RESEARCH

Evaluation of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge

Survey of Higher Education Providers 2004

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme was established in 2001 (when it was known as Excellence Challenge) with the aim of improving access to higher education (HE) for able young students from poorer backgrounds. The evaluation is being carried out on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) by a Consortium comprising the National Foundation for Educational Research, the London School of Economics and the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

The evaluation is multifaceted with a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods being used to evaluate the programme: large-scale surveys of students and tutors in schools and further education sector institutions; surveys of higher education providers; surveys of young people eligible for Opportunity Bursaries; interviews with Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinators and area-based studies of specific partnerships and higher education institutions. The overall aim of the evaluation is to explore the effectiveness of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme in terms of the extent to which it appears to contribute to increasing and widening participation in higher education.

In the Summer Term of 2004, the third survey of higher education providers in England was conducted. The aim of the survey was to gather information about those activities that had been undertaken by higher education providers as part of their widening participation (WP) initiatives and, in particular, as a result of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme. This report provides key findings that emerged from the 2004 survey (see Pennell *et al*., 2004 for results from the 2003 survey and West *et al*., 2003a for results from the 2002 survey).

Methods

Postal questionnaires and an accompanying letter were sent to 120 higher education institutions in England that provided full-time undergraduate programmes (e.g. BSc or BA programmes).[1] Completed questionnaires were returned (after reminder letters and telephone calls) from a total of 67 institutions, giving an overall response rate of 56 per cent. Of the 67 responses analysed, 29 were from pre-1992 universities, 35 were from post-1992 universities and three were from institutions classified as 'other' institutions (e.g. specialist colleges).

The proportion of pre-1992 higher education institutions responding to the survey was somewhat higher than that in England (43 per cent versus 39 per

[1] All had been included in the previous two surveys. The two previous surveys had also included further education colleges that had been allocated Opportunity Bursaries.

cent); the same proportion of post-1992 institutions responded as in England (52 per cent); and fewer 'other' institutions responded than in England (5 per cent versus 9 per cent).

Widening participation activities

- The most frequently reported widening participation activities were summer schools (mentioned by 99 per cent of respondents), followed by presentations to schools (97 per cent), and visits made by university staff to reinforce school links (94 per cent). In 88 per cent of institutions it was reported that open days/Aiming for a College Education (ACE) days were held, in 85 per cent that there was a student ambassador scheme in operation and in 81 per cent that outreach work took place with community groups. Parent-focused activities were run by 70 per cent of institutions and mentoring schemes for pupils were reported by 69 per cent. Just under two-thirds of the respondents reported tutoring of pupils by undergraduates (64 per cent) and a similar proportion that 'other' master classes[2] were organised (63 per cent).
- Overall, more outreach activities were reported in 2003/04 than in 2002/03. The largest increase was in the proportion of institutions reporting that they undertook outreach work or planned to carry out outreach work with community groups, an increase of 15 percentage points over this period (from 66 per cent to 81 per cent). However, for almost all other outreach activities increased activity was reported. Where activities had taken place for the first time in 2003/04 respondents were asked why they had been introduced. The main reason given was the availability of increased funding, predominantly from Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, from Aimhigher: Partnerships for Progression (P4P), from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) or the European Social Fund (ESF).
- Respondents reported that some outreach activities were targeted at particular groups of potential higher education students. Nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) reported targeting minority ethnic groups and two-thirds mature learners. Nearly two-fifths (39 per cent) targeted part-time learners; and the same proportion targeted those studying for the Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE).
- When asked which of the institution's outreach activities were the most effective for raising aspirations, the activity mentioned most frequently by those respondents who gave a view (N=62), was summer schools – mentioned by 39 per cent.

Staffing and widening participation

- Sixty-nine per cent of respondents considered that taking part in widening participation activities had had a positive impact on the higher education staff involved in the activities, and 72 per cent felt that there had been a

[2] 'Other' master classes are master classes not provided in connection with the Advanced Extension Award.

positive impact on staff in schools that had been involved in widening participation activities.

Recruitment of students

- A variety of factors were reported to be taken into account by admissions staff when recruiting students in the context of widening participation. Two-thirds of respondents reported that admissions staff took into account the performance of the applicant at interview and just under two-thirds (64 per cent) that admissions staff took into account involvement in a compact (or similar) scheme. Half of the respondents (51 per cent) mentioned that recommendations from schools or colleges with which the institution had links were taken into account and just over two-fifths (43 per cent) reported taking into account information indicating that a student came from a disadvantaged background; the same proportion took into account attendance at a university-run course or class.
- Forty-six per cent of respondents considered that the institution's widening participation activities had had an impact in terms of increased applications, although 27 per cent thought it was too early to say and 24 per cent did not know (3 per cent did not respond).

Special admissions strategies

- Just under 70 per cent of institutions (46) had adopted special admissions strategies for disadvantaged students. The strategies most frequently mentioned by respondents in these institutions were compact (or similar) schemes (mentioned by 76 per cent) and foundation or bridging courses (mentioned by 54 per cent.). Thirty per cent of respondents with special admissions strategies reported that they guaranteed interviews to mature students, 28 per cent that they offered students from disadvantaged backgrounds a lower 'points offer' and 26 per cent that they operated a system of flexible offers for those who had attended widening participation activities.

Views on the changes to student financing

- Respondents welcomed the reintroduction of student grants. However, many were concerned that the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2006/07 would have an impact on their widening participation efforts. In particular, they considered that students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who feared incurring increased levels of higher education debt, would be more reluctant to take part in widening participation activities that were perceived to lead on to higher education.
- Respondents were concerned that there was insufficient information in the public domain about the financial support that would be available to higher education students from disadvantaged backgrounds from 2006.

Views about the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Policy

- Respondents were positive about the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme although there was some concern about the sustainability of the programme in the longer term.
- Some concern was expressed about various operational aspects of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge including a perception that the move towards the unified Aimhigher programme had had an impact on the delivery of widening participation activities.

Emerging issues

A number of implications for policy arise from this survey of higher education providers.

