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# The Uses and Impact of HEFCE Funding for Widening Participation

Report to HEFCE by CFE and Edge Hill  
University

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## 1| Executive summary

1.1 This report has been produced by CFE for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). It is based on findings from research carried out to explore the uses and impact of HEFCE funding for Widening Participation (WP).

### Project background

1.2 Since the publication of the Kennedy and Dearing reports in 1997, the term 'widening participation' (WP) has been adopted by central government and has featured prominently in policy initiatives aimed at addressing under-representation in higher education (HE). HEFCE has been delivering funding specifically for WP to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Further Education Colleges (FECs) since the academic year 1999/2000. In 2011/2012, HEFCE funding for WP totalled £368 million. This comprised three streams: widening access (£129 million); improving retention (£226 million); and disability (£13 million). Institutions are, however, encouraged to set their own WP priorities and use this funding flexibly in order to achieve their stated aims.

1.3 Working with OFFA, HEFCE is currently developing a national strategy for promoting access and student success in HE. To inform this strategy, CFE and Edge Hill University were commissioned to conduct research in order to provide systematic evidence of the way in which HEFCE's funding for WP is deployed within institutions. Institutional perceptions of the impact that the funding has had on outcomes were explored, along with perceptions of the impact that a reduction in funding would have on outcomes and the extent and nature of the WP activities undertaken.

### Approach

1.4 The research sought to complement the information already collected through HEFCE's and OFFA's monitoring processes. It involved a survey of all institutions in receipt of a HEFCE WP allocation of at least £50,000 and in-depth interviews with staff that have strategic and/or operational oversight of WP in a cross-section of institutions.

1.5 Of the 205 institutions invited to take part in the survey, 104 responded (50.7 per cent). These institutions accounted for £272 million, or 73.7 per cent, of the total HEFCE WP allocation for the academic year 2011/2012. In-depth interviews were conducted with staff in 31 institutions, with steps taken to achieve as representative a sample as possible. For the purposes of analysis, institutions have been grouped into the following four types:

- > **Inclusive institutions:** Large, usually teaching-intensive institutions that recruit significant numbers of WP students.
- > **Selective institutions:** Large, usually research-intensive institutions that recruit high-attaining students.

- > **Specialist or professional training institutes:** Smaller HEIs and colleges that offer only a small range of courses, usually dedicated to a particular profession.
- > **Small institutions:** FECs, general colleges and small HEIs that often recruit locally and many of whose students are from disadvantaged groups.

## Key findings and conclusions

### Institutional approaches to WP

1.6 While there has been a long-standing commitment to WP across the sector, the introduction of the WP allocation in 1999/2000 acted as an important trigger, helping to bring about a significant cultural change in institutions and facilitate greater acceptance of the importance of WP objectives. Currently the overwhelming majority of institutions feel that HEFCE's strategic priorities for WP fit with their own institutional priorities.

1.7 The HE sector is extremely diverse and institutions face different issues and challenges in relation to WP. As a result, most institutions value the opportunity to set their own priorities and targets in response to their institutional context and local needs. However institutions also value guidance from national bodies such as HEFCE and OFFA in relation to the targeting of WP activities.

1.8 A wide range of factors shape and influence WP priorities but they are, to a large extent, determined by the nature of the institution, the composition of the local population, the existing student body and the available resources.

1.9 Institution type has an impact on the strategy and approach to WP. Inclusive and small institutions are typically more focused on improving retention; selective and specialist institutions tend to be more concerned with widening access.

1.10 The majority of institutions have a WP strategy, co-ordinated and, at least in part, delivered by a dedicated WP unit. A substantial minority of institutions integrate WP into their wider institutional and/or department strategies and responsibility for co-ordination and delivery is shared across the institution. This practise is particularly common amongst inclusive and small institutions where a significant proportion of students are classified as WP and WP is regarded as 'core business'.

### Funding for WP

1.11 Only a small proportion of research participants reported that their WP work is funded entirely by the HEFCE allocation; most supplement their allocation with income from other sources, most commonly fee income.

1.12 Selective and specialist institutions are, on average, less reliant on the HEFCE allocation than small and inclusive institutions which typically have proportionately larger WP cohorts.

1.13 The net financial benefits derived from the introduction of the WP allocation are perceived to be limited in some institutional contexts when reductions in other areas of



funding are taken into account. Nevertheless, the majority of staff recognise the importance of ring-fencing resources for WP.

1.14 The majority of institutions of all types find it challenging to accurately apportion expenditure on specific activities to the individual strands of the HEFCE allocation. This is partly because institutions have been encouraged to mainstream activities and have not been required to systematically account for expenditure against just their WP allocation. It is also because many institutions do not differentiate clearly between HEFCE-funded WP activities and WP work funded through other sources. Even so, there is evidence that some institutions have developed systems and processes to better monitor expenditure and others are currently putting mechanisms in place.

1.15 Institutions commonly utilise resources from one of the three HEFCE WP income streams to supplement activities funded primarily through another. Furthermore, it is not always possible to differentiate activities as 'widening access' or 'improving retention', as some are designed to serve both purposes.

### WP targeting and activities

1.16 Although HEFCE guidance heavily influences the targeting of WP activity, many WP practitioners have developed strategies designed to respond to local demographics and the subject profile of their institution.

1.17 Overall, widening access activities tend to be more targeted than retention activities which, on the whole, are embedded into the wider curriculum and support services.

1.18 Institutions endeavour to strike a balance between targeting support at the groups that require it most and delivering an inclusive offer designed to ensure all students are treated equally, are supported to succeed and are not stigmatised irrespective of their individual needs or circumstances.

1.19 Institutions are engaged in an extensive range of standalone as well as mainstreamed/embedded WP activities. HEFCE funding currently primarily supports infrastructure developments, staff appointments, outreach activities, curriculum development and student support.

1.20 The extent and nature of WP activities vary according to the type of institution and the characteristics of the local population. Institutional outreach work tends to be locally focused. Those institutions seeking to reach out to disadvantaged students living outside their region face a number of additional challenges, not least because relocation often presents a barrier for WP target groups. Small and inclusive institutions that tend to offer more vocational courses are more likely to engage with employers in order to achieve widening access objectives than selective and specialist institutions.

1.21 The activities most commonly undertaken by the majority of institutions are generally the same as those perceived to be the most effective. These include: work with schools and colleges to raise aspirations; activities that expose prospective students to the HE environment; pre-entry as well as on-programme academic and pastoral support; and the provision of a dedicated disability support unit.

1.22 There is widespread agreement that the key to effective WP approaches is the establishment of a coherent programme of inter-related activities that incorporate access and retention and are sustained over the entire student lifecycle. There is also agreement that retention activities are most effective when they are integrated across all aspects of the learning experience, with academic departments directly involved.

### Impact and evaluation of WP interventions

1.23 The introduction of the WP allocation in 1999/2000 is perceived to have resulted in a range of wider benefits for institutions (in addition to the benefits for the individual and the economy). In addition to formalising and integrating WP into institutional strategies and shifting organisational culture and attitudes, the allocation is also perceived to have helped ensure institutions remain focused on all aspects of the student lifecycle, irrespective of their individual institutional priorities for WP. As a result, most institutions are engaged in activities that contribute to WP in HE generally, as well as those that impact directly on access and retention within their own institution.

1.24 There is a widespread perception that progress has been made in relation to access, retention and disability provision. In a number of cases this is reflected in improved performance against WP benchmarks. There is widespread agreement that the HEFCE funding has had a significant impact upon WP outcomes in all three areas, with the allocation being viewed as a driver for rising national HE participation rates.

1.25 Monitoring of HESA data is widespread, and feedback from participants on discrete WP activities is commonplace. However, there is little evidence that the impact of WP activities is being systematically evaluated by the majority of institutions, despite recent emphasis on this by HEFCE. Although a minority of institutions have engaged external research agencies to evaluate aspects of their provision, most institutions appear not to be carrying out robust evaluations of longer term impact in order to develop a coherent understanding of 'what works and why'.

1.26 The need to enhance evaluative activity is recognised by a growing number of institutions. However, institutions are unsure about the best approach to take and wary of the potential costs. Differentiating the impact of activities that increase participation in HE generally from those that impact on one specific institution presents an additional challenge.

1.27 Most institutions would value further guidance from national bodies such as HEFCE and OFFA relating to strategies and approaches for evaluating WP activity, in addition to the monitoring requirements.

1.28 There is widespread agreement that a reduction in HEFCE funding for WP would have a detrimental impact on the level and nature of activities as well as on outcomes. The evidence suggests that a wide range of WP activity is dependent upon HEFCE funding and any reduction in the HEFCE allocation would have a disproportionate effect on the sector, with those institutions currently serving the largest numbers of WP students likely to be hit hardest. A significant amount of WP activity would be reduced or cease altogether. Withdrawal of funding would also most likely impact on the quality or level of provision in areas not directly related to WP.

