up of postgraduate study. Evidence gathered by I-Graduate⁵⁶ for HEFCE and in the 2012 NUS student experience survey (cited in the ARC Network literature review) shows that a wide range of factors affect postgraduate students’ decision making, such as career development, personal development and employment.

Financial barriers

54. HEFCE and the Research Councils provide significant public funding of postgraduate education which helps to minimise the level of fees charged by universities, and there is a subsidised professional and career development loan scheme run by two banks. Since 2012-13, an increasing number of universities have included financial support in their access agreements to encourage disadvantaged students to continue into postgraduate study; and other sources of funding such as charities and sponsorship are also available. Disabled postgraduates can access the DSA, albeit at a lower level than undergraduates.

55. There is, though, no comprehensive publicly financed loan scheme for either fees or living costs comparable to that for undergraduates, and the public funding for taught postgraduates is particularly limited. Most postgraduate students, therefore, must cover their own fees and living costs, which may deter some students from entering postgraduate study: in the 2012 NUS Student Experience survey, referenced in the literature review, 75.9 per cent of respondents said tuition fees and living costs could prevent them from progressing to postgraduate study.

56. Stakeholders told HEFCE during institutional visits to discuss postgraduate provision that they expect PGT fees to go up, due to factors such as cost of provision and concerns that PGT should be perceived to be “higher value” than undergraduate; they also feared that institutions that did not raise their fees would “look cheap”. This may suppress demand, as discussed in the “Access All Areas?” report.

57. Alongside this, higher levels of student debt following the undergraduate reforms could impact on progression to postgraduate study from 2015-16. Around half the students surveyed for the

⁵⁵ HEFCE “Institutional visits to discuss postgraduate provision” (2012).

⁵⁶ I-Graduate “Understanding the information needs of postgraduate taught students and how they can be met” 2013.

Futuretrack⁵⁷ project indicated that their postgraduate options/plans would be limited by the debts they were likely to have accumulated while studying for their degree. Over a third of students with debts of £15,000 or more stated that they would like to study for a postgraduate qualification, but were reluctant to accumulate further debt. Students from less affluent backgrounds may be less likely than others to be able to finance their own studies, and less willing to take on further debt in order to do so. There are concerns, too, that information on the financial support that is available for postgraduate students is not easily accessible.

58. There has been much debate regarding the role of student finance in access to postgraduate study, and bodies across the HE sector have called for an affordable and equitable loan system for postgraduate students. Some have suggested models for such a system (see HEFCE 2013/14). Institutions told HEFCE, during visits to discuss postgraduate provision, that they thought access to student funding was vital to undertaking postgraduate study and that the recent changes to funding and student finance could adversely affect participation by students from lower income groups. Notwithstanding this, there is not yet a clear picture of whether the new undergraduate finance system will be a barrier to postgraduate progression, nor of whether the acquisition of further debt through a loan finance scheme would help to address this, least of all among the significant proportion of postgraduates who are part-time and mature.

59. A new section in the National Student Survey that specifically asks final year students whether they intend progressing to further study will enable HEFCE to monitor whether intentions appear to have been affected by the reforms to undergraduate fees and financing. The Postgraduate Support Scheme (see paragraph 99d of this chapter) will also enable HEFCE to work with institutions and employers to test different finance models, with a view to understanding which approaches might be successful in the longer term.

Information, advice and guidance

60. Potential postgraduate students have to find their way through a complex landscape of varied fees and different funding sources, each with distinct requirements, as discussed in the literature review. A wealth of information is available about postgraduate study but it lacks coherence and is often difficult to find, according to the I-Graduate report on PGT students' information needs.

61. Our interim report⁵⁸ highlighted the challenges in providing high quality, relevant advice and guidance about undergraduate study to potential students. These challenges also extend to the postgraduate sector. Evidence from research and stakeholder engagement for the national strategy highlights the need for clearer, relevant, comparable information to be provided on the choices available, the costs involved and the funding available. HEFCE has responded to this evidence and put a number of work streams in place, and OFFA has encouraged universities and colleges to include a focus on information, advice and guidance (IAG) for potential postgraduate students in their access agreements. But the issues in IAG require a cross-sector, cross-government response.

⁵⁷ [Higher Education Careers Service Unit \(HECSU\) "Futuretrack Stage 4: transitions into employment, future study and other outcomes" \(2012\).](#)

⁵⁸ [HEFCE/OFFA "National strategy for access and student success: interim report to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills" \(2013\).](#)

62. For undergraduate students, the Key Information Set (KIS) provides a standardised, comparable set of basic information about a course and the student experience but there is no direct equivalent for postgraduate students (although several information websites exist, such as www.prospects.ac.uk and www.findamasters.com). However, our research into the information needs of postgraduate students suggests that such a model would not be appropriate at the postgraduate level. The I-Graduate report on PGT students' information needs found that there was a major issue in knowing the information needs of students who took up postgraduate study after a long break, because these students were not in "the system" and it was very difficult to know how to contact them.

63. There is no direct postgraduate equivalent of the National Student Survey. The HE Academy's Postgraduate Taught and Postgraduate Research Experience Surveys cover some similar areas, but the results are not published at an institutional level.

64. HEFCE has commissioned research to investigate the feasibility of developing a national survey of PGT students⁵⁹. It found that there was some support for a PGT student satisfaction survey, but not enough to justify a large-scale exercise, given the existence of other information. It was felt that this might not be the best way of meeting student needs. As a result, HEFCE is now leading work that will:

- provide advice and guidance to institutions on the information needs of prospective PGT students
- develop a toolkit of guidance for prospective PGT students
- investigate the information-seeking behaviour of prospective PGT students
- develop the evidence base about the information needs of prospective PGT students currently outside the HE system.

First institution attended

65. The institution at which a student completed their first degree appears to be a key factor in progression to further study. HEFCE 2013/13 reveals that transition rates are highest for HEIs that require high UCAS tariff scores for entry, while the "Transition to higher degrees across the UK" report found that research-intensive universities provided one-third of the individuals progressing on to PGT study and over half of those progressing to PGR.

66. This is perhaps not surprising, given the availability of research funding and studentships at such institutions. The question is how far these institutions look beyond their own undergraduate pool, or applicants from universities with similar profiles to their own, to ensure that they are accepting candidates with the greatest potential. More work is necessary to establish the factors involved in the concentration of students progressing to further study: for example, the culture of the institution and availability of relevant advice and guidance may contribute.

67. HEFCE 2013/13 confirms the significance of the institution where undergraduate study takes place but also that over all types of postgraduate study, mature students were more likely to stay at their undergraduate institution than young students (see Table 6). This may reflect that mature students are more likely to have ties and responsibilities that make them unwilling or unable to move location.