- Almost all widening participation outreach activities were reported to have increased between 2002/03 and 2003/04. Where institutions had undertaken new outreach activities in 2003/04 the main reason given was the availability of funding from Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, Aimhigher: P4P and HEFCE/ESF. This suggests that the policy of focusing attention on widening participation, by both the DfES and HEFCE, has increased the emphasis within higher education institutions on access to higher education.
- In 99 per cent of the higher education institutions, it was reported that a summer school had been or would be held in 2003/04. There was also a suggestion from respondents that summer schools were particularly effective in terms of widening participation although several felt that they were not cost effective.
- There was concern that the changes to student financing would deter prospective students from engagement in widening participation activities and in higher education more generally. More targeted information and publicity, at a national and local level to explain the financial support available to such students after 2006, should help counteract these negative perceptions.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge

The evaluation of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme is being carried out on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) by a Consortium comprising the National Foundation for Educational Research, the London School of Economics and the Institute for Fiscal Studies. The programme was initially established in 2001 (and was known at that time as Excellence Challenge) with the aim of improving access to higher education for able young students from poorer backgrounds. The White Paper, '*The Future of Higher Education*' (DfES, 2003) made a commitment to bring Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge (formerly Excellence Challenge) and Aimhigher: Partnership for Progression (P4P) together to deliver a national outreach programme called Aimhigher (HEFCE, 2004a).

The Government White Paper '*The Future of Higher Education*' (DfES, 2003), announced that the coverage of the programme would be widened so that by 2006, 86 new local partnerships would be in place. In addition, the Excellence Challenge programme would be brought together with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Learning and Skills Council (LSC) Partnerships for Progression (P4P) initiative, which began in 2003, to deliver a coherent outreach programme, called 'Aimhigher'. This programme has now been established (HEFCE, 2004b). In 2003, HEFCE also announced changes to the way in which it funds universities for widening participation activities, replacing the 'postcode premium' (see West *et al.,* 2003b) with the widening participation allocation.

The evaluation is multifaceted with a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods being used to evaluate the programme. Methods include:

- large-scale surveys of students and tutors in schools and further education sector institutions, in order to provide information about such factors as activities undertaken as part of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme and students' attitudes towards education; the information obtained from these surveys (combined with administrative data sources) will also be used to look at the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on attainment and progression;
- surveys of higher education providers to establish information about activities aimed at widening participation, and policies and practices in relation to access to higher education and perceived effectiveness;
- surveys of young people eligible for Opportunity Bursaries to ascertain their characteristics, financial circumstances and experiences;
- interviews with Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinators;

- area-based studies of specific partnerships and higher education institutions to explore policy and practice at a local level and the perceived effectiveness of the various strands of the programme.

The overall aim of the evaluation is to explore the effectiveness of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme in terms of the extent to which it appears to contribute to increasing and widening participation in higher education. Whilst the quantitative methods will enable associations to be established between activities and outcomes, the qualitative methods will seek to explore the processes involved and identify practice that is perceived to be effective in terms of the overall programme aims.

This report focuses on **Strand Two** and provides findings from the third and final survey of higher education providers carried out as part of the evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge by the Consortium, on a range of activities and strategies related to widening participation that were adopted by higher education providers.

1.2 The survey of Higher Education Providers

In the Summer Term 2004, the third survey of higher education providers in England was conducted. The aim of the survey was to gather information about the relevant activities that had been undertaken by higher education providers as part of their widening participation initiatives (see West *et al*., 2003a and Pennell *et al.,* 2004 for details of the previous surveys). The survey builds upon the two earlier surveys and also takes account of the increased breadth of the new unified Aimhigher programme which serves both young people and adults from groups under-represented in higher education[3] across the country (see HEFCE, 2004a).

An outline of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme is given in Section 2. Section 3 provides an overview of the methods adopted and Section 4 presents key findings. Section 5 summarises key findings arising from the survey and presents a number of policy implications.

[3] Predominantly those up to the age of 30.

2. THE AIMHIGHER: EXCELLENCE CHALLENGE PROGRAMME

The original Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme was for a duration of three years, beginning in September 2001 (when it was known as Excellence Challenge). The programme built on the widening participation strategy funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).[4] The aim of the programme was to increase and widen participation in higher education among young people, including those from poorer backgrounds who apply to and enter higher education. Another key related aim was to improve the links between schools, colleges and universities. The programme was divided into six strands, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Strands of the programme

Strand 1 funded a range of activities in schools and colleges to provide the encouragement and support that young people need to increase attainment, raise aspirations and successfully apply to university.

Strand 2 provided extra money to universities and other higher education providers for summer schools, outreach work and to help institutions with the extra costs involved with supporting students who come from areas with low participation rates in higher education.

Strand 3, the Young People's Publicity Campaign provided advice, information and promotes higher education to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in a variety of ways.

Strand 4 provided extra financial support for students through 26,000 Opportunity Bursaries each worth £2,000 over three years.

Strand 5 was the evaluation of the programme; this was carried out by a consortium comprising the National Foundation for Educational Research, the London School of Economics and the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Strand 6 provided payments, through the student associates pilot programme to undergraduates to do work in schools and further education colleges; the aim was that they would provide role models for young people and help them to learn more about higher education.

Source: DfES (reported by West *et al*., 2003b)

This report relates primarily to **Strand Two** of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge (formerly Excellence Challenge), and focuses on those activities and strategies that relate to widening participation, recruitment and admissions.

[4] See Higher Education Consultancy Group (HECG) & National Centre for Social Research (NCSR), 2003.

The specific objectives of **Strand Two**, as identified by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2001) were to:

- encourage institutions to widen participation in higher education by under-represented groups;
- raise the aspirations of all to attend the institution that is best able to match their abilities, interests and needs; and
- ensure that all students have the best possible chance of succeeding in their studies.

As noted by Pennell *et al.* (2004), under **Strand Two**, higher education providers, were given £60 million over the first three years of the programme, via HEFCE. Institutions were given some discretion as to the use of this funding, in recognition of the fact that 'one size does not fit all' (DfEE, 2000), and perhaps more importantly, that institutions already had diverse approaches to widening participation. As examples of good practice in widening participation, the DfEE (2000) provided a list of activities that had been 'shown to work' (p. 19). These included:

- appointment of recruitment staff, including 'ambassadors' to reach out to talented young people and to encourage applications;
- better training and development opportunities for staff engaged in selecting students to ensure a uniformly high quality of selection;
- action to ensure that admission and selection arrangements are free of any inadvertent bias;
- enhanced contact between higher education institutions and local schools and further education institutions, including more mentoring and assistance by staff and students;
- expansion of summer schools and other opportunities for young people and their teachers/tutors to come into contact with higher education institutions, their staff and students;
- better support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to ensure that they are retained once they enrol in higher education; and
- appointment of a person to co-ordinate all the outreach work to ensure maximum impact and a clear focus across the institution.