1.29 Small and inclusive institutions are likely to be the most severely affected by a reduction in funding as they are the most heavily reliant on the HEFCE allocation and typically have the largest WP cohorts.

1.30 It is likely that the removal of the WP allocation would trigger strategic debates to reassess WP priorities in all types of institution. Early indications suggest that institutions would be likely to continue their more intensive partnership working only where an impact and benefits to their institution can be proven. Many would re-focus their activities on recruitment and retention (which results in a more tangible return on the investment for the individual institutions). The area of expenditure likely to be hit hardest would be outreach work designed to raise aspirations and awareness of the benefits of HE generally.

### Issues for consideration

1.31 Although institutions value the flexibility afforded to them to tailor their WP approach and activities to local circumstances, the lack of consistency across the sector makes benchmarking difficult. Institutions would find it valuable to be able to compare performance against other similar institutions.

1.32 The tracking and evaluation of the impact of WP activities presents an ongoing challenge, especially where activities are mainstreamed and mechanisms have not been put in place to account for the way in which specific streams of WP funding are spent.

1.33 The introduction of an evaluation framework to enable institutions to systematically capture data and demonstrate the impact of their activities across all stages of the student lifecycle would help to ensure institutions were able to account for the way in which their allocation is spent in the future; it would also help to facilitate institutional comparisons and the sharing of good practice.

1.34 The perceived 'marketisation' of HE and increased competition between institutions could mitigate against the prioritisation of collaborative activities and/or activities that derive benefits for the wider sector and policy objectives, such as early interventions in schools. These interventions are also the most reliant on HEFCE WP funding, and are likely to be the hardest hit by any alteration in the WP allocation. This suggests that the HEFCE WP allocation would need to be retained for collaborative WP activity and early interventions work to be maintained in future.

1.35 Institutions identified that recent reforms to HE policy had given rise to a number of tensions that may impact on efforts to effectively widen participation. The new fee structure (including associated loans and financial aid programmes) is perceived to be adding an extra layer of complexity for students during the decision-making process. Although, at present, higher fees do not appear to be having a disproportionate impact on applications from disadvantaged groups (although applications overall have decreased), it will be important to continue to monitor the extent to which cost presents a barrier to access and the role of financial aid in supporting disadvantaged students and the achievement of WP objectives.

1.36 Recent reforms lifted the restrictions on the number of AAB entrants to institutions. (Restrictions will also be lifted on ABB students in 2013/14.) It will also be important to monitor the extent to which this policy deters institutions from continuing to adopt some

inclusive approaches. This applies particularly to strategies to reduce entry requirements for disadvantaged groups in response to contextual information, including an assessment of their capability to study and succeed in HE.

## 2| Introduction

2.1 This report has been produced by CFE and Edge Hill University for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). It summarises the findings of research into the uses and impact of HEFCE funding for widening participation (WP).

### Project background

2.2 Since the publication of the Kennedy and Dearing reports in 1997,<sup>1</sup> the term 'widening participation' has been adopted by central government and has featured prominently in policy initiatives aimed at addressing under-representation in higher education (HE). WP policies have been driven by concerns about social justice and by recognition of the needs of the knowledge economy; the under-representation of certain groups in HE has been regarded not only as unjust but also as a major contributor to a skills deficit which ultimately hinders economic growth.

2.3 HEFCE has been delivering funding specifically for WP to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Further Education Colleges (FECs) since the academic year 1999/2000. The amount of funding dedicated to WP has steadily increased over this period, with a significant uplift occurring in 2003/2004. In 2011/2012 HEFCE funding for WP totalled £368 million. This funding – referred to as the 'WP allocation', and formerly the 'WP premium' – comprises three streams, outlined below (with 2011/2012 funding totals in parentheses):

- > **Widening access**, which is designed to cover some of the costs of outreach activity (£129 million)
- > **Improving retention and success** (referred to hereafter as 'improving retention'), which is designed to cover some of the costs of work done to improve student support and progression (£226 million)
- > **Disability**, which is designed to assist in creating better provision for disabled students (£13 million)

2.4 These funding streams are allocated to HEIs and to FECs that deliver HE to help meet the extra costs associated with recruiting certain types of student and to ensure that these students are retained and that they succeed in HE. In the case of the widening access allocation, funding for institutions is calculated based on the numbers of undergraduate new entrants from low participation neighbourhoods in HE. Improving retention funding is allocated according to 'risk', which is informed by the age of students and their entry qualifications. Disability allocation funding is calculated by taking into account the number of students at each institution in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA).

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<sup>1</sup> Helena Kennedy, *Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education* (Coventry: Further Education Funding Council, 1997); The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (London: NCIHE, 1997), <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/>.

2.5 Since the full implementation of the 'single conversation' accountability framework in 2008, institutions have not had to provide detailed monitoring data of their WP allocations.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, institutions have been able to use the WP allocation to address institution-specific challenges; although HEFCE has issued guidance, they have not sought to prescribe funded activities and target groups. In 2009, however, HEIs and directly funded FECs were asked to submit a Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (WPSA) to demonstrate the work they are doing in respect of WP, including evidence of how WP has become integrated into their policies, processes and cultures.<sup>3</sup> Since 2009/2010, institutions have been asked to submit annual reports on their WP activity and expenditure. In 2012 HEFCE requested an Interim Widening Participation Strategic Statement (IW PSS) from institutions.<sup>4</sup>

2.6 HEFCE's monitoring process for WP is conducted jointly with the monitoring of Access Agreements carried out by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). Access Agreements have been in existence since the academic year 2005/2006, though since the 2012 funding reforms they have played a more significant role. At present institutions charging fees of more than the 'basic level' of £6000 per annum for a full-time course are required to produce an Access Agreement for OFFA detailing their fee limits and how they will utilise a proportion of additional fee income to support access and retention. They are also required to set targets and milestones for themselves which must be agreed by OFFA. Since the academic year 2002/2003, comparable performance indicators for WP have been produced by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) on behalf of HEFCE and the UK's other HE funding councils, which include institutional benchmarks as well as details of whether institutions meet the benchmarks or under- or over-perform.

2.7 More generally, HEFCE has placed consistent emphasis on the need to mainstream WP activities in order to ensure they become embedded in broader institutional strategies. The aim is to ensure that WP activity is not carried out on the periphery of institutions but is incorporated into all areas of institutional practice. Emphasis has also been placed on supporting individuals across the student lifecycle, from first aspirations through to admission, transition, retention, completion and progression into employment, and more recently postgraduate study.

2.8 Working with OFFA, HEFCE is currently developing a national strategy for promoting access and student success in HE and maximising the impact of HEFCE's WP funding, as well as institutions' own investment in WP and funding delivered through the National Scholarship Programme (NSP). To inform this strategy, CFE and Edge Hill University were commissioned to conduct research that will provide systematic evidence of the way in which HEFCE's funding for WP is deployed within institutions and the impact that those institutions perceive the funding has had on outcomes.

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<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Accountability for Higher Education Institutions* (Bristol: HEFCE, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Request for Widening Participation Strategic Assessments* (Bristol: HEFCE, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> For details about the reasoning behind the call for IW PSSs see: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2012/cl112012/>.

## Research questions

2.9 The aim of this research is to complement the information already collected through HEFCE and OFFA's monitoring processes. As part of their annual WPSA monitoring returns, institutions are asked to report expenditure on all their WP commitments, giving them the opportunity to take credit for the full range of WP activities they invest in. However, institutions are expected to include activity funded from both HEFCE WP funding and from other sources, so it is not possible to identify from the monitoring returns the expenditure on WP funded through the HEFCE WP allocation. Unlike the monitoring returns, this research sought to focus on the HEFCE WP allocation only in order to develop a fuller understanding of how HEFCE WP funding is being used by HEIs and FECs and how it is impacting on WP objectives. Specifically, the research looked at:

- > How HEIs and FECs have used the WP funding from HEFCE
- > What the funding has delivered
- > What evidence there is of the impact that the funding has had on institutional and wider WP objectives
- > What would no longer be delivered if funding were reduced or withdrawn, and the impact of this activity ceasing

2.10 In order to address these questions, the research investigated a range of areas, including the organisation and administration of WP in institutions, institutional evaluations of WP activity, and participants' perspectives on national WP policy. The research involved two methods of data collection: a survey and in-depth interviews with institutions that receive more than £50,000 of HEFCE funding.<sup>5</sup>

## Institutional survey

2.11 All institutions that received a WP allocation of more than £50,000 in the academic year 2011/2012 were invited to take part in the institutional survey. In total, 205 HEIs and FECs received more than this amount and were thus eligible to participate. Initially, all eligible institutions were invited by HEFCE to take part in the research and, if appropriate, to nominate a suitable contact to complete the survey. The sample frame was constructed from information supplied by institutions in response to HEFCE's invitation, existing databases of WP contacts and pro-active engagement by CFE with institutions.