⁵⁹ [NatCen "The feasibility of conducting a national survey of postgraduate taught students" \(2013\).](#)

Table 6: Percentage of 2010-11 full-time first-degree UK qualifiers at English HEIs who went on to postgraduate study, who studied undergraduate and postgraduate at the same institution, by age group

Age group	Number transitioning	% staying at the same institution			
		PGR	Taught masters	Other PG	Total PG
Young	22,730	60%	49%	38%	47%
Mature	4,455	72%	56%	51%	56%
Total	27,185	60%	49%	38%	47%

Source: HEFCE 2013/13

68. Ethnicity also appears to link to institutional factors. In his 2009 research, Paul Wakeling reported that Black students and those from Bangladeshi communities are more likely to be attending post-1992 universities (that is, former polytechnics). Conversely, Indian, Chinese, Asian other and other/mixed ethnic groups are more highly represented in pre-1992 universities. He also notes that: “Higher education presents an opportunity for social mobility and integration but it can also reproduce existing inequalities. Access to postgraduate study for the UK’s ethnic minorities is a case in point”⁶⁰.

Progression to employment

69. The UK graduate employment market continues to grow and to withstand wider economic influences⁶¹. But there remain long-standing issues that need to be addressed so that all students, whatever their background and personal characteristics, have equal opportunity to obtain appropriate employment after graduation.

70. We recognise that universities and colleges have already undertaken extensive activity in terms of graduate employability and workforce development. They have worked constructively with employers on the development of foundation degrees, co-funded provision and a variety of workforce development programmes. However, unexplained differences in outcomes for students with certain characteristics remain a concern and targeted, evidenced-based approaches should be developed to address these variations. This will require action not just by universities and colleges, but also by employers and employer organisations, Government and national agencies including HEFCE and OFFA.

Graduate recruitment practices

71. Many professions and professional bodies have made great efforts to make access to the professions fairer and to expand the pool from which they recruit, and some of the country’s leading businesses have demonstrated their commitment to improving social mobility by joining the Government’s social mobility compact. Successive governments have sought to work with the

⁶⁰ Paul Wakeling “Are Ethnic Minorities Underrepresented in UK Postgraduate Study?”, Higher Education Quarterly 63 (2009) summary available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2008.00413.x/abstract>.

⁶¹ [HECSU and AGCAS “What do graduates do?” \(2012\)](#).

professions to address issues of social mobility⁶² and the Professions for Good project produced a social mobility toolkit⁶³ for employers aimed at supplying them with the mechanisms through which they might better improve the social diversity of their workforce. But there are areas where employers can do more to help all graduates in progressing to employment that fits their qualifications and skills.

72. Research by the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) has found that 76 per cent of employers do not collect data regarding the socio-economic background of the graduates they recruit. Just 13 per cent do collect this data, and of these, all of them monitor the school attended, 77 per cent monitor for first generation HE, 19 per cent monitor for whether the person received free school meals and 15 per cent monitor parental occupation. AGR also reports that only 24 per cent of employers have initiatives to improve the socio-economic mix of their workforce; a further 21 per cent have plans to introduce something, but 41 per cent have no such initiatives and no plans to develop any⁶⁴. The fact that so few graduate employers are actively exploring, or working to improve, the diversity of their workforce and future recruits may be a significant barrier to improving social mobility and may be behind some of the differences in employment rates between groups of graduates.

73. The "Graduate Market in 2013" survey⁶⁵ found that a quarter of employers specified a minimum UCAS tariff of at least 260 points (the equivalent of BCC at A-level) when recruiting graduates. AGR research puts the proportion of employers requiring a minimum UCAS tariff even higher, at 35.3 per cent⁶⁶. This potentially downplays the academic achievements of students while at university, particularly considering that applicants from schools in more disadvantaged areas could be accepted with lower A-level achievement than their peers from more advantaged background and perform at least as well in their degrees⁶⁷. Employers that ignore the added value delivered to the student throughout his/her time at university are therefore acting as a potential block to greater social mobility. Plus, as the 2012 Milburn report points out, the tariff was not designed for this purpose and using it in this way disadvantages older learners who may have taken their qualifications before 2001, as well as those who may have taken less traditional routes into university, studying qualifications not covered by the tariff. Milburn recommended that "all employers should stop this practice immediately, as it is both discriminatory and unlikely to be effective as a tool for identifying potential".

74. Graduate recruiters also often state minimum degree attainment. In 2012, 76 per cent required a minimum 2:1 degree classification, up from 73.2 per cent the previous year; there was been a corresponding decline in the proportion of employers that required a minimum of a 2:2⁶⁸. The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) and the AGR have said that this sends out confusing messages about the value of an upper second degree award and, to a lesser extent, about UCAS scores in their selection processes, and that the effect of such policies is apparent in

⁶² For example, [Gateways to the Professions, Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, Opening doors, breaking barriers: a strategy for social mobility](#) and [All-party parliamentary group on social mobility](#).

⁶³ [Professions for Good "Social Mobility Toolkit for the Professions" \(2012\)](#).

⁶⁴ Carl Gilleard "Why social mobility should matter to employers" (2013). [Keynote presentation available at conference website](#).

⁶⁵ [High Fliers Research Limited "The Graduate Market in 2013: Annual review of graduate vacancies & starting salaries at Britain's leading employers" \(2013\)](#).

⁶⁶ Association of Graduate Recruiters "Summer 2013: review final report" (2013).

⁶⁷ AG Hoare & R Johnston "[Widening participation through admissions policy - a British case study of school and university performance](#)". Higher Education Quarterly, vol 36., pp. 21-41 (2011).

⁶⁸ Association of Graduate Recruiters "Summer 2013 review: final report" (2013).

students' perceptions of the importance of gaining at least a 2:1 degree⁶⁹. The AGCAS and AGR have called for more openness about the use of such criteria – whether it is a strategy to restrict numbers of applications, or whether employers think the scores have any objective relevance.

75. Meanwhile, some employers target their recruitment efforts at particular institutions. The AGCAS and AGR project found that this has implications both for those institutions that are targeted and those that are not, because it potentially creates a small number of favoured institutions at which student expectations will be very different. These are more likely to be institutions that attract higher proportions of advantaged students, which may lead to the entrenchment of such advantage – as we saw earlier in this chapter, there is a significant difference in the likelihood of getting a graduate-level job between graduates from different school and income backgrounds.

76. These approaches are in stark contrast to those found in other European countries. Norwegian and Dutch employers often do not ask for the grades attained by prospective employees (or the institution attended) as part of their selection criteria⁷⁰. In these countries, possession of a degree is most important, followed by involvement in extra-curricular activities, membership of societies, part-time jobs etc.

77. The “Graduate success” report suggests that HE providers should promote good practice among employers, and demonstrate how good recruitment practices and employee diversity advantage the employer.

Improving graduate employability

78. Simply having academic qualifications may no longer be enough to secure graduate-level employment. There is an increasing expectation that HE should equip graduates with other skills and experience that improve their “employability”. For example in 2013, GTI Media’s survey⁷¹ of 2,300 undergraduate students found that over one-third of them felt universities had the main responsibility to prepare students for employment, and in the 2009 CBI skills survey over 80 per cent of employers said that universities should equip their students with better employability skills.