According to Lewis (2002), from the early 1990s widening participation became a priority for higher education institutions and, in particular, for HEFCE (see HECG & NCSR, 2003) which is responsible for distributing government funds to English higher education institutions – although even before this time, some individual institutions were active in this field (Lewis, 2002). Public funds to higher education institutions for widening participation are allocated and distributed by HEFCE (see West *et al*., 2003a). In this context it is important to note that between 2001-02 and 2003-04, £60 million was distributed under **Strand Two** to higher education providers. It is also

important to stress that **Strand Two** of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge built on widening participation initiatives already in place in universities. It should also be noted that there was a linkage between **Strand Two** and **Strand One** of the programme as schools and colleges in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships were able to commission widening participation activities directly from higher education providers or enable activities that were already provided to be extended to additional numbers of students.

3. METHODS

In May 2004, postal questionnaires and an accompanying letter were sent to 120 higher education institutions in England.[5]

Completed questionnaires were returned (after reminder letters and telephone calls) from a total of 67 institutions, giving an overall response rate of 56 per cent. Twenty-nine of the 67 institutions were pre-1992 universities, 35 were post-1992 universities and three were classified as 'other' institutions.

The proportion of pre-1992 higher education institutions responding to the survey was somewhat higher than that in England at 43 per cent (compared with 39 per cent in England) while the proportion of post-1992 institutions was the same (52 per cent) and the proportion of 'other' institutions, such as specialist colleges was lower than in England (5 per cent versus 9 per cent).[6] The universities that responded to the survey were similar to those in England in terms of key indicators (see Annex A).

Fifty-eight per cent of the respondents (39) were widening participation coordinators; others included the institution's vice principal; the academic or assistant academic registrar; the head of student recruitment and a number of respondents with the term 'Aimhigher' in their job title.

[5] These institutions were selected, in conjunction with the DfES, for the first survey of higher education providers from the total of 131 higher education institutions in England (West *et al*., 2003a); they had all had been allocated Opportunity Bursaries (see West *et al*., 2003b). The previous two surveys had also included those further education colleges that were administering Opportunity Bursaries at the time.

[6] N=131 – higher education institutions in England; N=67 – sample of higher education institutions.

4. KEY FINDINGS

This section presents selected findings from the survey, focusing in particular on: widening participation activities; student recruitment; admissions strategies; respondents' views on student financing; and their views on the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme. It should be noted that given the different ways that widening participation activities are funded in higher education it has not always been possible to attribute particular activities to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge.

4.1 Widening participation activities

Respondents were asked to provide details about the widening participation outreach activities provided in their institutions. They were asked to indicate from a list of possible activities those that had been planned or had taken place in 2003/04 with particular reference to activities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. They were also asked about activities that had taken place in 2002/03. Table 1 gives their responses.

Table 1. Widening participation activities in institutions

Widening participation activity	Actual/planned activities 2003/04 %	Actual activities 2002/03 %
Summer schools	99	96
Presentations to schools about universities	97	93
Visits to reinforce school links by HE staff	94	88
Open days/ACE days	88	81
Student ambassador scheme	85	72
Outreach work with community groups	81	66
Parent focussed activities	70	58
Mentoring of school pupils by undergraduates*	69	58
Tutoring of school pupils by university students	64	54
Master classes**	63	61
Specialists classes on degree subjects	48	49
Road shows	39	33
Saturday schools	37	25
Shadowing of university students by pupils	34	24
Revision classes	34	31
Winter schools	31	22
Participation in National Mentoring Pilot	28	28
Student Associate Scheme	19	9
Advanced Extension Award Master classes	16	19
Other	49	33
N=67		

**Excluding the National Mentoring Pilot.*
*** Excluding Advanced Extension Award Master Classes.*
More than one answer could be given; total does not equal 100.

As shown in Table 1, the most frequently reported outreach activity in 2003/04 was summer schools, followed by presentations to schools about university and visits to schools (each mentioned by more than nine out of ten respondents). Indeed, all except for one of the 67 respondents reported that their institution had or would be offering summer schools in 2003/04 and all except for two had or planned to make presentations to schools about university. At least eight out of ten respondents reported that they had held or planned to hold Open Days/Aiming for a College Education (ACE) days (88 per cent); had a student ambassador scheme in place (85 per cent); and had conducted or planned to conduct outreach work with community groups (81 per cent). Seven out of ten respondents reported that they were offering activities aimed at parents; a similar proportion reported that students from their institution were mentoring school pupils. The mean number of activities offered was 11.5 (range 5 to 17). For pre-1992 institutions the mean number

was 12.1 and for post-1992 institutions it was 11.1 (range 6 to 16). There were no statistically significant differences in the types of activities offered by pre- and post-1992 institutions.[7]

Outreach activity was reported to have increased in 2003/04 compared with 2002/03; this was the case for almost all activities. The largest change was in institutions reporting that they were carrying out or planned to carry out work with community groups; 66 per cent reported such involvement in 2002/03 compared with 81 per cent in 2003/04, an increase of 15 percentage points.

Where activities had taken place for the first time in 2003/04, respondents were asked, in an open-ended question, why they had been introduced. The main reason put forward by the 39 respondents who answered this question was the availability of increased funding predominantly from Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, Aimhigher: P4P and HEFCE/ESF.[8] Other reasons given were: the appointment of additional staff or increased expertise; initiatives arising out of collaborative activity; involvement in a pilot project (generally the student associates pilot programme or the National Mentoring Pilot Project); or in response to a specific and identified need. Sometimes a combination of reasons was given. A selection of reasons is given below:

> *The appointment of a Widening Participation Coordinator combined with funding through Aimhigher P4P has resulted in a significant increase in outreach activities in the College.*
>
> *Opportunities have arisen to work with community groups in specific subject areas.*
>
> *The work with* [a] *unit for schoolgirl mothers was introduced as it was recognised that such students (all of whom were from a WP background) were excluded from the majority of WP* [widening participation] *activities, as they did not attend mainstream school/college.*
>
> *Professional ACE days were introduced as a way for students to find out about progression routes/careers in health professions.*

Where activities had taken place in 2002/03 but did not take place in 2003/04 respondents were asked in an open-ended question to give the reasons for this. The main reason given by the nine respondents who answered this question was 'staff shortage'.

Respondents were asked if any of their outreach activities were targeted at particular groups of potential higher education students; a list was presented to

[7] All differences reported as statistically significant are significant at the 0.05 level or beyond using Fisher's Exact Test.

[8] Funding from HEFCE/ESF was reported to be for summer schools and Easter schools (see HEFCE, 2003).

reflect the target groups of the integrated Aimhigher programme (see HEFCE, 2004a).