2.12 The survey was designed to explore current institutional WP policy and approaches along with expenditure against the HEFCE WP allocations for the widening access, improving retention and disability streams during the academic year 2011/2012. The survey was administered online using SNAP Webhost.<sup>6</sup> The individual survey responses for each institution were pre-populated with the institutional allocation for each funding stream. Each institution was then allocated a unique user name and password so that responses could be tracked and multiple individuals within an institution could contribute to the final submission.

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<sup>5</sup> A threshold of £50k was agreed with HEFCE to avoid burdening those institutions in receipt of a relatively small amount of WP funding as a proportion of their overall budget with detailed requests for information. The majority of these institutions were FECs, though some HEIs were also excluded.

<sup>6</sup> For details about SNAP Webhost see: <https://www.snapsurveys.com/snaponline-webhost/>.

In total, 84 institutions submitted a full response to the survey (40.9 per cent). A further 46 institutions partially completed survey, of which 20 were considered to be sufficiently comprehensive to be included in analysis. The overall response rate achieved was therefore 50.7 per cent. These institutions account for £272 million, or 73.7 per cent, of the total HEFCE WP allocation for the academic year 2011/2012.

2.13 A wide range of institution types are represented in the survey findings, as well as the full range of English regions (see Table 2.1). There was, however, a significantly lower response rate among FECs. Of the 84 FECs that received more than £50,000 of HEFCE funding in 2011/2012, 20 completed the survey, representing a response rate of 23.8 per cent. Thus while it has been possible to make comparisons between institution types in this report, it is important to recognise that in the aggregated survey data larger HEIs are better represented than FECs, which tend to receive a much smaller amount of HEFCE funding.

Table 2.1: Submitted survey responses by region

Region	No. of responses	No. of eligible institutions	% eligible institutions
East Midlands	8	19	42.1
East of England	7	10	70
Greater London	20	40	50
North East	7	12	58.3
North West	12	29	41.4
South East	14	28	50
South West	12	18	66.7
West Midlands	14	23	60.9
Yorkshire and Humber	10	26	38.5
Total	104	205	50.7

## Interviews with institutions

2.14 Alongside the institutional survey, interviews with staff with strategic and/or operational oversight of WP were conducted within 31 FECs and HEIs. The aim of these interviews was twofold: first, to gather more detailed, descriptive data about the uses of the HEFCE WP allocation and institutions' current WP priorities; and second, to investigate how institutions' approaches to WP have changed since the WP allocation was introduced in 1999/2000, and specifically the role that the HEFCE funding has played in altering institutional approaches and attitudes toward WP. The interview was designed to cover a much longer time-frame than the institutional survey, which focused on the year 2011/2012.

2.15 Steps were taken to achieve as representative a sample as possible. The profile of the participating institutions by institution type and geographical location is outlined in Table 2.2 below (see paragraph 3.7 for details about the institutional typology used in this report).



Table 2.2: Institutions interviewed by institution type and English region

Institution type	No. of institutions	Region	No. of institutions
Inclusive	11	East Midlands	4
Selective	11	East of England	2
Specialist	3	Greater London	5
Small (FEC)	6 (4)	North East	3
Total	31	West Midlands	3
		Yorkshire and Humber	3
		Total	31

2.16 Wherever possible, data gathered through the interviews was compared with the survey responses to ensure reliability. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that the data gathered during both of the research stages was perceptual, so there may be differences between, for example, participants' views on the impact of the HEFCE WP funding and the actual impact of the funding.

## Report structure

2.17 This report is structured as follows: This chapter presents the context for the research and details the research methods. Chapter 3 examines the ways in which WP is organised within institutions. Chapter 4 details how WP activities are funded, including the proportion of the total cost currently met by HEFCE through the WP allocation. Chapter 5 examines the activities and interventions currently supported by the HEFCE allocation and the range of target groups. Chapter 6 explores institutional perceptions of the impact that these activities are having and any evidence of impact that is currently captured. Finally, in Chapter 7 we draw together the key findings and consider the implications for HEFCE as it develops its future strategy for WP.

## 3| Institutional approaches to WP

3.1 This chapter considers the strategic approaches to WP, as well as the overarching operating models, of FECs and HEIs in England. It explores differences in the priorities and approaches of different types of institution and gives an account of the ways in which these have evolved since the WP allocation was first introduced. Finally, it examines institutional commitment to WP, along with current and future challenges for WP, in the context of recent reforms to HE policy. The chapter reveals that:

- > The overwhelming majority of institutions feel that HEFCE's strategic priorities for WP fit with their own institutional priorities.
- > Institutions face different issues and challenges in relation to WP and therefore value the opportunity to set their own priorities and targets.
- > While there has been a long-standing commitment to WP across the sector, the introduction of the WP allocation helped bring about a significant cultural change in institutions and greater acceptance of WP.

### National priorities for WP

3.2 Although efforts to widen access to HE originally emphasised the enrolment of mature students, widening participation over the past decade and a half has focused on the enrolment of younger students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and in particular from those social classes whose participation rates have remained consistently low.<sup>7</sup> It is recognised that access to HE is insufficient, and success in HE and beyond is equally important. The most recent strategic statement from HEFCE<sup>8</sup> identifies a number of key principles, including student opportunity, which will drive change in HE and guide HEFCE's future work. The HEFCE website presents the following current aim with regards to WP:

Our aim is to promote and provide the opportunity of successful participation in higher education to everyone who can benefit from it. This is vital for social justice and economic competitiveness.

3.3 The overarching aim of WP is to address under-representation in HE in order to improve social mobility by supporting individuals to overcome situational, institutional and dispositional barriers to progression. The HEFCE WP allocation supports FECs and HEIs to develop interventions at key stages in the student lifecycle – pre-HE, on entry to HE, and while on programme – which are designed to raise aspirations and improve access, retention and success for disadvantaged groups. Although the WP allocation is currently delivered in

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<sup>7</sup> Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Strategies for Widening Participation in Higher Education: A Guide to Good Practice* (Bristol: HEFCE, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Opportunity, Choice and Excellence in Higher Education* (Bristol: HEFCE, 2011).

three strands, institutions are encouraged to set their own priorities and use the funding flexibly in order to achieve their stated aims.

3.4 Overall, the majority of staff (81 from a base of 88) within institutions with responsibility for WP agree that their institutional priorities for WP fit with HEFCE's priorities. Further, 77 agree that a key strength of the current approach is the ability to set priorities at the institutional level. This agreement is found across all types of institution, with no specific group of institutions having a more negative perception:

I definitely think it has been positive to allow institutions to set their own benchmarks and priorities because it actually encourages more discussion and more debate around it... If there is almost too much directive, then people just go, 'Oh, okay', and just try and meet that goal.

Head of Outreach, selective institution

I think [allowing institutions to set their own priorities is] a good idea, because most organisations know their prospective students, know where they are underrepresented and, also, know that once the students are actually on their campus, that they need that flexibility to be able to respond to the existing students' needs.

Head of Higher Education, small FEC

3.5 Institutions value the guidance that is issued by HEFCE to support them in identifying priorities and developing strategy. Interviewees emphasised that they had no wish to develop their WP strategy in isolation. Institutions also recognise the value of setting their own WP targets against widely used indicators of WP performance, notably HESA data. As the Head of Outreach at a selective institution explained in interview, '[Setting targets] gives us a focus, there is a real drive and impetus to meet them, because there will be financial and reputational consequences if we don't succeed'.

### Institutional priorities for WP

3.6 A range of contextual factors – such as history, mission, geographical location and entry tariffs – shape and influence institutional priorities and approaches to WP.<sup>9</sup> The evidence clearly demonstrates that the approaches taken differ markedly between institutions and that there are a number of reasons for this. The number of WP students as a proportion of the total population varies considerably between institutions and institutions have different priorities in relation to WP as a result. The resources available for WP activities vary between institutions, with some relying more heavily on the HEFCE WP allocation than others. Institutions are, therefore, starting from different positions and accordingly manage their WP activities very differently.