79. Research⁷² suggests that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly in need of help with employability skills because they are:

- less likely to understand about assessment centres and interviews (although they are more likely to have had writing applications and CVs assessed as part of their course)
- less likely to be able to show that they have been involved in extra-curricular activities during their time in higher education – something that many employers look for in graduates – often because they have not had enough time.

⁶⁹ [M Pennington, E Mosley and R Sinclair “AGCAS/AGR Graduate success project: an investigation of graduate transitions, social mobility and the HEAR” \(2013\).](#)

⁷⁰ [CFE/Edge Hill University “International research on the effectiveness of widening participation” \(2013\).](#)

⁷¹ [GTI Media “Great expectations: how good are universities at making their students more employable” \(January 2013\).](#)

⁷² For example, the [ARC Network “Literature review of research into widening participation to higher education” \(2013\)](#), [M Pennington, E Mosley and R Sinclair “AGCAS/AGR Graduate success project: an investigation of graduate transitions, social mobility and the HEAR” \(2013\)](#) and [Higher Education Careers Service Unit \(HECSU\) “Futuretrack Stage 4: transitions into employment, future study and other outcomes” \(2012\).](#)

⁷³ [Geoff Mason et al “Employability skills initiatives in higher education: what effects do they have on graduate labour market outcomes”, Education Economics 17.](#)

80. However, some studies show that university involvement in teaching employability skills does not significantly improve employment outcomes⁷³ and that the policy of developing employability skills does not correct social disadvantage which occurs within the graduate labour market⁷⁴. Plus, as the literature review says, there is little empirical evidence of what works effectively for disadvantaged groups: “Employability strategies may not always be explicit in how they will address the needs of under-represented groups, and do not always assess impact over the long term, or take-up of interventions by different student groups. There are gaps in knowledge about whether interventions affect the student population equally.”

Activity to improve employability

81. The extent to which HEIs have responded to the employability agenda varies. For example, [“Access agreement and widening participation strategic assessment 2011-12 and National Scholarship Programme 2012-13 \(in-year\) monitoring outcomes” \(OFFA 2013/02, HEFCE 2013/12\)](#) shows that expenditure on support for progression to further study or employment accounted for only 2.8 per cent of the sector’s total WP expenditure in 2011-12⁷⁵, whereas almost two-thirds of total expenditure was focused on current students, as shown in Table 7. It should be borne in mind, however, that in providing this information to OFFA and HEFCE, institutions were able to calculate WP expenditure in different ways, which may have included interpreting the categories differently. It could also be argued that work to support current students includes within it approaches designed to enhance successful progression. And, from 2012-13, many institutions have increased their focus on employability in their access agreements, in line with OFFA’s guidance.

Table 7: Total WP expenditure by category 2011-12, as a percentage of total sector WP expenditure

WP expenditure category	HEIs (£m)	FECs (£m)	Total (£m)	Expenditure as a percentage of overall spend
Outreach work with schools and/or young people	64.5	2.7	67.2	9.9%
Outreach work with communities/adults	27.7	2.2	29.9	4.4%
Support for current students (academic and pastoral)	434.0	10.2	444.2	65.2%
Support for progression from HE (into employment or postgraduate study)	17.9	1.1	19.0	2.8%
Support for disabled students	48.1	1.8	49.9	7.3%
WP staffing and administration	66.4	4.1	70.5	10.3%
Other	0.9	0	0.9	1%
Total (£m)	659.5	22.0	681.6	100.0%

Source: OFFA 2013/02, HEFCE 2013/12

Note: Figures may not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding.

⁷⁴ N Wilton “Do employability skills really matter in the graduate labour market? The case of business and management graduates”. *Work, Employment and Society*, 25 (1), pp. 85-100 (2011).

⁷⁵ This includes funding from a range of sources including HEFCE’s WP allocation, additional fee income and philanthropic funds, but excludes funding for bursaries or other forms of institutional student financial support.

82. BIS research shows that 69 per cent of UK institutions have a strategy for enhancing student employability, and calls for “all institutions [to] incorporate an employability strategy into their development processes to ensure all students have the opportunity to access a common level of employability skills”⁷⁶.

83. Higher education providers can improve employability through their learning and teaching practices. Embedding employability into the curriculum, rather than bolting on activity, is widely regarded as best practice and this includes:

- providing modified course content
- increasing work experience opportunities
- engaging with employers.

84. HE Academy research⁷⁷ states that “active learning”, which engages the student in “deep” learning where the aim is to understand rather than simply memorise, enables students to develop their employability. This report goes on to say that the curriculum should address the employability of students from under-represented groups in four ways:

- develop explicit awareness of employability
- provide access to relevant work experience and reflection on what has been learned from all employment opportunities
- improve students’ confidence, self-esteem and aspiration with regards to applying for graduate employment
- improve familiarity with the labour market and develop skills in looking for and applying for jobs.

85. In its 2012 report, “Pedagogy for employability”⁷⁸, the HE Academy emphasises the importance of a pedagogic approach that integrates employability with teaching and learning through and across disciplines. It argues that employability is not about lists or categories of skills but “skilful practices in context”, personal development and career planning, especially for learners from disadvantaged or under-represented backgrounds who may benefit from a curriculum that supports their career planning and develops their employability skills.

86. However, the BIS research reports that although 91 per cent of UK careers staff felt that academic staff shared responsibility for employability skills, their involvement is often limited. Its report maintains that the widespread, active involvement of academic staff is essential, and says that it would be worth institutions considering compulsory elements of employability studies in degree programmes (only 10 per cent of UK institutions currently do this).

87. Since 2010 HEIs have been required to produce a public statement outlining what they do to promote employability. This statement forms part of the Unistats website which hosts the KIS.

88. To help employers to differentiate between graduates, and to support graduates in demonstrating their achievements, the HE sector has also recently introduced the Higher Education Achievement Report. It will provide a record of a student’s achievements throughout their time in HE, including academic work, extra-curricular activities, prizes and employability awards, voluntary work and offices held in students’ union clubs and societies.

⁷⁶ [BIS “Supporting graduate employability: practice in other countries” \(BIS research paper no. 40\) \(2011\).](#)

⁷⁷ [Liz Thomas and Robert Jones “Embedding employability in the context of widening participation” \(2007\).](#)

⁷⁸ [Ann Pegg et al “Pedagogy for employability” \(2012\).](#)

89. There is also a role for the HE sector in further supporting and encouraging students into entrepreneurial activity throughout their study and beyond. HEFCE is currently undertaking some research on student start-ups which will help institutions to develop possible approaches.

Case study: Brunel University – Professional mentoring programme

What is it?

The Professional Mentoring Programme at Brunel University provides additional support to widening participation students as they progress from university into their desired profession. Each student is mentored by a qualified professional who works in a sector or industry related to the student's subject or career aspiration.

Who is it for?

The programme is targeted at students from under-represented groups. Eligibility criteria include those students who are the first generation of their family to enter higher education; entitled to a full maintenance higher education grant; from an area with low participation in higher education; mature; disabled; a local authority care leaver.

What happens?