Table 2. Outreach activities targeted at particular groups

Target group	Institutions %
Minority ethnic groups	72
Mature learners	66
Part-time learners	39
Learners in vocational areas (post-16 AVCE)	39
Learners in vocational areas (post-16 other (non-AVCE)	34
Learners in vocational areas (pre-16)	27
Disabled people	25
Residents in rural areas	24
Work-based learners	22
N=67	

As can be seen from Table 2, nearly three-quarters of respondents (72 per cent) reported targeting minority ethnic groups, two-thirds targeted activities at mature learners and over one-third targeted part-time learners or vocational learners post-16.

A number of statistically significant differences were found between pre-1992 and post-1992 universities. More post-1992 than pre-1992 institutions targeted activities at: young people studying vocational subjects (both pre-16 and post-16 Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE), work-based learners, and those with disabilities.

Respondents were also asked to provide details of the types of outreach activities they provided to these groups of learners. Some examples of those focusing on young people, the target group of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, are given in Figure 2. (Examples of the activities that focused on other groups are given in Annex 3.)

Figure 2. Outreach activities focusing on young people

The [project for widening access through sport for young people from minority ethnic groups] combines sport and education and develops community links.

Year 10 summer schools are targeted on Turkish boys.

We organise an Access students' summer school in September and a reinforcement conference in January.

Year 10 master classes are coordinated by Business Education [in the county] but delivered by university staff. There is also a Year 12 vocational summer school (two days and one night) for local college students studying on vocational courses.

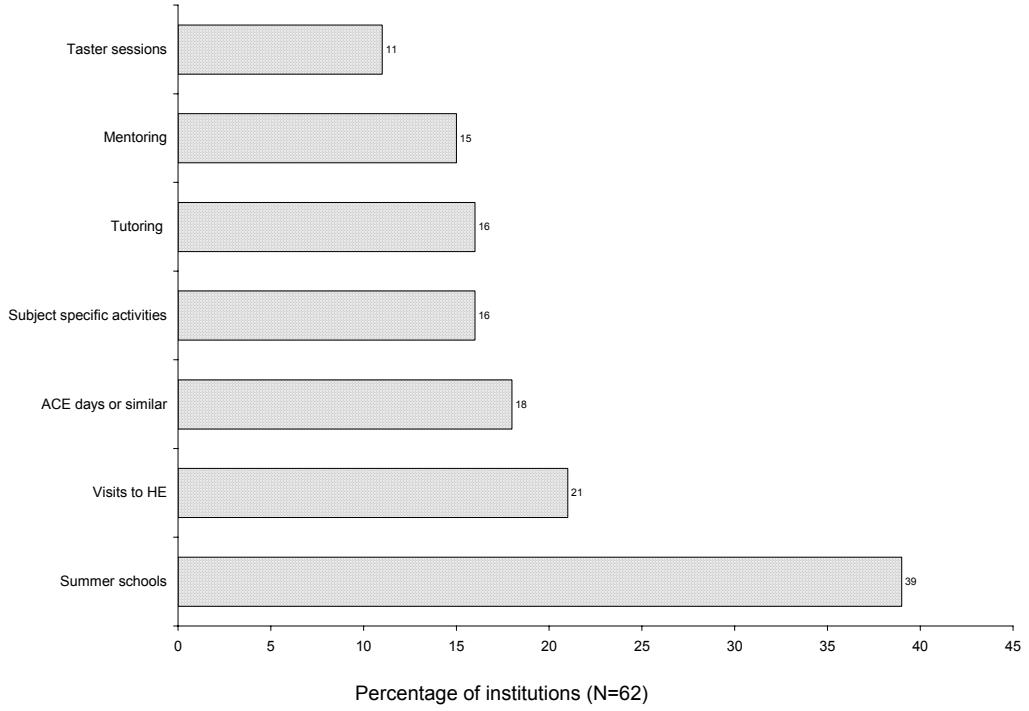
We have developed bridging programmes from Advanced Modern Apprenticeships into HE.

The residential summer school for pupils in Years 10 to 12 aims to encourage disabled young people across [the area] to aspire to higher education.

We organise ACE days, mentoring and tutoring in rural schools.

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked which of their institution's outreach activities they considered to be 'the most effective' in raising aspirations and which 'the least effective'. Figure 3 gives those activities perceived to be the most effective.

Figure 3. Activities perceived to be the most effective



As shown in Figure 3, the activity mentioned most frequently by respondents as being the 'most effective' in terms of raising aspirations (N=62) was

summer schools (39 per cent (24 institutions)), followed by visits to higher education institutions (21 per cent (13)), ACE days (18 per cent (11)), subject specific events (16 per cent (10)), tutoring (16 per cent (10)) and mentoring (15 per cent (9)).

Far fewer respondents identified any type of activity as being the 'least effective'. Indeed, about a quarter (23 per cent (12)) of those answering the question (N=55) considered that none of the activities that they ran were ineffective. One commented:

> *As WP practitioners for many years, we have learnt a great deal about developing activities and ensuring that they are effective. We work closely with partners to ensure clear aims and objectives for activities.*

Another made the following point:

> *Activities as such aren't ineffective, none of them. What's least effective re: the aim of WP is finding that schools/colleges are sending people who already intend to go to HE anyway.*

Where activities were seen as ineffective in terms of raising aspirations cogent reasons for this view were generally given. Some respondents felt that the least effective activities were those that attracted students who were already intending to go on to higher education. These activities tended to be those designed for students in Years 12 and 13 such as master classes and had the aim of raising achievement. Indeed, eight respondents identified master classes as the least effective outreach activity, the largest number for any single activity.

However, more generally, effective and ineffective activities were seen by some respondents as having particular characteristics. Successful aspiration raising events were seen as having a clear focus and an objective outcome; they were tailored to meet the needs of specific groups; and often involved contact over an extended period. The use of higher education students as role models was also seen as being a very important component of a successful widening participation activity and singled out by several respondents as the most important aspect of a widening participation activity. One respondent described the most effective activities as providing:

> *A sustained programme of activities from an early age and/or over several years involving current HE students.*

Another emphasised the importance of targeting activities:

> *In general, activities must be tailored to the participants and their circumstances. A 'one size fits all' approach does not work.*

Advocating the institution's university experience days (similar to ACE days) as being the 'most effective', one respondent explained that this programme was:

> *part of a package for year 10* [pupils] *that is supported by work in years 8, 9 and 11.*

Another felt that the institution's summer school programme was the most effective on the grounds that the activity was:

> *residential and lasts 5 days. It provides pupils with an insight into all elements of student life in a supportive environment and the length of the summer schools also allows barriers to HE to be addressed and myths and misconceptions* [to be] *overcome.*

Unsuccessful activities, on the other hand, were described as being less targeted; not linked to other activities; involved little interaction by the students themselves; and lacked higher education students as role models. Single interventions such as one-off talks/presentations and university open days often appeared to fit into this category as respondents felt that they lacked a clear context, were not a part of sustained widening participation activity and did not engage school students sufficiently. (This type of activity was often described as 'generic' by respondents.) Some staff presentations were also reported as being ineffective if staff were unaware of the widening participation context or were using a lecture format that was considered inappropriate for the client group.