3.7 Our analysis categorises institutions into four types. This typology was initially formulated in light of the preliminary findings that emerged in this study. It was then further developed using an existing classification constructed by HEFCE and used in various HEFCE

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<sup>9</sup> Liz Thomas et al., *Review of Widening Participation Strategic Assessments* (Ormskirk: Action on Access, 2009).

reports,<sup>10</sup> as well as an analysis of the number of existing full-time equivalent students (FTEs) at each institution. The four types are defined as follows:

- > **Inclusive** institutions: Large, usually teaching-intensive institutions that recruit significant numbers of WP students. These institutions tend to target WP groups as part of their standard recruitment activities and have been doing so since before HEFCE provided dedicated funding for WP. Inclusive institutions tend to have a large number of students from low socio-economic groups (SEGs) and low participation neighbourhoods and, as a result, tend to receive the most WP funding from HEFCE. They are more likely to focus their efforts on improving retention.
- > **Selective** institutions: Large, usually research-intensive institutions that recruit high-attaining students. These institutions may be highly committed to WP but tend not to have a large proportion of WP students. They are more likely to focus their efforts on widening access.
- > **Specialist** or professional training institutes: Smaller HEIs and colleges that offer only a small range of courses, usually dedicated to a particular profession (for example, medicine, education or the performing arts). These institutions are often highly selective, and their specialism means that WP presents a range of distinct challenges. WP activity by these institutions is for the most part related to widening access and addressing under-representation in specific academic courses and/or career types.
- > **Small** institutions: FECs, general colleges and small HEIs that usually have a clear interest in social mobility among disadvantaged groups. Much like inclusive institutions, these often target WP groups as part of their standard recruitment activities, but they tend to receive only limited funding from HEFCE due to their size. Many offer both further education (FE) and HE courses, and WP often focuses on progression between the two. They are more likely to prioritise activities to support retention and student success.

3.8 All the institutions included in this research have been classified using this typology. Of our survey respondents, 35 are classified as inclusive, 31 are classified as selective, 11 are classified as specialist and 27 are classified as small (of which 20 are FECs and 7 HEIs). This typology is used as a basis for our analysis throughout this report and interview participants are identified by the type of institution they represent. Where relevant, the findings are also examined by level of WP funding received.

## Strategic approaches to WP

3.9 Given the variety of institution types and the challenges they face in relation to WP, it is perhaps unsurprising that a range of strategic approaches to WP are being adopted. The majority of institutions (65 from a base of 104) indicated that they have a dedicated WP strategy (in addition to an Access Agreement and a WPSA). In just under a third of institutions (30), WP forms part of a wider institutional strategy or strategies. A limited number (7) of institutions reported that they are currently developing a strategy, and only a very small number of (2) indicated they do not currently have a WP strategy.

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<sup>10</sup> Such as, for example, Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Staff Employed at HEFCE-funded HEIs: Trends and Profiles 1995-96 to 2010-11* (Bristol: HEFCE, 2012).

3.10 Our analysis by institution type indicates that the majority of institutions of all types have a dedicated WP strategy. This includes a large proportion of FECs (11), even though none of them have a dedicated WP unit (see paragraph 3.14 below). However, our findings do indicate – although not to a statistically significant level – that inclusive institutions and small FECs are more likely to integrate WP into their wider institutional strategy or strategies than other types of institution (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Frequency of responses to the question, ‘Does your institution have a dedicated WP strategy?’ by institution type

Response	Selective	Inclusive	Specialist	Small, HEI	Small, FEC
‘Yes’	23	18	9	4	11
‘No, but we have one in development’	2	1	1	1	2
‘No, but WP forms part of a wider institutional strategy’	5	16	1	2	6
‘No, we do not have a WP strategy’	1	0	0	0	1
Total	31	35	11	7	20

3.11 A number of factors could explain this difference, but according to our interviewees the composition of the student body and the centrality of WP within the institutional mission and priorities are key factors. In some inclusive and small institutions with particularly large populations of WP students, it is regarded as more appropriate to integrate WP into core strategies such as marketing, recruitment, admissions and learning and teaching, rather than to develop a standalone strategy:

We don’t have a separate strategy.... It’s integrated across. It’s in our main learning and teaching strategy; it’s in our academic development strategy; it’s in our employer engagement strategy. In a sense it’s embedded in everything we do.

Pro-Vice Chancellor, inclusive institution

I think what we do is that we give consideration to inclusivity within all university level strategies. I don’t think we separate out, explicitly, a WP strategy.

Director of Learning and Teaching, inclusive institution

3.12 This also reflects HEFCE’s encouragement to make WP a core strategic issue and to implement cultural change.<sup>11</sup>

3.13 According to survey respondents, the majority of institutions review their strategic approach to WP annually. A range of systems are in place to support this process and these ensure a wide range of staff are consulted and contribute to the strategy’s development. In some institutions the strategy/strategies are reviewed by existing committees, such as an

<sup>11</sup> See Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Request for Widening Participation Strategic Assessments* section 14.

equality and diversity steering group. In a number of others, a dedicated WP steering group or committee has been established to bring together senior managers with an interest in WP from across institution:

I'm the director of marketing and communications... and have ultimate operational responsibility for ensuring that we meet all of the actions on the Access Agreement and our WPSA. I chair the Widening Participation Steering Group which reports to our academic board

Director of Marketing, small institution

## Co-ordination and delivery of WP strategies

3.14 The differences between institution types can be further illustrated by examining the infrastructure that is in place and the way in which WP activity is organised. According to the survey, the majority of institutions (58 out of 103) have a dedicated WP unit. However, in order to understand the role and remit of these units and other units and departments within the institution, survey respondents were asked to distinguish between the *coordination* of WP activity (including overall monitoring and strategic planning) and the *delivery* of WP activity (including the implementation of specific projects and interventions). Of those institutions that have a WP unit, the majority (30) coordinate all HEFCE-funded WP activity, with delivery of activities being carried out by the WP unit and other service units and academic departments. A smaller number (20) share both the coordination and delivery of WP activities between the WP unit and other units and departments within the institution. Only a very small number (4) adopt a centralised approach and coordinate and deliver all WP activity from the WP unit.

3.15 Analysis by institution type reveals that selective institutions are most likely to have a dedicated WP unit. Conversely, small institutions are highly unlikely to have a dedicated WP unit; as Table 3.2 illustrates, none of the FECs participating in the research have a WP unit within their institution.

3.16 As smaller institutions tend to receive a smaller amount of HEFCE funding, it is perhaps not surprising that analysis by WP allocation also reveals that those institutions in receipt of the smallest amount funding are least likely to have a dedicated unit; 15 out of 17 institutions in the bottom sixth in terms of HEFCE WP funding received do not have a dedicated unit. More striking, however, is that a significant minority of inclusive institutions (Table 3.2) and over half of those in receipt of the largest WP allocation (Table 3.3) do not have a dedicated WP unit. Indeed, the survey found a statistically significant difference between the number of inclusive and selective institutions that have a WP unit. Again, the reasons for this are likely to be varied, but the evidence captured during the interviews suggests that they mirror the reasons given for a lack of a dedicated WP strategy. In many inclusive institutions WP is central to and embedded within the institution's wider strategy and activities. Responsibility for the co-ordination and delivery of WP is, therefore, shared across the institution and coordinated and delivered locally by the individual service units and academic departments either as stand-alone activities or as part of the mainstream offer:

The widening participation packages are embedded. There is nobody in the university called 'Widening Participation Manager' or anything. So, basically, the activities are managed as part of the various activities [...]. We don't

invent things, and attach them at the side and call them ‘widening participation’.

Registrar, inclusive institution

Table 3.2: Frequency of responses to the question, ‘Does your institution have a WP unit?’ by institution type

Institution type	Number with WP unit	Number without WP unit	Percentage with WP unit
Selective	27	4	87
Inclusive	21	14	60
Specialist	7	3	70
Small, HEI	3	4	42.8
Small, FEC	0	20	0
Total	58	45	Average 56.3

Table 3.3: Frequency of responses to the question, ‘Does your institution have a WP unit?’ by total WP allocation received from HEFCE

Institutions grouped by total HEFCE WP funding received in 2011/2012	Number with WP unit	Number without WP unit	Percentage with WP unit
Group 1 (over £4.8 million)	8	10	44.4
Group 2 (over £2.3 million to £4.8 million)	12	5	70.6
Group 3 (over 1.3 million to £2.3 million)	13	4	76.4
Group 4 (over £775k to £1.3 million)	12	5	70.6
Group 5 (over £290k to £775k)	11	6	64.7
Group 6 (£290k or less)	2	15	11.8
Total	58	45	Average 56.3

3.17 In the 45 responding institutions that do not have a central WP unit, an existing academic department or service unit most commonly assumes responsibility for co-ordinating WP activity (in 19 cases). In a further 10 institutions, separate units have been established to co-ordinate the activities funded through the three WP income streams – access, retention and disability. In a further 13 institutions there is no central coordination.

### Involvement of other departments and service units

3.18 Irrespective of the presence of a central WP unit, almost all institutions involve a range of other departments and service units in the coordination and/or delivery of WP activities. Table 3.4 summarises the departments and service units within institutions that commonly play a role in the coordination and/or delivery of the three HEFCE-funded streams of WP activity. Overall, and with the exception of finance departments, a greater proportion of institutions report that other service units and academic departments are involved in the delivery rather than the co-ordination of all WP activities.

3.19 Further analysis by WP funding stream reveals that while student services tend to fulfil a key role in relation to all three areas of activity, other departments are more likely to be

focused in one area. The findings suggest that marketing and admissions are most commonly involved in the co-ordination and delivery of widening access activities, along with finance which also has a key role in relation to retention. Registry and academic departments are most likely to be involved in activities to support retention. Unsurprisingly, a higher proportion of Disability Services and Equality and Diversity units are involved in disability activities than in activities linked to access and retention (Table 3.4).