Mentors and students meet monthly at the mentor's workplace. The issues most frequently discussed are CV improvement, career planning, interview skills and confidence-building. Amongst other things, the programme also provides career development and networking skills workshops, business networking events, mock interviews and open evenings focused on particular employment sectors.

What is the impact?

In 2012 the programme was externally evaluated using project data (2009-2012), a survey of students and mentors, and focus groups. The evaluation showed that those who had been mentored were more likely to be in employment six months after graduation than the student body as a whole at Brunel. Four out of five students reported "great impact" or "some significant impact" on their employability from being part of the programme.

Students reported that the scheme had improved their employability skills (88 per cent) and confidence in applying for graduate-level jobs (83 per cent), and given them a clearer vision of their career goals and plans (73 per cent). Over half (54 per cent) felt that through the scheme they have gained a wider network of contacts and better links with graduate employers.

Work placements

90. Placements, including sandwich placements, contribute to employability. Two studies show that students who do placements are more likely to be in graduate employment six months after completing their course than those who do not⁷⁹. Furthermore, placements can help develop skills such as self-confidence, time management and business awareness.

⁷⁹ Geoff Mason et al (ibid) and [Ruth Brooks "Evaluating the impact of placements on employability".](#) [Employability, Enterprise and Citizenship in Higher Education conference 2012 \(2012\).](#)

91. There has been a decrease in recent years in the number of students undertaking structured work placements owing to a number of factors including lack of information about placements and the impact of student fees. The CBI report “Tomorrow’s growth” recommends an expansion of the number of courses offering placement years to students in partnership with business alongside the development of other, flexible forms of HE provision to enable students to “learn-while-you-earn”.

92. Where work experience is unpaid, though, this may exclude those who cannot afford to work for free even though they have the ability to succeed. This will impact on their access to careers in which unpaid experience is widely used, including many of the professions. The AGCAS/AGR “Graduate success” report encourages employers to examine their views about, and use of, unpaid internships.

93. OFFA takes a broad view of student success and allows HE providers to include measures to improve employability in their access agreements, including initiatives that help disadvantaged students access placement years. In some cases, this might include post-graduation expenditure. For example, some institutions include measures to support advice or funding for internships and graduate placements, including in professions where social mobility is low. This might include work with local employers to increase the number of work placements and internships, or targeted financial support that enables students to undertake work placements.

Improving the employability and impact of postgraduates

94. It is not only at the undergraduate level that more could be done to improve employment outcomes. Research cited in HEFCE 2013/14 has identified that postgraduates need to be better prepared for the jobs market, and that their value to the economy and society needs to be better quantified and demonstrated. We know relatively little about what employers, either in the public or private sector, want from postgraduates or how they might decide about investing in postgraduate provision.

95. HEFCE 2013/14 also found that while postgraduates appear to enjoy some advantages in the employment market, this is not true of all subjects. To ensure postgraduates are highly employable, the report argues, will require institutions to work with employers to determine what skills are needed and valued, giving businesses an appropriate level of input into programme development, which may lead to increasingly flexible delivery approaches.

Student contribution

96. The CBI/NUS “Working towards your future” research highlighted that students themselves must take some responsibility for the development of their own employability skills and be placed at the centre of the process⁸⁰. In order to understand how this may be achieved most effectively and to better appreciate the student perspective on employability skills, it is essential that student opinions are more actively investigated and tracked.

97. Many UK institutions already engage prospective students to determine the role that employability plays in decisions over course of study, but this engagement should be more widespread.

⁸⁰ [CBI/NUS “Working towards your future: making the most of your time in higher education” \(2011\)](#).

Our strategic approach to progression

98. Postgraduate education and the employment landscape are both highly diverse, so there is unlikely to be a “one size fits all” solution. HEFCE and OFFA will work with institutions, students and employers to develop a range of approaches. HEFCE and OFFA will also continue to support the HE sector to boost graduate employability and employment.

99. We will support continued progress through:

- a. Facilitating and supporting effective student engagement in progression and employability issues. This will be delivered through the Student Engagement Partnership.
- b. Ensuring the provision of high quality information, backed up with effective advice and guidance, that addresses the career aspirations of students and potential students, encompassing the links between students’ choices of what and where to study with the careers they hope to or could pursue.
- c. Expecting institutions to address the unexplained differences in outcomes for students with different characteristics, and supporting institutions to develop evidenced-based approaches to address these variations, including inclusive approaches to employability with more targeted activity where required.
- d. Supporting a portfolio of pilot projects through HEFCE’s £25 million Postgraduate Support Scheme, which aims to help institutions test finance and activity options for stimulating progression into taught postgraduate education, and through this route into postgraduate research. Institutions have been asked to identify those groups of students they consider currently to be under-represented at postgraduate level and to propose actions that will address this (for more information, see [“Postgraduate Support Scheme: Invitation to submit funding proposals for pilot projects to stimulate taught postgraduate education” \(HEFCE Circular letter 18/2013\)](#)).
- e. Informing the development of the £50 million national programme for postgraduates, which the Government announced alongside its spending review in July 2013. This scheme, which will run from 2015-16, will be developed during 2014-15 in light of the evidence arising from the current NSP and other strands of research (for more information see www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newsarchive/2013/name_82628,en.html).
- f. Continuing to build the evidence base regarding effective approaches to progression to further study or to/within employment, and to support the development and dissemination of good practice, including the co-ordination of national research including through:
 - further research into progression to postgraduate taught provision – within which the part-time and mature population will be a key feature, alongside the dynamics of progression into postgraduate research
 - new research and analysis, including analysis of students’ intentions after graduation, derived from the new extension to the National Student Survey, and comprehensive evidence on taught postgraduate fees and costs, which will provide a better basis for determining how education at this level should be financed

- working with the Research Councils to develop a clearer picture of how the dual support system operates with regard to postgraduate research, with a view to ensuring that it attracts the most capable students into research careers, regardless of their background
 - further work to investigate the unexplained differences in employment outcomes for students from different groups, such as the relationship between POLAR quintile and employment after graduation, and of the differences between employment outcomes for people who went to state schools and those who went to independent schools.
- g. The development of a national evaluation framework to help universities and colleges evaluate their own access and student success activities more effectively and feed into national evaluation and understanding of effective practice.
- h. Through their respective processes OFFA and HEFCE will emphasise a whole student lifecycle approach.

Chapter 4:

Implementation of the strategy

1. Actions that will enable HE providers to improve access, student success and progression have been set out in the preceding chapters. Together, they form a strategy designed to ensure that all those with the potential to benefit from HE are given equal opportunity to participate in and succeed on a course and in an institution that best fits their needs and aspirations.
2. In this chapter, we describe how OFFA and HEFCE will work with universities, colleges and sector partners to implement the strategy. In particular, we explain how HEFCE and OFFA will:
 - target investment in WP more effectively
 - establish a new approach to collaborative outreach
 - establish a national evaluation framework
 - ensure that OFFA and HEFCE's reporting and monitoring processes for access and student success are coherent and that our requests for information and data as far as possible do not overlap
 - work with sector partners to assess whether national research could be more effectively co-ordinated.
3. We then outline our plans for monitoring and evaluating the progress of the strategy, and how we might develop it in the future.