Although summer schools were identified as the most successful widening participation activities overall, several respondents felt that they were the least effective in terms of cost effectiveness. One described them as *'high investment, too little and too late'.*

As well as asking respondents about the effectiveness of outreach activities in terms of raising the aspirations of young people, they were also asked if there had been any impact on staff involved in widening participation activities. In an open-ended question respondents were first asked about the impact, if any, on **HE academic staff** involved in the institution's widening participation activities.

Table 3. Impact on academic staff of involvement in outreach activities

Impact	Institutions %
Positive impact	69
Minimal/limited impact	18
Variable/mixed impact	6
No response	7
N=67	

As shown in Table 3, 69 per cent (46 respondents) felt that taking part in widening participation activities had had a positive impact on those HE staff involved, compared with a just under a fifth (18 per cent) who felt that the impact was minimal or limited; a small minority of respondents (6 per cent (4)) felt that the impact had been mixed or variable.

Comments from respondents who reported a positive impact included the following:

> *Working with schools and colleges helps academic staff to engage with the pre- and post-16 curriculum, and gives them a greater understanding of current qualifications. It has also helped them to understand how schools and colleges work, and how their priorities are different from those of universities.*

> *Very positive – we minimise their involvement to play on their strengths i.e. WP Team does all admin/school/college contacts etc.; academics provide curriculum.*

> *Significant impact on committed individuals. The key is the status afforded by the institution to involvement in WP activities. If it does figure significantly within promotional criteria, staff will be more willing to get involved.*

Those who felt that the impact on HE staff had been 'limited' or 'minimal' gave a variety of reasons for holding this view. In several cases respondents felt that the impact was not profound because staff at the institution were already committed to widening participation, as indicated in the following comment:

> *Minimal impact: the university has always been actively involved in WP activities. WP is part of our mission and character. Staff know this and sign up to it when they join us. Therefore, the impact of WP activities on academic staff is not notable in terms of changing behaviour and perceptions.*

Several others took a contrary view, feeling that it was the peripheral role that HE staff played in widening participation at their institution that had lessened its impact:

> *Limited impact: constantly hear the argument that academic staff should not be involved, as they need to concentrate all their energies on teaching and research…*

> *The majority of widening participation activities have been delivered by the widening participation officer. HE academic staff have been involved to some extent and found the activity enjoyable. However, the impact has been small.*

Finally, several respondents described the impact as 'mixed' or 'variable', for example:

> *Two different kinds of impact: motivates some to prioritise the target groups; with some others, strengthens beliefs that WP will bring more burdens for them.*

Respondents were then asked what they thought the impact had been, if any, on **staff in schools** that had been involved in the institution's widening participation activities.

Table 4. Impact of outreach work on staff in schools

Impact	Institutions %
Positive impact	72
Variable/mixed impact	13
Minimal/limited impact	2
Other	6
No response	7
N=67	

As shown in Table 4, 72 per cent of respondents (48) considered that taking part in widening participation activities had had a positive impact on staff in schools compared with 13 per cent (9) who thought that the impact had been 'variable' or 'mixed'. A selection of comments from respondents who felt that the impact had been positive are given below:

> *Staff in schools take back new ideas, innovative practice and borrow resources which they do not have in school. By listening to teachers we make events relevant and enable preparatory and follow-up to take place in school.*

> *Close collaboration with staff in schools has ensured greater widening participation impact. There is mutual support and development.*

> *The widening participation activities have been important in breaking down barriers between schools and the university. Teachers also appreciate the time and effort that student ambassadors, mentors and tutors devote to their students.*

> *Big change from negative to positive attitude. Previously we were 'the snobby place on the hill'; now they want to work with us and see that we can help them.*

Comments from respondents who felt that the impact on school staff was 'variable' or 'mixed' included the following:

Most want to network with the university and that is extremely positive but some staff do not believe in the abilities of their pupils.

Some are now more enthusiastic about promoting our university to their students but possibly not HE in general. Sadly, most staff see our activities as an opportunity to take some free time. They do not usually remain with their pupils. Those who participate update their knowledge about HE and the student experience.

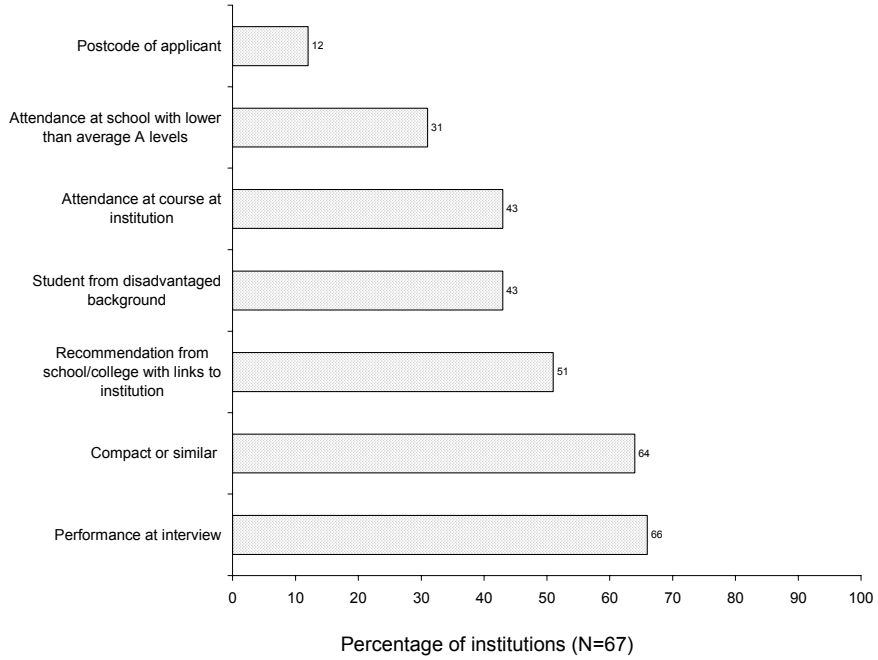
4.2 Student recruitment

A series of questions were asked about student recruitment and admissions. Respondents were asked for details of the factors taken into account when making decisions about who should be offered a place. This was followed by several questions on the impact of widening participation initiatives on applications.