Table 3.4: Other departments and service units involved in the coordination and delivery of HEFCE-funded WP activity

	Widening access		Improving retention		Disability	
	Co-ordination	Delivery	Co-ordination	Delivery	Co-ordination	Delivery
Student Services	22	43	28	65	30	59
Disability Services	12	28	19	41	35	64
Finance	23	16	19	19	11	7
Admissions	24	58	9	17	12	18
Registry	13	23	17	25	6	15
Marketing	25	50	12	18	12	15
Equality & Diversity Unit	8	17	9	22	13	33
Academic school/faculty	21	72	27	65	18	46
Learning Development Unit	-	2	-	8	-	2
Other	13	14	14	6	7	5

3.20 The reasons why different service units and academic departments are involved in the coordination and/or delivery of different WP activities were explored during the in-depth interviews with staff and include: areas of expertise, synergies with existing roles and responsibilities and level of available resources. The following quote illustrates this:

I share responsibility for widening participation with our marketing department, partly because our director of marketing has a few more people who do our outreach work. The division is very much them responsible for outreach, and I'm kind of responsible for our retention, progression and our achievement.

Director of Learning and Teaching, inclusive institution

3.21 The extent and nature of the involvement of different departments and service units in the coordination and delivery of the different WP activity streams could also be a reflection of the level of priority an individual area of activity is accorded within an institution. Institutions must fulfil statutory obligations in relation to provision for disabled students and support for students with disabilities is a key priority in all institutions. However, one clear theme to emerge from the research findings is that priorities in relation to widening access and improving retention vary according to the type of institution.



3.22 Evidence of the contrasting priorities of different institution types initially emerged from the analysis of the survey data. Respondents were asked to rank their agreement with the statement ‘Improving retention is a higher strategic priority than widening access at our institution’ on a scale of one to seven, where one indicated strong disagreement and seven indicated strong agreement. The findings demonstrate a statistically significant difference in the average level of agreement between different institution types. Small and inclusive institutions are more likely to agree with the statement that retention is a higher priority than access in their institution, while selective and specialist institutions are more likely to disagree with the statement (see Table 3.5).

Table 3.5: Average level of agreement with the statement ‘Improving retention is a higher strategic priority than widening access at our institution’ (based on a 7 point scale)

Institution type	Mean	Number of responses
Small, FEC	5.69	16
Inclusive	5.22	32
Small, HEI	4.67	6
Selective	3.35	26
Specialist	3.25	8

3.23 Most small and inclusive institutions recruit large numbers of their students from the local population, a substantial proportion of whom are often classified as WP. Indeed, up to 80 per cent of the total student population is comprised of WP students in some cases. Widening access is not typically considered to be a significant challenge for this type of institution. However, interviewees suggested that retention and achievement rates amongst WP students are, on average, lower than those for non-WP students. Retention is, therefore, more likely to be a higher order priority in institutions with large WP cohorts.

[W]e don’t have difficulties in attracting WP students. So we have perhaps concentrated our efforts on retaining them.

Director of Learning and Teaching, inclusive institution

The challenge for us is not to increase any particular category of student... it’s improving our and their performance.

Pro-Vice Chancellor, inclusive institution

3.24 By contrast, selective and specialist institutions tend to regard retention as less of an institutional priority than access.

[Retention is] not a huge issue for us because – totally honestly – our entry grades are quite high, [so] generally speaking whatever background you’re from, you have the ability to be here, the ability to hold your own.

Head of Widening Participation, selective institution

I don’t think we would have got a WP intake by default, so we’ve had to work hard to build that. Whereas I think historically retention has been good.

Head of Partnerships, selective institution

3.25 Interviewees from selective institutions often reported that widening access was particularly challenging and an area where in some instances not enough progress had been made. Widening access is challenging because, in addition to the range of situational, institutional and dispositional factors that impact on an individual's progression into HE, there are also a range of contextual factors that impact on an institution's ability to successfully attract those groups who have traditionally been under represented in the sector. These include the number of potential WP students living in the local area and achieving the required entry requirements as well as the willingness and ability of WP students living in other regions to relocate to take up a place at a selective institution. Different institutions face different issues in relation to widening access and the impact and success of their activities is often dependent, at least in part, on input from a range of other organisations, including schools and colleges, and the provision of effective support services such as careers education and guidance. These issues are explored further in Chapter 6.

### Institutional commitment to WP

3.26 Irrespective of their specific institutional priorities for WP, the majority of survey respondents (79 of 92) agreed that 'widening access for disadvantaged students had always been a strategic priority within their institution' and almost all of the interviewees reported that there remained a strong commitment to WP.

I think [the Vice-Chancellor] is very clear that a top university can maintain its historic and very public commitment to widening participation and to community engagement.

Head of Widening Participation, selective institution

3.27 Analysis by institution type indicates that, on average, inclusive and small institutions agree more strongly that 'widening access for disadvantaged students has always been a strategic priority within their institution' than selective institutions (mean ratings of 6.4, 6.3 and 5.5 respectively on a seven-point scale where one is 'strongly disagree' and seven is 'strongly agree'). However, the difference between these types of institution was not found to be statistically significant. Respondents reported, regardless of institution type, that institutional commitment to WP had increased over time (see below).

3.28 The current commitment to WP is commonly reflected in the institutional missions, as well as in relevant strategies and, overall, is believed to be shared by staff working at all levels. The following comment reflects a widely held view:

The view of staff across the institution is, actually, much more than just acceptance. It's really something which is part of the fabric of the [institution].

Head of Widening Participation, specialist institution

3.29 However, it is important to recognise that some staff, particularly at an operational level, may not be aware of all of the activities in place designed to widen participation and/or may not be aware that the activities embedded as part of the core offer actually contribute to WP objectives. There is also evidence that a minority of staff, and those based in selective institutions in particular, remain sceptical about WP and that there is a reluctance to engage in activities that are not perceived to be an integral part of their core role. A small minority of

interviewees from selective institutions also suggested that, while there was widespread acceptance of WP among faculty, administrative and senior staff, the practical incorporation of WP across their institution was inconsistent. Two interviewees in particular commented that, although their institution claimed to be committed to WP, WP activity was at times marginalised by other institutional priorities, or treated as an 'optional extra' by some staff:

On the one hand there's obviously a very strong commitment to widening participation.... On the other, one can be frustrated sometimes by the apparent ignoring of WP issues in some developments. Sometimes I think that's unintentional; people just forget. At other times I think, yes, there is a tension between WP and the associated issues and messages, and the desire to raise our entry requirements.

Head of Widening Participation, selective institution

### Changes over time

3.30 Although the majority of institutions claim WP has always been a strategic priority, the extent and nature of the institutional commitment to the principles of wider access, retention and success has evolved over time. Our findings suggest that the introduction of the WP allocation in 1999/2000 acted as an important trigger, serving to galvanise institutional strategies and approaches where they already existed; stimulating and enabling their development and implementation where they did not. The impact of the introduction of the HEFCE funding varied according to institution type and the extent and nature of their existing WP activities. Interviewees from smaller colleges and specialist professional training institutes suggested that the WP funding helped them to formalise their strategy and provided the resources they needed to realise their objectives.

We were looking at [WP] prior to 2000, but we weren't in a position to do anything apart from... I wouldn't say paying lip service, but we weren't able to do anything concrete, simply because of our low resource base, and it was only once we had the HEFCE funding that we were able to do what the institution had a commitment to doing.

Head of Widening Participation, specialist institution

3.31 In many institutions, and selective institutions in particular, winning the hearts and minds of staff at all levels was viewed as essential to the success of WP, but was also considered to be a key challenge. The funding from HEFCE has helped support this process by keeping WP on the agenda and providing a minimum level of resource to fund the development of the necessary infrastructure, activities and associated staff costs. As a result, most interviewees from selective institutions reported that there had been an increasing acceptance of WP since the funding was first introduced.

3.32 Conversely, larger, inclusive institutions have faced different challenges as most were engaged in some form of WP activities prior to the introduction of the funding. Interviewees from these institutions suggested that over the last twelve years WP activity has become more explicit and more sophisticated as well as, in some cases, more embedded and central to institutional strategies.

I think the difference is, when you look back at that time, it's almost as though the institution would go, 'Well, this is what we do,' and then they had this bit, which was about widening participation. I think the difference over the time is that it's become... thoroughly integrated, I think, into the way we think about things.

Pro-Vice Chancellor, inclusive institution

Because of the nature of the institution and the local demographic, it's always been a widening participation institution. What happened, I think, between 1995 and 2000 was it recognised itself as one of those and recognised that this was an institutional mission [and this] was being recognised in the national agenda too. So it started to explicitly align itself and broadcast that fact.