Investment and resourcing

4. The strategy highlights the advances made to date on WP. It acknowledges the challenges that remain and sets out measures that will boost further progress.
5. Continued progress will only be made if the measures to deliver it are properly supported on a stable, long-term basis. This requires significant investment in both funding and resources. Full implementation of the strategy will depend on continued public investment in WP being sustained, and institutions making effective use of the income they generate from tuition fees and other sources.
6. The most important resource in delivering the goals of the strategy is people: staff with the right knowledge, skills and expertise will be required at all levels if institutions are to secure access, student success and progression.
7. Funding for widening access, student success and progression is drawn from both private (tuition fees) and public (HEFCE grant and government funds) income. This funding model recognises both the private benefit that WP brings to individual students and the public benefit: the capacity of wider participation to increase social mobility, improve community cohesion, promote civic engagement and generate a highly skilled workforce.

Targeting investment in widening participation more effectively

8. HEFCE and OFFA hold institutions accountable for meeting their responsibilities to ensure that the public funding for, and institutional investment, in widening access and student success is targeted effectively and invested in those areas that will deliver the greatest impact for students.

Maximising use of the student opportunity allocation

9. HEFCE funds widening participation through the student opportunity allocation. This consists of three elements calculated to recognise the costs of: widening access; student retention and success; and provision and support for disabled students – the largest element is provided to improve retention and support student success, and this will continue to be the case. As chapter 2 explains, supporting all students to succeed and addressing inequalities in student outcomes is essential to the achievement of a more socially mobile, just and cohesive society.

10. HEFCE will expect institutions to account for this funding by providing data to demonstrate value for money in how the allocation is used to enhance their provision and support successful student outcomes. Institutions will need to take a strategic approach, examining student support services alongside their academic provision and ensuring that all aspects of their provision are inclusive, responsive and flexible enough to meet the diverse needs of all students. HEFCE will continue to use annual monitoring to gain much of this information, as well as an adapted widening participation statement process.

Maximising use of access agreement spend

11. Institutions charging higher fees will continue to decide the detail of their access agreements, including investment, based on their own evaluation and national evidence. OFFA will provide more energetic challenge and support to universities and colleges, to ensure that institutions:

- use evidence, evaluation and reasoning in choosing where to focus their investment
- take a strategic approach that maximises impact for students
- demonstrate the outcomes of their access agreement activities, including how they contribute to widening participation nationally
- increasingly align access agreements with institutional equality and diversity strategies
- involve students more in the design, implementation and monitoring of access agreements
- report on their progress through annual monitoring returns.

12. OFFA's guidance sets out a clear expectation that institutions should nurture early and sustained outreach activity. This can be effectively delivered through collaborative partnerships.

13. Currently, institutions' NSP match-funding investment may be included in the calculation of total access agreement investment. From 2015-16, the NSP will be realigned to support postgraduates and no further government funding for undergraduate scholarships will be allocated, so NSP match-funding will cease. Nevertheless, OFFA will expect institutions to continue to invest in their access agreements at levels previously approved for 2015-16, with funds previously budgeted as

NSP match being spent in ways that best support the institution's WP strategy. OFFA will encourage institutions to use part of the investment previously planned for NSP match-funding to support and strengthen collaborative activities delivered through the national approach.

A new approach to support collaborative outreach

14. Long-term, sustained outreach programmes are crucial to success in widening participation. They are particularly effective when they involve HE providers, schools, colleges, employers and other partners working closely together. Following the interim national strategy report⁸¹, BIS asked HEFCE and OFFA to look at establishing a new approach to support institutional collaboration which will build on the conclusions set out in this national strategy:

- outreach is most effective when delivered as a progressive, sustained programme of activity and engagement over time
- outreach programmes need to be directed towards young people at different stages of their educational career and begin at primary level
- the effective delivery of outreach programmes requires the full, adequately resourced involvement and engagement of HEIs, FECs and schools
- the collaborative provision of outreach delivers significant benefits in terms of scale, engagement, co-ordination and impartiality
- progression pathways for learners with non-traditional or vocational qualifications need to be clearly articulated
- outreach to mature learners depends on good links with FECs, employers and the community
- without good advice and guidance, outreach is impoverished and less effective.

15. We recognise that many institutions already work collaboratively with a range of partners and that there are many different types of collaborative arrangements. Such variation is welcome, and it will be important that institutions have sufficient flexibility to build/develop collaborative arrangements appropriate to the needs of their localities and circumstances. HEFCE will provide funding support to institutions for collaborative outreach which can maximise the opportunities delivered through these arrangements. In addition, through its access agreement process, OFFA will encourage all institutions to build on and strengthen collaborative arrangements where beneficial and appropriate.

16. In order to support the sector to track more effectively the progression of learners that have taken part in outreach activity, HEFCE will fund the national roll out of a tracking system. This system will provide a robust mechanism to assist institutions in evaluating the impact of their activity.

A national evaluation framework

17. Institutions must be able to demonstrate that the widening access and student success activities they undertake are worthwhile and effective. This principle applies both to public funding, and to institutions' expenditure through agreements with OFFA: there must be convincing evidence of value for money for taxpayers, students and the institution.

⁸¹ [HEFCE and OFFA "National strategy for access and student success: Interim report to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills" \(2013\).](#)

18. Institutions understand well the need for robust evaluation, and OFFA and HEFCE have set out clear expectations in this area, encouraging institutions to improve and build upon their evaluative activity in their access agreements, widening participation strategic assessments and WPSSs. HEFCE issued guidance to institutions in October 2010 ([“Widening participation strategic assessments: guidance on developing evaluative approaches to widening participation activities and commitments” \(HEFCE Circular letter 24/2010\)](#)) which set out its expectations with regard to the evaluation of WP activities and offered guidance on how to build effective evaluation plans. OFFA’s access agreement guidance for 2014-15 ([“How to produce an access agreement for 2014-15” \(OFFA 2013/01\)](#)) asks institutions to build effective evaluation into their access plans from the beginning and to use the knowledge gained from their evaluations to support and influence the development of future activity. A recent survey found that “the most commonly cited benefit of the requirement to produce an access agreement was the opportunity to improve the monitoring and evaluation of WP activities”⁸².

19. The evidence gathered for this strategy (for example, the literature review) strongly suggests that institutions would welcome more support, co-ordination and guidance to help them further develop this area of their work.

20. HEFCE and OFFA have a national overview of the sector, and are therefore well placed to facilitate the development of good evaluation practice. We will do this by working with the sector to develop a national evaluation framework, bringing together local evidence to shape a regional and national picture. We will look at the feasibility of a set of sector-wide evaluative measures, and produce good practice guidance.

21. Our expectation is that the framework will help institutions embed evaluation into their work. This will ensure value and efficiency, and facilitate comparison between institutions.