Recruitment of students

Respondents reported that a range of factors were taken into account when they were recruiting students in the context of widening participation as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Factors taken into account



As can be seen in Figure 4, two-thirds of respondents reported that their institution took into account the performance of an applicant at interview (44) and a similar proportion that the applicant's participation in a compact (or similar) scheme (43) was taken into account. Around half (51 per cent (34)),

mentioned taking into account a recommendation from a school or college with which the institution had links. Around two-fifths of respondents (43 per cent (29)) reported that their institution took into account an applicant's participation in a widening participation event at the institution concerned; the same proportion reported taking into account information indicating that an applicant came from a disadvantaged background. Smaller numbers took account of the fact that an applicant had attended schools with lower than average General Certificate of Education Advanced (GCE A) level performance and the postcode of applicants. In addition to these factors, around a fifth of institutions (22 per cent) took into account other factors, such as extenuating or special circumstances and disabilities.

There was one statistically significant difference between pre- and post-1992 universities in their recruitment practices, with more respondents at pre-1992 universities reporting that they took into account information indicating that an applicant came from a disadvantaged background (64 per cent versus 36 per cent).

Impact of widening participation on student applications

Respondents were asked whether, in their opinion, the institution's widening participation activities had had any impact in terms of increased applications. Forty-six per cent (31 respondents) felt that widening participation activities had had an impact although about a half felt that it was either too early to say (27 per cent (18)) or did not know (24 per cent (16)). (Three per cent (2) did not answer the question.)

Respondents who indicated that their activities had had an impact in terms of increased applications were asked, in an open-ended question, which activities appeared to be the most effective in this regard. From their responses, the most effective activities appeared to be those that involved a sustained relationship between the higher education provider and the schools or FE colleges taking part in them; these included admission compacts and other partnership arrangements, the involvement of higher education students (e.g. as mentors, tutors or student ambassadors) and specific curriculum projects. Summer schools were also felt to be effective in terms of increasing applications. Several respondents, however, found it difficult to attribute an increase in applications to any particular activity as they offered a package of activities to schools. As one explained:

> *We are working with more regional schools. As a result applications from the North East have gone up from 41.8 per cent in 1999 to 51.5 per cent in 2003. However, it is almost impossible to determine which* [widening participation] *activities have had the biggest impact – there are so many with so many different age groups.*

4.3 Special admissions strategies

Respondents were asked if their institution had adopted any special admissions strategies for disadvantaged students. Sixty-nine per cent (46 respondents) reported that such strategies had been adopted and 27 per cent (18) that they had not been adopted (4 per cent (3) did not answer the question).

In those cases where special admissions strategies had been established, respondents were asked which of a series of strategies had been used. Their responses are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Special admissions strategies for disadvantaged students

Strategies adopted	Institutions %
Compact or similar schemes	76
Foundation/bridging courses prior to degree course	54
Guaranteed interviews to mature students	30
Lower points offer for students from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds	28
Flexible offer linked to attending university widening participation activity (e.g. attending summer school)	26
Lower points offer for students from lower performing schools	20
Additional background information	20
Guaranteed offer to disabled students	20
Additional testing procedures (e.g. psychometric testing, 'aptitude' testing)	7
Other	26
None identified	9
N = 46	

A filter question: all those reporting special admission strategies for disadvantaged students. More than one answer could be put forward; total does not equal 100.

As shown in the above table compact (or similar) schemes were frequently adopted;[9] these were mentioned by about three-quarters of respondents at institutions where there were special admissions schemes in place (35). This was followed by foundation or bridging courses which were mentioned by over half (25). Thirty per cent (14) said that interviews were guaranteed to mature students and 28 per cent (13) that they accepted a lower points/grade offer for students who came from disadvantaged backgrounds. About a quarter (26 per cent (12)) reported flexible offers for those attending widening

[9] Eight of the 35 institutions had an assessed component as part of the scheme, whereby students were required to undertake a project or other assessed element, in addition to meeting the other requirements of the scheme.

participation activities[10] and a fifth (9) reported that a lower points or grade from lower performing schools was accepted; that interviews were guaranteed to disabled students; that additional background information was used.

Respondents were then asked if the special admission strategies adopted had had a positive effect in terms of increasing the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who were admitted. Twenty-one respondents, out of the 46 who had adopted such strategies, felt that they had resulted in increased admissions while 12 thought it was too early to say and 9 did not know (4 did not respond to the question).

Respondents who considered that the strategies employed had resulted in increased admissions were asked to provide additional information about the strategies adopted and the types of students for which admissions had increased. Comments included the following:

> [The Compact Scheme with an assessed component] *now has 350 applicants, 50 per cent of whom have accepted a lower grade offer in 'exchange' for completion of a* [learning skills module].
>
> *The progression link agreement from FE colleges in certain areas has increased student applications. This has only worked when the FE college has also participated in events and a relationship has been established.*
>
> *The university-wide Foundation Year has 650 students, linked to over 120 degree programmes. This scheme also incorporates targets for specific groups* [of applicants]*: Afro-Caribbean, female Bangladeshi and social groups 4 and 5.*

However, several respondents felt that it was not possible to attribute increases in admissions to any particular strategy:

> *We have seen increases in our numbers from certain disadvantaged backgrounds, but it is often difficult to put this down to one particular activity rather than integrated and incremental programmes of work.*
>
> *Targeted state school numbers are higher. We are still trying to track WP students through school and will soon have a clearer picture.*

4.4 Views on changes to student financing

Respondents were asked several open-ended questions on the government's proposed changes to student financing. First of all, they were asked about the likely impact, if any, of the changes on their own widening participation activities. From their responses it appeared that the issue of most concern was the introduction of variable tuition fees. In particular, respondents appeared to

[10] Five of the 12 had an assessed component as part of the flexible offer scheme.

feel that this change would have a stronger impact on students from disadvantaged backgrounds who they considered to be more reluctant to incur large levels of student debt than other groups.