Pro-Vice Chancellor, inclusive institution

## Current and future challenges

3.33 The HE landscape has changed rapidly over recent years as a result of significant reforms, most notably to funding and the fee structure in England, and in response to the economic downturn. These changes have implications for the development and delivery of WP strategies both now and in the future as institutions adjust to shifts in the level and source of income and the number and type of students applying to study in HE.

3.34 Although widespread speculation about the detrimental impact of the introduction of higher level fees in 2012 on applications from disadvantaged groups has not, so far, been borne out,<sup>12</sup> the new fee structure (including associated loans and financial aid programmes) was perceived by participants to be adding an extra layer of complexity for students during the decision-making process and for institutions seeking to attract and support them. One interviewee in particular argued that national-level WP policy should place greater emphasis on the need to inform students – especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds – about the tuition fee arrangements that came into effect in 2012. He and other interviewees explained that a significant part of his institution's widening access activities now focus upon correcting common misconceptions about fees and their repayment:

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<sup>12</sup> See UCAS Analysis and Research, *How Have Applications for Full-time Undergraduate Higher Education in the UK Changed in 2012?* (Cheltenham: UCAS, 2012).

[T]hat whole area of the interest that's attached to the loans and how the repayments will work has become an area of complexity which has been largely misunderstood in the popular press. We do feel that we've got much more of a mountain to climb than we ever had previously, in terms of ensuring that these messages get over.... [T]here's the outreach element to all of all of this.... Because, you know, the students at that age do not have a level of financial capability about them which prepares them for the level of complexity which is in the higher education student funding scheme.

Head of Widening Participation, small institution

3.35 In addition, some interviewees argued that perceived pressure to reduce average fee levels through the use of fee waivers for WP students creates a paradox: on the one hand, the Government has argued that fees do not present a barrier to access to HE because they are a deferred cost that is only repayable on graduation when income levels meet a minimum threshold; on the other hand, institutions are promoting fee waivers as a means of encouraging applicants who may be deterred by cost. Furthermore, some institutions expressed concern about how the strategy to subsidise WP activities with income from fees above £6,000 would be perceived by students. Specifically, they suggested that some students might be dissatisfied with a portion of their fee payments going toward WP activities from which they do not personally benefit.

3.36 The debate about the effectiveness of reducing entry requirements for WP target groups continues; while some remain fiercely opposed to it on the grounds of quality and the potential impact on retention and achievement rates, there is emerging evidence that a modest reduction in grade requirements in response to contextual information, coupled with additional support and/or additional assessment of a student's capability to study at the required level, can help to support widening access without a corresponding negative impact on completion and achievement rates.<sup>13</sup> However, a number of interviewees included in this research suggested that the pressure to improve league table positions, along with recent reforms allowing institutions to compete for an unrestricted number of students with AAB grades (or equivalent) at A-Level, may make these approaches less common.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, they noted that these reforms were putting pressure on institutions to raise their entry requirements or, in the case of selective institutions with existing entry requirements at this level, reduce initiatives that support applicants with lower entry qualifications in a bid to compete for a larger share of student numbers.

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<sup>13</sup> See Kath Bridger, Jenny Shaw, and Joanne Moore, *Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Research to Describe the Use of Contextual Data in Admissions at a Sample of Universities and Colleges in the UK* (Cheltenham: Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> From 2013/14, restrictions will also be lifted for ABB entrants.

One of the things that has changed strategically, perhaps most definitely over the last year, is our entry criteria for students. I certainly remember my first go on clearing ten to fifteen years ago, where we would make quite low offers, but certainly our UCAS tariff has been increasing year on year.

Director of Learning and Teaching, inclusive institution

3.37 While the pressure to raise entry requirements is felt most keenly by inclusive institutions, interviewees from three selective HEIs also noted that sharp rises in entry requirements are at odds with the aim of attracting WP students. A shift in emphasis, and greater use of contextual data, may be required to ensure disadvantaged students access HE via lower offers and/or support to then to achieve the required grades. Grade inflation, without additional support and the use of contextual data, could potentially lead to disadvantaged students finding it increasingly difficult to access HE, as a larger number of HEIs raise entry criteria as part of a drive to increase student numbers.

3.38 The perceived 'marketisation' of HE associated with increased competition between institutions could, interviewees felt, militate against collaborative WP activities and WP activities that derive benefits for the wider sector such as early interventions in schools (see paragraph 6.27). However, there was a widespread perception among the interviewees we spoke to that sustained interventions at key stages in a potential applicant's educational journey are most likely to raise aspirations and attainment.<sup>15</sup> As a lack of aspiration and poor attainment present key barriers to access to HE,<sup>16</sup> any measures that impact on work in these areas could be to the detriment of WP objectives.

3.39 Despite these tensions and concerns, several interviewees based in different types of institution reported that the joint monitoring process undertaken by HEFCE and OFFA, and especially the WPSA in 2009 and subsequent annual monitoring returns, had led to a more coordinated and focused approach to WP, as well as, in some cases, more extensive and rigorous evaluation of WP activity (see Chapter 6). While interviewees at two institutions perceived current reporting requirements to be too burdensome, in general the introduction of WPSAs was viewed positively:

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<sup>15</sup> Action on Access, *Higher Education Progression Framework* (Ormskirk: Action on Access, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Haroon Chowdry et al. (2008) *Widening Participation in Higher Education: Analysis Using Linked Administrative Data*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.

[We] actually wrote our first official widening participation strategy in 2009.... I don't think they'd put together a formal strategy before.

Higher Education Manager, FEC

[F]rom an operational point of view, from a person that is trying to get stuff done on the ground, I think having the access agreements and the WPSA has really made people focus.... We had a WP strategy but I think the WPSA really made us sit down and think about it a bit more. It showed how all the different strands pulled together in a way that probably hadn't been done for a few years.

Head of Outreach, selective institution

## Summary

3.40 The HE sector is extremely diverse and institutions face different issues and challenges in relation to WP. Most, therefore, value the opportunity to set their own priorities in response to institutional context with guidance from national bodies such as HEFCE in relation to the targeting of activities. A wide range of factors shape and influence these priorities but they are, to a large extent, determined by the nature of the institution, the composition of the local population and the existing student body, and the available resources. Currently the overwhelming majority of institutions feel that HEFCE's strategic priorities for WP fit with their own institutional priorities.

3.41 Institution type (inclusive, selective, specialist or small) has an impact on the strategy and approach to WP. Inclusive and small institutions tend to attract a high proportion of WP students and are, therefore, focused on improving retention. Conversely, selective and specialist institutions are more concerned with widening access as the retention and completion rates of WP and non-WP students studying with these types of provider are broadly comparable.

3.42 The majority of institutions have a WP strategy, co-ordinated and in part delivered by a dedicated WP unit. However, a substantial minority elect to integrate WP into their wider institutional and/or department strategies and responsibility for co-ordination and delivery is shared across the institution. This practise is particularly common amongst inclusive and small institutions where a significant proportion of students are classified as WP and WP is regarded as their core business as a result.

3.43 Most institutions of all types report that there has been a long-standing commitment to WP within their organisation but that the introduction of the WP allocation in 1999/2000 helped to formalise WP and facilitate greater acceptance of the importance of WP objectives. There is evidence that there has been a significant shift in organisational culture and attitudes towards WP as a result of the funding, particularly in selective institutions. However, recent reforms to HE are perceived to be creating new tensions for individuals and institutions which potentially militate against the achievement of WP objectives.





## 4| WP funding and expenditure

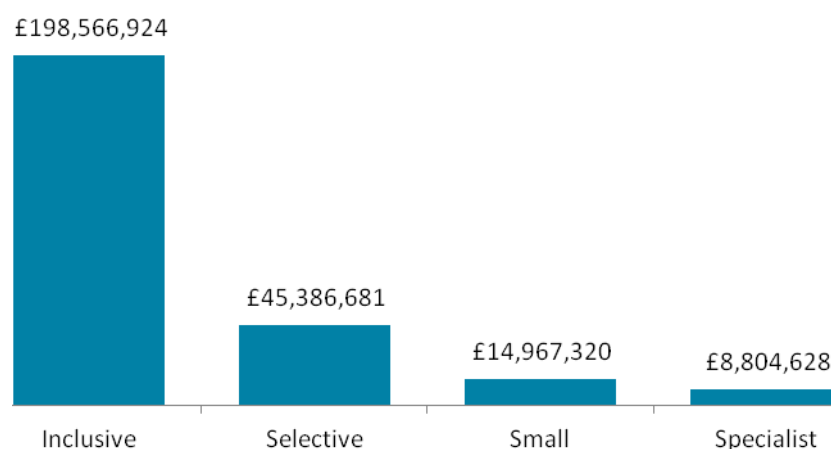
4.1 This chapter examines expenditure on WP activities. After first summarising the proportion of HEFCE funding allocated to each of the institution types for WP and the other sources of income institutions draw upon in order to meet the costs of WP, we go on to consider the ways in which institutions currently track and account for their expenditure. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the perceived value added to institutions by the WP allocation. The chapter reveals that:

- > Despite a high degree of variation in the total allocation received by different institutions, only a small number of institutional budgets for WP are comprised entirely of HEFCE funding.
- > Institutions of all types find it challenging to link expenditure on specific activities to the individual strands of the HEFCE allocation.
- > Although the HEFCE allocation has not resulted in a substantial net financial gain for some institutions, the majority recognise the importance of the HEFCE allocation in enabling the ring-fencing of resources for WP.