Building on existing knowledge

22. There is a growing body of work on the effective evaluation of widening participation activity. One of a series of WP toolkits published in December 2012 focuses on evaluation strategies, and makes the case for a more structured, consistent approach to evaluation: “Evaluation helps to increase the coherence of [the developing WP] evidence base and address criticisms about its perceived effectiveness”⁸³. We will build on this and other work in developing the new framework.

23. We will also convene a cross-sector group, drawing on the knowledge and expertise of practitioners, analysts, and representatives from a broad range of institutions and organisations, including former Aimhigher partnerships. The group will help to shape the framework, with the key aim of ensuring that it will be flexible, easy to implement, and minimise administrative burden on institutions.

⁸² CFE/Edge Hill University “The uses and impact of access agreements and associated spend” (2013).

⁸³ [International Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby and the Progression Trust “Higher education outreach to widen participation: toolkits for practitioners” \(2012\).](#)

Timetable

Action	Timing
Commission research into the feasibility of common measures that could be utilised in the evaluation framework	For development with stakeholders in 2014
Issue high-level evaluation guidance	
Testing with institutions to ensure that the framework and any identified common measures are fit for purpose	
Issue further in-depth guidance	January 2015
The framework continues to develop, responding to developments in the sector (for example, emerging changes to the data landscape such as the development of a unique learner number)	January 2015 onward

OFFA and HEFCE reporting and monitoring processes for access and student success

24. Institutions are currently required to submit WPSSs and access agreements to HEFCE and OFFA respectively. HEFCE and OFFA will continuously review their processes to ensure that our reporting and monitoring processes are coherent and that our requests for information as far as possible do not overlap so that we:

- avoid duplication and reduce unnecessary burden on institutions
- work more closely together, and ensure that our messages to the sector are consistent
- help to foster a shared vision of access and student success between HEFCE, OFFA and the sector.

25. We need, however, to ensure that processes meet our own respective needs: OFFA and HEFCE are independent organisations with complementary but unique roles, and our processes need to reflect this.

26. In requesting information from the sector OFFA and HEFCE will:

- a. Provide reporting frameworks within which institutions can develop, organise, articulate and evidence their approach and commitment to WP using quantitative and qualitative information and data. The frameworks will establish a basis for robust evaluation and monitoring, as well as fulfilling statutory obligations with regard to variable fees and conditions of grant in relation to the student opportunity allocation.
- b. Increase understanding of access and student success strategies and practice from sector-wide and institutional perspectives across the whole student lifecycle.
- c. Identify and respond to trends, areas of good and innovative practice, potential gaps in coverage and areas for improvement.
- d. Jointly work in a way that is consistent with the principles set out by the Better Regulation Commission (transparency, accountability, proportionality consistency, targeting).

Co-ordination of national research

27. There are many bodies/agencies/organisations that conduct national research into the issues identified in this strategy. HEFCE and OFFA have already established relationships with many of these bodies and so will work with them to try and assess whether there would be an effective way of co-ordinating this activity to better support the national evidence base. More effective co-ordination or strategic oversight of national research studies would enable the collective national agencies to identify the evidence gaps or weaknesses which we might need to address.

28. We plan to arrange a meeting of the relevant stakeholders at which we will seek agreement in principle to greater co-ordination. The details of how such a co-ordinating function would work would then be developed throughout 2014.

29. HEFCE and OFFA are also committed to reporting every three years on the sector's progress in meeting the aims and objectives set out in the strategy, using the evidence and indicators we discuss below. We will seek the input of those agencies actively engaged in national research, evaluation and analysis in the development of these reports.

On-going evaluation and development of the strategy

30. We do not envisage revising the priorities of the strategy in the medium term, but the underlying strands will continue to evolve in order to remain relevant and fit for purpose in the evolving HE sector.

31. To ensure the strategy's relevance we will monitor progress against the progress indicators outlined below and take appropriate action, for example updating and publishing new information and changes to the sector as required.

32. The strategy and objectives should be reviewed after five years.

Progress indicators

33. As we move towards implementation of this strategy it will be important to put in place appropriate approaches to monitor progress against its stated aims and objectives. These may include different types of evidence, so would draw on analysis of administrative data sets, national research studies, evaluation evidence (both institutional and national), monitoring returns from institutions, and so on.

34. We have already indicated our intention to speak with other national bodies and stakeholders to discuss how we can more effectively co-ordinate the national research studies undertaken to avoid duplication, secure a sector overview of the research being done and identify gaps. The collective expertise of these bodies/organisations will also help us to develop the most effective and appropriate progress indicators.

35. In addition, both HEFCE and OFFA conduct their own analytical studies which will play a key role in the measurement of progress.

36. A central element in developing the evaluation framework will be the adoption of key progress indicators. We have indicated below some of the data sources that we would expect to use to measure progress against the three broad stages of the student lifecycle. We will seek, in developing progress indicators, not to increase the data collection burden on institutions.

Access

37. HEFCE and OFFA will continue to run their analytical programmes which seek to measure the participation rates in HE of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their rates of participation by institutional selectivity. Such work will draw on the POLAR data set, UCAS data and end of cycle reports (for an explanation of POLAR, please see the glossary). Through such analysis we will be able to monitor participation rates for students with different characteristics and so would be able to measure any improvements – in the participation of men, for example. In addition the national statistics that are published on an annual basis will also be important sources, such as the HESA performance indicators, the BIS participation rates in higher education and the DfE's Key Stage 5 destination measures.

38. We will use linked administrative data to undertake periodic analysis of groups/cohorts entering HE. We will complement this quantitative approach with qualitative studies. Such studies would provide a richer picture and allow particular foci, for example, on students with different entry qualifications or entering different types of institution.

39. Much of the analysis we undertake to measure WP focuses on young participation due to the robustness of the data available. Work will therefore continue to develop more robust ways to measure the participation of mature students in terms of their socio-economic background.

Retention and student success

40. The HESA student record provides a rich data source from which we will be able to undertake sophisticated analysis that will continue to assess non-continuation rates, degree attainment by different student groups and, combining it with the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (both Early and Longitudinal), outcomes such as progression to postgraduate study or graduate employability. We will be able to further establish trends which measure progress in different parts of the sector in addressing issues of non-continuation and we will periodically be able to measure progress in tackling currently unexplained differential outcomes.

Progression

41. When considering progression to postgraduate study we must be mindful of the fact that the majority of students enter postgraduate study after a number of years out of HE. This makes measuring participation in postgraduate study according to widening participation indicators very difficult. Therefore, a key priority will be for us to work with our partners and other stakeholders to develop appropriate measures that will capture students' backgrounds in a meaningful way for WP. We anticipate that we will rely on a mix of both qualitative evidence and administrative data to measure progress for these students. For the minority of students that progress immediately from undergraduate to postgraduate study, we will continue to measure trends in transition using the HESA data.

42. We are able to track HE students into first employment through targeted qualitative studies of particular groups/cohorts, HESA's Destination of Leavers from Higher Education, and institutional held data. This could then be supplemented with evidence on longer-term outcomes using HESA's Longitudinal Destination of Leavers from Higher Education as well as with targeted qualitative studies of the longer-term employment outcomes for particular groups/cohorts for example through the employment HE performance indicators.