> *New fees will turn off students from disadvantaged backgrounds because of fear of debt.*
>
> *There will be a greater reluctance of debt averse students to engage with WP activities.*
>
> *The issue of debt is the key concern of many young people and such concerns threaten to undermine WP outreach activities. We are also concerned about the problems of students having to access each institution they are interested in to find out the levels of support they may be entitled to.*
>
> *I am very concerned about the impact of part-time 'up front' fees, particularly on poorer students who wish to combine work with study.*

Although the reintroduction of grants was welcomed some felt that the lack of clear information about the financial benefits available to students after 2006 was not getting across:

> *Students' parents from lower socio-economic groups on low incomes who will, in reality, not be disadvantaged because of grants for fees, believe that the cost will be prohibitive. Information in the public domain isn't clear enough.*

Several respondents felt that the changes would not have an impact on their own widening participation activities:

> *Very little impact: one-third of our students are not liable for fees and one-third only pay 50 per cent of fees.*

While others felt that it was too early to be able to judge what the likely effects would be:

> *It is difficult to assess at this point. The reintroduction of grants has been welcomed at parents' evenings; we don't yet know enough about variable fees or the Office for Fair Access to assess their impact.*

Respondents were then asked if they intended to change the types of widening participation programmes that they ran, or to alter the balance between programmes in the light of the changes to student financing. Many respondents indicated that they planned to focus more closely on providing more information and advice, particularly on financial issues. Comments from respondents included the following:

We need to ensure that the package of student support is properly understood. So our focus will be on explaining what is available and what the benefits are.

[The proposed reforms] *have spread anxiety in the minds of our target group and (very importantly) their parents. The message of increased support has not got across yet. Our response is to increase advice sessions on finance.*

We will have to spend more time and resources on activities regarding finance as we will be asked to do more of this work. This will take time and resources away form other areas such as awareness raising, aspiration raising, personal effectiveness and making choices.

Finally, respondents were asked whether they thought the changes were likely to have a positive or negative effect in terms of widening participation more generally. Of those who expressed a clear opinion more were concerned that the reforms would have a negative rather than a positive effect on widening participation (17 compared with 7) although a further 10 felt that the impact would be mixed or neutral. However, many respondents were unsure of the likely impact (19) or did not answer the question (12). (Two respondents gave other responses.) A selection of comments is given in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Views on the impact of changes to student financing

Negative effect

There [are] already a lot of misconceptions about the cost of HE and levels of debt. The introduction of variable fees will only increase concerns and put even more people off.

The positive effects of improved funding for students from low income backgrounds could well be outweighed by fears of high debt, the effect of debt on future aspirations such as house purchase, and the lack of certainty on enhanced career prospects. The complexity of the funding will be most off putting to those we need to attract the most.

Positive effect

I hope, positive but it is a matter of a lot of work and publicity engaging the correct students **and** their families. Teachers and careers' advisers need updating too.

Positive although more support is needed at transition to the HE stage to increase retention.

Mixed or neutral effect

Student finance – negative as much of the media information is negative. Office for Fair Access – positive with outline commitment to widening participation.

Initially negative but this may be redressed as changes become part of the accepted culture and information is readily available**.**

4.5 Views about Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge

Respondents were also given the opportunity to comment on Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. The comments were wide ranging, however, several broad themes were apparent. A number of respondents pointed to the overall **benefits** of the programme:

> *I do think that* [it] *has had a huge impact. University is increasingly seen as the norm by the majority of school-aged students.*

> *I just wanted to mention that I find my role very rewarding, especially if I have made a small contribution to a young person's choices. My role is more about the opportunities that exist within higher education rather than promoting my own institution and that is very fulfilling.*

> *I am hoping that Aimhigher Integration will make initial links with new partners (within Excellence Challenge) easier. So far our work is proving successful and always inspiring and enjoyable! More funds would obviously improve/extend our capacity; as a small institution money is always an issue. The positive effects on us as an institution are considerable (from our students' perspectives, in particular).*

Some concerns about **organisational and operational issues** were expressed by other respondents:

> *We find the ... policy and its funding schemes overly complicated. The regional aspect is not always helpful and we have WP activities outside the Aimhigher area in which we are located so funding these is problematic. There is increasing pressure on the university to meet increased demand from schools and colleges – often at short notice. This cannot be met without increased resources in the university and this cannot always be facilitated by Aimhigher funding.*

> *The addition of Excellence Challenge monies has broadened the aims and brought many more 'players' into the scheme. It is important that sub-regional policies deal fairly with those areas which had previous Excellence Challenge monies and those which did not but which also have significant problems of low HE take-up.*

> *While the ... policy is laudable, the operational aspects with their absurdly over-bureaucratic structure are not advancing the cause one iota.*

A number of respondents were concerned about the strain caused on their widening participation activities by the move towards integrated Aimhigher.

> *Having been involved in managing the Aimhigher integration process and development of the new business plan – I can honestly say that our greatest barrier has been the funders themselves. All is in place on the ground in order to greatly expand the volume of collaborative WP*

work – we need confirmation of funding levels and some understanding by funders of the complexities of running a large partnership…

Working in partnership is very productive but the timetable for Aimhigher integration has had a detrimental effect on this year's activities and existing partnership working.

Integration is putting a strain on the delivery of developmental activities.

A large number of respondents commented on different aspects of **funding**. Many were concerned about **continuity of funding and the sustainability of Aimhigher in the longer term**:

The lack of information on funding … has had very negative effects on all engaged in planning. We cannot afford to lose the goodwill that has developed over the past three years.

As both WP officers are paid out of the WP funding it would be good to know [as soon as possible] *whether there is to be a further three year funding period after 2004/05 as our jobs are at risk, let alone all the activities and partnerships we have established over the past three years.*

Short-termism of … funding makes embedding of even the most successful activities very difficult.

Several felt that there needed to be a re-think on **how funding for widening participation was allocated:**

The number of enhancement activities, whether taking pupils out of school for visits/courses at HE or visits by HE staff to schools is limited by the resources (space/time) at HE and by the need to deliver the curriculum in schools. The new integration funding needs to address structural needs as there is little evidence that visits and other one-off events are useful. Also some schools have neither staff nor resources available to allow them to participate due to high staff turnover and demoralised staff. These are schools that need to be supported the most!

[The policy involves] *an enormous investment for little identifiable return. Investing £0.25 billion in schools and resources might have a more positive impact.*

A major impact on WP could be created by providing more and better careers and HE guidance in schools. The development of Connexions, the targets given to the service and the limited time-table time available, mean that young people do not get the information, advice and guidance they need.