### The HEFCE WP allocation

4.2 We noted in the introduction to this report that HEFCE has been delivering funding specifically for WP to HEIs and FECs since 1999/2000 and that the total allocation in 2011/2012 was £368 million. Figure 4.1 gives details of the total allocation received by institutions participating in the survey in that academic year, for each of the four institution types identified in this research:

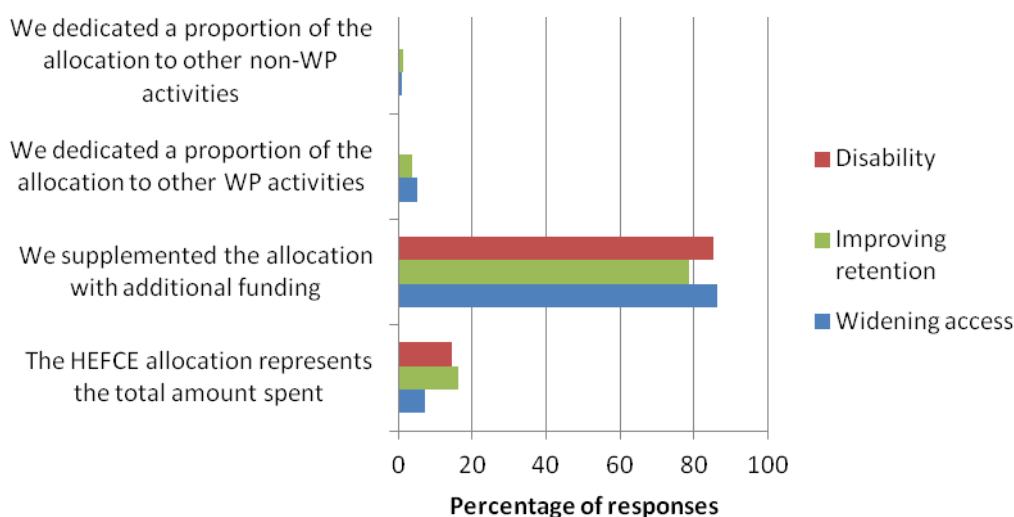
Figure 4.1 HEFCE WP allocation of institutions participating in the survey, by institution type



## Expenditure on WP

4.3 The amount of funding each institution receives from HEFCE is dependent on a number of factors, including the numbers of undergraduate new entrants from low participation neighbourhoods, their calculated risk of withdrawing from HE, and the number of students in receipt of the DSA. However, the proportion of total WP funding that the HEFCE allocation comprises within an individual institution will be dependent on the level of fees the institution charges. As a result, there is a high degree of variation in the total allocation received by different institutions, as well as a high degree of variation in the proportion of WP spending the allocation represents. Only a small proportion of survey respondents reported that their WP work is funded entirely by the HEFCE allocation; the overwhelming majority of institutions supplement the HEFCE WP allocation with income from other sources (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: HEFCE WP funding in relation to other sources of funding for WP



4.4 As a result of the variation in the HEFCE allocation and in the extent to which the allocation is supplemented by other sources of income, the proportion of total expenditure on WP that the HEFCE allocation represents also varies between institutions. Table 4.1 below demonstrates that the HEFCE allocation for widening access represents less than 25 per cent of total expenditure on widening access in a third of institutions that provided a response (26), compared with just 6 institutions that reported almost all of their expenditure in this area was based on the HEFCE allocation. Similar trends were observed for expenditure on improving retention, as well as disability.

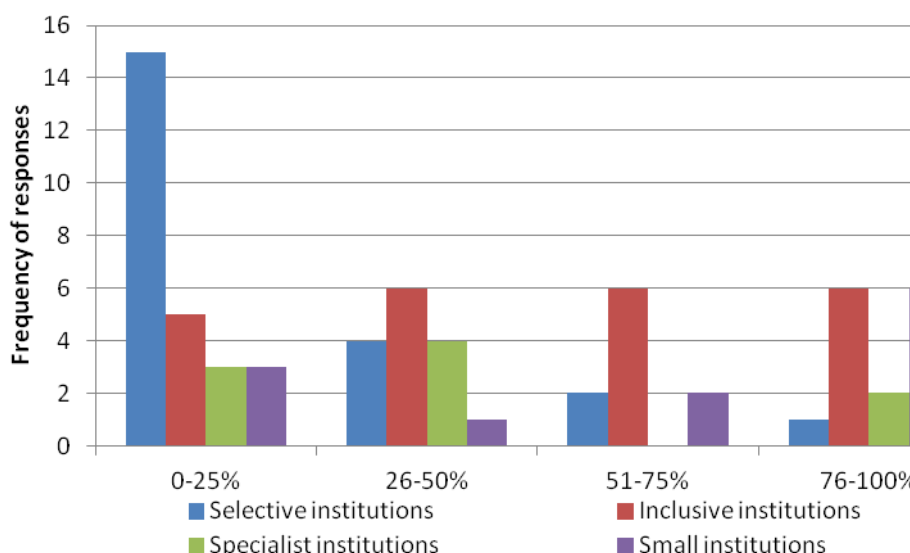
Table 4.1: HEFCE funding as a proportion of total widening access funding

Approximately what proportion of your institution's total spending on widening access does the HEFCE allocation represent?	Frequency
Less than 10%	17
11%-25%	9
26%-50%	15
51%-75%	10
76%-90%	9
Over 90%	6
Don't know	13
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>79</b>

(No response = 25)

4.5 Analysis by institution type indicates that the HEFCE allocation represents less than 25 per cent of total WP funding for widening access in the majority of selective institutions. The HEFCE allocation represents more than half of funding for widening access in half of inclusive and two thirds of small institutions that provided a response – a statistically significant difference (Figure 4.3). Similar trends were observed in relation to funding for improving retention. Inclusive institutions tend to recruit more students from low participation neighbourhoods and consequently receive a larger proportion of the HEFCE allocation. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that a more significant proportion of their income is derived from this source and that these institutions are more reliant on HEFCE funding than selective and specialist institutions as a result.

Figure 4.3: HEFCE funding as a proportion of total WP funding for widening access, by type of institution



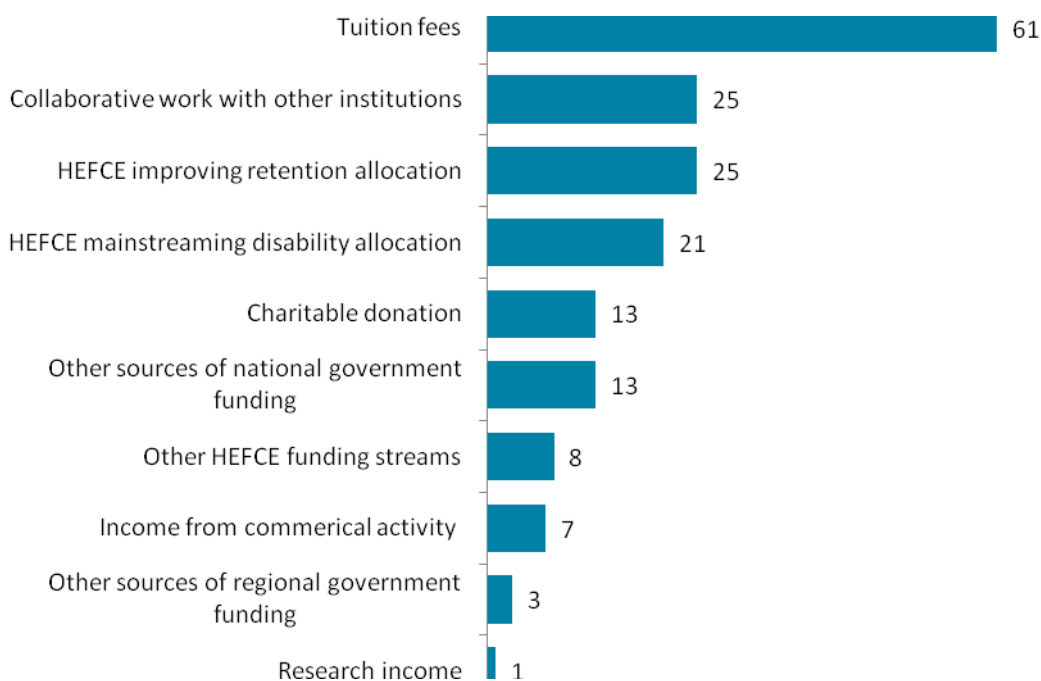
### Supplementary sources of income

4.6 The survey results indicate that, aside from the HEFCE allocation, the most common source of additional funding for WP activities is tuition fee income. Collaborative work with

other institutions also represents a significant source of funding for widening access activities (although not activities aimed at improving retention or supporting disabled students). A substantial minority of institutions cross-subsidise widening access activities with retention funding or vice versa depending on institutional priorities (Figure 4.4).