43. In all of these areas it will be important to ensure that the measures we develop are sensitive to different student characteristics and that we are able to address progress in developing HE that is more flexible and responsive to student demand.

Policy areas for further development

44. The strategy highlights a number of policy areas that are currently at an early stage of development:

- a. **Access to postgraduate study:** currently being taken forward within HEFCE as part of its broader activity to support postgraduate provision in the sector.
- b. **Addressing differential degree attainment for students with different characteristics:** this will require further work with other partners, such as the Higher Education Academy, to both explain why these differences exist and develop approaches to address them.
- c. **Addressing the differential employment outcomes for students with different characteristics:** this will require further research, and HEFCE and OFFA are working with institutions to develop approaches that will enhance progression opportunities for different groups.

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Glossary



Access When we talk about “access” or “widening access”, we mean ensuring that any barriers to students from lower income and other under-represented backgrounds entering and successfully completing higher education are removed.

Access agreement An agreement between OFFA and a university or college charging higher fees, setting out how the university/college intends to safeguard and promote fair access to higher education through its outreach work, financial support etc. It also includes targets and milestones, set by the university/college itself. All institutions that wish to charge above the basic level of tuition fees must have an access agreement.

Access course/Access to HE course Courses that prepare learners who do not have standard entry qualifications for higher education courses.

AGCAS [Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services](#)

AGR [Association of Graduate Recruiters](#)

Aimhigher Aimhigher was a national programme (in England) that aimed to widen access to higher education by raising awareness, aspirations and attainment among learners from under-represented groups. It was jointly funded by HEFCE and BIS with contributions from the Learning and Skills Council (now the Skills Funding Agency) and the Department of Health. It used a partnership model and by 2011 (when the programme closed) there were 42 Aimhigher partnerships in operation. Some of these partnerships continue, supported by other means.

AOC [Association of Colleges](#). A representative body for the UK’s colleges.

Attainment We refer to attainment in respect of the achievement of qualifications or levels of learning and the grades or scores.

BIS [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills](#). The department of UK Government with ultimate responsibility for higher education in England.

BME Black and minority ethnic

Bursary A cash award given to a student by a university or college, aimed at easing the transition into higher education and helping them successfully complete their studies.

Cohort Usually, this refers to the group of students that enter higher education in a specific year: for example “the 2011-12 cohort” would be those who entered in academic year 2011-12. However, some of the research referenced in this strategy uses “cohort” to mean students who were aged 18 in one year and who entered HE by the end of the following year (either aged 18 or 19), to account for the number of young people that either defer or take a gap year before embarking on their degrees. To enable distinction between the two types of cohort, the latter is written in a different way: for example “the 11:12 cohort” would be those aged 18 in 2011, and who entered HE either in the 2011-12 or 2012-13 academic years.

Compact agreement A set of arrangements between HEIs, schools and colleges that provide special conditions or consideration for entry into the HEI. “Consideration” might mean anything from a promise that applications will be carefully and sympathetically considered, to a variation in the standard offer associated with successful participation in some form of additional learning. As such, compacts are a means of establishing a closer working relationship and understanding between HEIs and schools and colleges. They are also an active means of widening participation in targeted communities.

Completion rates The proportions of students who complete the course of study that they have stated they intend to complete.

DfE [Department for Education](#). The department of UK Government with ultimate responsibility for primary and secondary education and children’s services.

Disability allocation An element of HEFCE’s student opportunity funding (see below) to help with the extra costs associated with widening access and improving provision for disabled students.

DSA Disabled Students’ Allowance. A Government benefit given to students who meet certain criteria.

ECU [Equality Challenge Unit](#). The body that works to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in UK higher education.

Employability The degree to which a person possesses the functional and enabling knowledge, skills, and attitudes required in the workplace.

FEC Further education college

Financial support Help with the cost of going to higher education, given to students by universities, colleges, the Government and other organisations. It may include cash awards, fee waivers or “in-kind” support such as free accommodation.

First degree Refers to the initial degree undertaken as opposed to a subsequent undergraduate or postgraduate qualification.

Flexible provision Courses that are structured differently to a standard, campus-based full-time model. They may differ in terms of the time, place and mode of delivery/learning, for example, accelerated courses, part-time courses or distance learning. Note that “flexible” and “part-time” are not synonymous: not all flexible provision is part-time, and not all part-time courses are particularly flexible.

Foundation course A higher education course designed to prepare students who have qualifications which are acceptable for entry in general, but are not appropriate to a specific course of study. Foundation courses are also used as Year 0 of a degree course to enable students with non-traditional qualifications to participate in higher education by preparing them for a full degree programme.

Foundation degree A two-year higher education qualification designed to meet skills shortages at the higher technician and associate professional levels. Foundation degrees are one level below the honours degree.

FTE Full-time equivalent. For comparison purposes, numbers of part-time students are converted to FTE because a direct headcount is often a poor indication of the actual volume of activity.

Further education Further education is education of people over compulsory school age (at time of writing, 16 in England) which does not take place in a secondary school. It may be in a sixth-form college, a further education college or a higher education institution. Further education courses are generally up to the standard of GCE A-level or NVQ Level 3.

Graduate job Occupations for which employers typically require the employee to have a degree and/or in which the nature of the work provides ample scope for the exercise of degree-level skills and knowledge.

GuildHE [GuildHE](#). One of the two representative bodies for higher education in the UK.

HE Higher education. Higher education courses are programmes leading to qualifications, or credits which can be counted towards qualifications, which are above the standard of A-levels or other Level 3 qualifications. They include degree courses, postgraduate courses and Higher National Diplomas.

HE Academy [Higher Education Academy](#). Works to help universities, colleges and others to deliver the best possible learning experience for all students.

HEAR [Higher Education Achievement Report](#). An electronic document produced by some higher education institutions, recording a student's achievement during their study.

HECSU [Higher Education Careers Services Unit](#). A research charity supporting careers advisors, specialising in higher education and graduate employment.

HEFCE [Higher Education Funding Council for England](#)

HEFCE grant Public funds allocated to higher education providers through HEFCE.

HEI Higher education institution. A university or college of higher education.

HEPI [Higher Education Policy Institute](#). A higher education think-tank.

HESA [Higher Education Statistics Agency](#). Collects, analyses and reports on HE statistics for universities and colleges in the UK.

Highly selective university A university that requires particularly high prior academic achievement in order for students to be accepted onto its courses.

IAG Information, advice and guidance

Institution A general term for HE providers, which may include universities, higher education colleges and further education colleges.

KIS Key Information Set(s). KIS are comparable sets of information about full- or part-time undergraduate courses and are designed to meet the information needs of prospective students.

Level 3 qualification Pre-HE qualifications, for example GCE A-levels and BTEC.

Level 4 qualification Higher level qualifications, for example a Certificate of Higher Education. HE qualifications range from Level 4 to Level 8.