Finally, a number of respondents made comments on the **policy content** and made suggestions for extending the number of groups targeted or put forward other policy suggestions:

> *The lack of focus on parents is limiting given their input into young people's decision making.*
>
> *Emphasis on youth is still misguided.*
>
> *Transition periods from school to FE and FE to HE need more attention. There needs to be more consistency in language and approach between various sectors at 'handover'.*
>
> *It should be recognised that some activities are better delivered by individual universities.* [The policy] *is best placed to deliver general aspiration/awareness raising activities and perhaps should include: working with primary schools; working with adults over 30 years of age; providing up-to-date advice on students' financial support.*

5. SUMMARY AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Summary

This report highlights key findings to emerge from the survey of higher education providers carried out in the summer term 2004 as part of the national evaluation of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme.

Outreach activities most frequently offered or planned by higher education providers during 2003/04 were summer schools and presentations to schools about university.

In the case of almost all outreach activities more work was reported in 2003/04 than in 2002/03. The largest increase was in the proportion of institutions reporting that they had undertaken or planned to undertake outreach work with community groups. The main reason given by respondents for introducing a new activity in 2003/04 was funding from Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, Aimhigher: P4P, HEFCE or the ESF. The specific groups of potential higher education students most frequently targeted by institutions were minority ethnic groups and mature learners.

When asked which outreach activities were most effective in raising the aspirations of young people, summer schools were most frequently mentioned by respondents expressing a view. From their overall comments, an effective activity appeared to be one that was targeted or tailored to meet the needs of specific groups and that had a clear focus as well as an objective outcome. Effective activities often involved contact over an extended period. The use of higher education students as role models was seen as an important component of a successful widening participation activity and was singled out as being the most important element of a widening participation activity by several respondents.

The majority of institutions took into account additional factors when recruiting students for higher education courses in the context of widening participation. The factors most frequently reported were: performance at interview, involvement in a compact scheme and recommendations from schools and colleges with which the institution had links. Approaching half of the respondents (46 per cent) reported that their widening participation activities had had an impact in terms of increasing applications.

More than two-thirds of institutions had adopted special admissions strategies for disadvantaged students. Those most frequently reported were compact or similar schemes and foundation courses/programmes or bridging courses.

Respondents were concerned that the introduction of variable fees from 2006 would make it harder to engage students from disadvantaged backgrounds in widening participation activities and higher education more generally. The re-introduction of student grants was welcomed.

5.2 Policy implications

A number of implications for policy arise from this survey of higher education providers.

- Widening participation activities were reported to have increased between 2002/03 and 2003/04 for almost all outreach activities. Where institutions had undertaken new outreach activities the main reason given was the availability of funding from Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, Aimhigher: P4P or HEFCE/ESF. This suggests that the policy of focusing attention on widening participation, by both the DfES and HEFCE, has significantly increased the emphasis within higher education institutions on access to higher education.
- Ninety-nine per cent of higher education institutions had held or planned to hold a summer school in 2003/04. There was also a suggestion from respondents that summer schools were particularly effective in terms of widening participation.
- Concern was expressed that the introduction of variable fees would deter those from disadvantaged backgrounds engaging in widening participation activities and entering higher education. More targeted information and publicity at a national and local level to explain the financial benefits available to such students after 2006 should help counteract these negative perceptions.

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ANNEX A: Representativeness of the sample

Table A1. Comparison of pre-1992 institutions 2002-03 in England and in survey

Performance indicators	Pre-1992 institutions Mean (N=44-46)	Survey pre-1992 institutions Mean (N=29)
Total entrants	2483	2740
Number young entrants	2081	2276
% young entrants	83	83
% with known data from state schools	91	91
% from state schools	79	81
State school/college benchmark	83	84
State school/college location adjusted benchmark	81	82
% with known data from low social classes	77	79
% from low social classes*	23	24

Source: HESA, 2004

Table A2. Comparison of post-1992 institutions 2002-03 in England and in survey

Performance indicator	Post-1992 institutions Mean (N=64-68)	Survey post-1992 institutions Mean (N=34-35)
Total entrants	2598	3091
Number young entrants	1680	2017
% young entrants	67	66
% with known data from state schools	78	81
% from state schools	94	95
State school/college benchmark	92	93
State school/college location adjusted benchmark	92	92
% with known data from low social classes	64	67
% from low social classes*	36	36

Source: HESA, 2004.

** A new classification has been adopted since the last survey was published (Pennell et al., 2004) based on the classification used in the 2001 census. This change in the definition has resulted in an increase in the overall percentage of those from low social classes (see HESA, 2004 for an explanation).*

ANNEX B: Changes to student financing

The changes following the passing of the Higher Education Act 2004 consist of the introduction of variable fees for courses in higher education (up to £3,000), to commence in the academic year 2006/07, and the establishment of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). The latter will require institutions that wish to raise fees above the current 'fixed fee' to obtain an access agreement from the Director of Fair Access to Higher Education. This agreement will be contingent on approval of a plan, prepared by the university, which will include details of the tuition fees to be charged for each course, the outreach activities that will be organised in respect of widening participation and the level of financial support that students will receive from the university in question (DfES, 2004).

Alongside the Act, the Government has introduced a means-tested grant of up to £1,000 for full-time undergraduate students in 2004/05. This will rise to £1,500 for students entering in 2006, plus £1,200 notional fee waiver, which will be paid in the form of a grant making a total of £2,700 available for the poorest students. Institutions which charge the poorest students more than £2,700 a year in fees will have to make up the difference by giving those students bursaries. For example, a university which charged £3,000 for a course will have to give the poorest students on that course bursaries of at least £300 (DfES, 2004).

ANNEX C: Outreach activities for other groups

Figure C1. Outreach activities focusing on other groups

We organise Education and Training Fairs for Asian Women (four fairs) and short courses on returning to education (two courses).

We work with Somali and Egyptian communities via the Institute of Archaeology and the Petrie Museum of Egyptology

Pre-entry: the access adviser visits FE colleges to discuss the benefits of HE, gives advice on the application process and liaises with academics. Information leaflets and websites have also been updated for mature learners. Post-entry: mature students are supported by the access adviser based in the WP office. They are also invited to an induction event at the beginning of term and given pastoral, financial and academic advice.

We work with community groups in local areas providing information and advice about learning and careers. We also work half a day per week in two job centres.

For both mature and part-time learners we organise taster sessions that are delivered in the community.

Information leaflets and websites have also been updated for mature learners. Post-entry: mature students are supported by the access adviser based in the WP office. They are also invited to an induction event at the beginning of term and given pastoral, financial and academic advice.

We have developed a learning hub to reach out to students with disabilities and have expanded a disabilities network group to include all key stakeholders.

In a joint event with five other universities we run an HE information event for deaf or disabled students.

To reach rural 'cool' spots we have developed [a project] to provide a variety of WP input to [three different areas].

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