Mature student For the purposes of this strategy we consider a mature student to be one aged 21 or over at the time of starting their course – some of the evidence referred to uses different definitions, and we have indicated these where they occur.

MOOC Massive open online course. An education course designed to be accessed interactively on a very large scale via the internet.

Non-continuation/non-completion When a student does not complete his or her course, which may be for a variety of reasons, including financial difficulties. Non-continuation applies to entrants who are no longer in HE one year later. Non-completion refers to the long-term outcome of failing to complete the course.

NSP National Scholarship Programme. A Government-backed scheme to help students from low-income backgrounds who start higher education courses in the 2012-13, 2013-14 and 2014-15 academic years.

NSS National Student Survey. An annual survey that gathers students' opinions on the quality of their courses.

NUS [National Union of Students](#)

OFFA [Office for Fair Access](#)

Ofsted Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

"Other postgraduate" Regulated postgraduate programmes that are mostly vocational courses in areas such as education and healthcare, including postgraduate certificates of education (see also PGT/PGR).

Outcomes "Outcomes" is used to refer both to the end result of activity (for example, the outcome of outreach activity should be improved participation rates in HE for students from disadvantaged backgrounds) and to the result of the students' experience in HE (for example, the qualifications attained and subsequent progression to further study or to/within employment).

Outreach Activity that helps to raise awareness of higher education, aspirations and attainment among people from disadvantaged backgrounds, for example, summer schools that give a taste of university life, homework clubs for pupils who may not have anywhere to study at home, or universities forming and sustaining links with employers and communities.

Participation "Participation" is used to refer to active engagement in all aspects of the student lifecycle, from outreach and pre-entry activity through to on-course engagement and the achievement of successful outcomes in terms of HE attainment and progression to employment or further study.

PGT/PGR Postgraduate taught/postgraduate research. Two types of postgraduate study (see also Other postgraduate).

POLAR The Participation of Local Areas classification. This shows how the chances of young people entering HE vary by where they live in the UK. It classifies students into five groups (quintiles 1 to 5) based on where they live prior to starting their first degree. Quintile 1 areas are those where there is the lowest participation in HE by young people, and which tend to be areas of the most disadvantage; quintile 5 areas are those with greater HE participation and generally the least disadvantage; quintiles 2, 3 and 4 are in between. There have been three iterations of the POLAR classification: the first version was based on young participation rates from the late 1990s; an updated version, POLAR2, was based on the participation rates of young people from 2000 to 2004;

the most recent is POLAR3, which is based on the HE participation rates of people aged 18 between 2005 and 2009 who entered a HE course in a UK HEI, or English or Scottish further education college, aged 18 or 19, between academic years 2005-06 and 2010-11. For more details about POLAR see www.hefce.ac.uk/polar/.

Postgraduate A course which normally requires a first degree as a condition of entry.

Progression “Progression” is used to refer both to accessing HE as well as progressing beyond the first HE qualification into suitable employment or further study opportunities.

PSS Postgraduate Support Scheme. A programme, administered by HEFCE, of finance and activity aimed at stimulating progression into taught postgraduate education, particularly among currently under-represented groups and in areas that support the Government’s ambitions for economic growth.

Pupil Premium Additional funding given to schools by the DfE so that they can support their disadvantaged pupils and close the attainment gap between them and their peers.

QAA [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/). The regulator of standards and quality in UK higher education courses.

RCUK [Research Councils UK](http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/). A partnership of seven subject-specific Research Councils which are funded by the Government to support research in their own establishments and to fund research projects in universities.

Research-intensive university A university whose mission focuses on research.

Retention Enabling and supporting students to complete their studies.

Roundtable discussions As part of the development of the strategy, we held a series of roundtable discussions with stakeholders, covering: collaborative outreach; widening participation in a changing environment; evaluation and monitoring across the student lifecycle; student success; retention and progression; equality and diversity in widening participation; outreach to, and support for, mature and part-time students; and the role of alternative HE providers. For more information see www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/currentworktowidenparticipation/natstrat/research.

Sandwich placement A work placement undertaken as part of a “sandwich course” (a course that includes periods of practical work in organisations outside the university or college).

Sector-adjusted average In this strategy we compare the outcomes achieved by different groups of students who share a particular characteristic (for example, those who went to state schools and those who went to independent schools). But the students within these groups have other characteristics which may be statistically influencing the group’s overall result (for example, their ethnicity, sex or age). So, we use a “sector-adjusted average” to tell us what outcome would be expected after accounting for these other factors. We can then see whether there is a significant gap between the group’s sector-adjusted average and actual outcome – if so, we can infer that there are other factors affecting the group’s performance, apart from those accounted for in the sector-adjusted average. For a more detailed definition, see HEFCE 2013/15.

STEM subjects Science, technology, engineering and maths subjects

SPA Supporting Professionalism in Admissions

Student lifecycle This is used to refer to the entirety of the HE experience for students. The lifecycle approach to widening participation helps to ensure that approaches to widen access, improve retention and support student success and progression are developed and delivered strategically across the institution.

Student opportunity funding allocation An annual grant from HEFCE to universities and colleges, recognising the extra costs associated with: recruiting and supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds currently under-represented in HE; widening access and improving provision for disabled students; and improving retention of students at risk of not completing their courses.

Student success Supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds during their studies, so they are more likely to complete their courses, fulfil their potential and go on to or progress within their chosen career or postgraduate study.

Tariff UCAS assigns a tariff score to full-time HE applicants' entry qualifications according to the grades or levels they achieved. These tariff scores are often used by HEIs as minimum entry requirements for their courses. In recent years analysts have used the tariff scores required by institutions to divide them into groups according to whether their overall entry requirements are "high tariff", "medium tariff" or "low tariff" relative to the sector overall.

Third sector Charities, not-for-profit organisations etc that are not part of either the public or private sectors.

UCAS [Universities and Colleges Admissions Service](#). A central administration service for university and college applications.

UKCES UK Commission for Employment and Skills

Undergraduate A student working towards a first degree, foundation degree, higher education certificate or diploma or equivalent.

Under-represented groups Groups that have higher education participation rates significantly below average, for example:

- students from lower socio-economic groups and neighbourhoods in which relatively few people enter higher education
- students from some ethnic groups or sub-groups
- students who have been in care
- disabled students.

The term usually refers to representation in the English higher education sector overall (as for the groups listed above), but sometimes refers to representation within a particular institution/group of institutions, or a particular subject/subject area.

UUK [Universities UK](#). One of the representative bodies for higher education providers in the UK.

WP Widening participation. Increasing the participation of under-represented groups by working to ensure that all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have the opportunity to do so, whatever their background and whenever they need it.

WPSS Widening participation strategic statement. Universities and colleges provide these statements on widening participation to HEFCE, allowing them to show, and take credit for, their work to widen participation, and show how it is embedded in their missions and policies.

Young student For the purposes of this strategy we consider a young student to be one aged under 21 at the time of starting their course – some of the evidence referred to uses different definitions, and we have indicated these where they occur.

Department for Business, Innovation & Skills <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-business-innovation-skills>

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