4.7 Although further analysis of the survey data did not reveal any statistically significant differences between the types of institution that cross-subsidise the widening access allocation with the improving retention allocation and vice versa, evidence from the interviews suggests that inclusive institutions commonly utilise widening access funding to support retention activities, in recognition of the need to support these students to be successful in HE. There are also notable examples whereby institutions utilise funding from these sources to supplement the disability allocation.

Figure 4.4: Other sources of income used to fund widening access work (base = 97)



4.8 There is evidence that some institutions supplement their WP allocation with charitable donations, other sources of local or national government funding, and income from commercial activity. One FEC included in the research reinvests profit from commercial activities into the college, including additional student support to enhance retention; and one specialist HEI raises a significant amount of funding from charitable foundations and local education services to fund summer schools, master classes, science workshops and other activities. Another institution had explored the possibility of establishing a subscription service for local schools to support WP activity, although it was unsure of the viability of such a scheme. A number of interviewees observed that, in the event of a reduction in the HEFCE allocation in the future, they would need to seek alternative sources of funding to sustain some of their WP activities. However, institutions on the whole were not confident about the viability of WP funded via charitable donations, while those that had considered raising tuition

fees to cover WP costs were concerned about the possible impact upon access (this is covered further in Chapter 6).

## Tracking and monitoring the HEFCE allocation

4.9 The merging of HEFCE funding with other WP funding sources can lead to challenges monitoring WP expenditure. Most of the institutions that were involved in the interview research do not differentiate clearly between HEFCE-funded WP activities and WP work funded through other sources. For many institutions, this means that accounting for the three HEFCE WP funding streams is not easy:

Obviously we need to account for [funding streams] separately but we don't have a rigid dividing line saying, 'This workshop is funded from the WP premium, and this one is funded from tuition fees'.

Head of Admissions, specialist institution

We aren't very good about taking the pot of widening participation money and putting it out on a piece of paper, and saying £10 goes here, £10 goes there. It's more like some of this money's been allocated into the marketing budget in order to fund certain activities.

Higher Education Manager, small FEC

4.10 The research findings also suggest that there are a number of other reasons why WP expenditure is difficult to track. First, even though reporting requirements have increased in recent years, institutions are not required to systematically account for all expenditure against their WP allocation. In addition, institutions have been encouraged to mainstream activities to ensure they became fully embedded in institutional practice; although this approach is regarded as the most effective in terms of driving cultural change, activities and the related expenditure are harder to monitor as a consequence. This difficulty is particularly acute in the case of retention funding, as retention work is most frequently embedded into core teaching and student support rather than delivered through the provision of specific services for targeted students. However, outreach work is similarly difficult to account for when it is undertaken by staff located in academic departments rather than by staff in a discrete unit whose main function is WP.

Funding is difficult to discuss because ... there isn't a separate unit and a separate budget [for WP at this institution].

Pro-Vice Chancellor, inclusive institution

4.11 Accounting for WP income by attributing it to particular activities was difficult for all types of institution.<sup>17</sup> However, the evidence from interviews suggested that it is particularly challenging for inclusive institutions that have a large WP student cohort and regard WP as a core function of the institution.

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<sup>17</sup> It is notable that the questions about the funding of WP in the institutional survey tended to attract the largest number of 'don't know' and non-responses, especially when the questions were focused upon the improving retention allocation.

4.12 Furthermore, institutions find attributing HEFCE WP income to specific activities hard because it is not always straightforward or possible to differentiate activities as ‘widening access’ or ‘improving retention’; some initiatives are designed to serve both purposes. For example, one interviewee provided the example of an introductory course which is primarily funded through the HEFCE WP allocation. Although its main purpose is to support retention and progression, it also plays an important role in widening access by helping to attract disadvantaged students who lack the skills and confidence to enrol on a full HE programme.

### Systems and processes

4.13 Despite these difficulties, a number of interviewees were able to describe systems and processes for accounting for WP funding in operation within their institutions. In one of the clearest examples, a selective institution described how retention funding is distributed to each of the faculties along with centrally-produced guidance outlining the kinds of activities that the funding should be used for. The faculties are then required to produce a report giving an account of their WP activity:

We’ve got three faculties. It’s allocated on proportional basis to them and they have to account for it in the reporting and monitoring process. They have to demonstrate that they’ve done things that are legitimately relating to widening participation.... Some of it [might go into] outreach with local schools. Some of it [might go into] bits of the admission process that relate to considering contextual data.... So, it’s embedded within the faculties but they do have to account for the money.

Director of Student Recruitment, selective institution

4.14 A small number of institutions reported that the WP funding they receive is set aside for a particular purpose and is easier to track as a consequence. For instance, in one selective institution the HEFCE WP allocation is ring-fenced for activities that aim to raise aspirations to enter into HE in general. The institution then uses other income streams, such as tuition fee income, to fund WP activities aimed at encouraging disadvantaged students to apply to that institution specifically.

4.15 Although in a minority of cases systems and processes for tracking and monitoring expenditure have been in place for some time, many report that they have been initiated in response to the requirements of the WPSA and may take some time to become fully established.

### Perceived value of the WP allocation

4.16 Although disaggregating expenditure against the WP allocation is challenging, there is evidence that it has funded a wide range of activities which otherwise may not have been possible (see Chapter 5) and which are contributing to the achievement of WP objectives (see Chapter 6). The allocation is also perceived to bring wider benefits to institutions. We noted in the previous chapter that the funding allocation is perceived to have contributed to the mainstreaming of WP by providing a framework for strategic discussions and priority setting as well as a firm resource base on which to develop and test out approaches; it has also helped to drive cultural change:

I think [the funding] gave us stability and a shape to the overall work that we were able to do. On the back of that we could then [find] other money to... build [on] it.... I think that in the sixteen years that I've been here there has been a massive mainstreaming of WP in terms of people thinking... in a good way, it's here, it's something that we do. I think that certainly wasn't the case when we started.

Head of the Partnership Development, selective institution

I think that [the separate funding streams] helps focus one's mind on where the spending is going to be and in terms of determining the priorities.... I think it gives some guidance without being too constricting.

Director of Learning and Teaching, inclusive institution

4.17 In addition, many of the interviewees stressed that the funding also fulfils a vital symbolic function, reminding the sector of the economic as well as the social significance of WP. This has helped to ensure WP activities continue to be accorded a high priority even when budgets are becoming increasingly contested.

I still think it has significance because it signals HEFCE's commitment to this as well. I think symbolically for them it's important to say, 'This is still important for us to be pushing this forward'. Whereas if, let's say, it was just something else that we were being expected to do but HEFCE didn't think it was important to fund it anymore, well, you know, you might have people thinking, 'Well, should we fund it then, if HEFCE doesn't want to fund it?'

Head of the Partnership Development, specialist institution

4.18 According to a number of interviewees, the existence of separate funding streams is also important as it helps to ensure that institutions remain focused on all the aspects of the student lifecycle. This is perceived to be particularly pertinent in the context of inclusive institutions that consistently meet or exceed WP benchmarks for access and that are consequently more concerned about retention. The presence of a dedicated funding stream for widening access is perceived to encourage them to continue investing in outreach activity alongside improving retention. Although HEFCE is intending to move towards a single allocation in the future, the three streams will be retained, and the corresponding evaluation framework could be utilised to ensure institutions demonstrate impact across all stages of the student lifecycle.

4.19 It is important to note, however, that the financial benefits derived from the introduction of the WP allocation – and the retention uplift in particular – are perceived to be limited in some institutional contexts when reductions in other areas of funding are taken into account. A number of interviewees regarded the WP allocation as making up for losses that have been incurred elsewhere:

Things like HEFCE tightening up on the definition of 'completion' for funding purposes has driven down our HEFCE teaching funding. We're still teaching the same number of students, but not all of them count, so I suppose actually in some ways, the widening participation money has plugged the gap.... So

there hasn't been a lump of money coming [in] ... and there hasn't been a change in our number of students; it's almost that the way the money has come in has been relabelled, if you like.

Pro-Vice Chancellor, inclusive institution

You might say, 'Well, you're getting a lot more money in widening participation than you used to'. Yes, but as an institution are we getting a lot more money than we used to? ... [W]e didn't get more money, it just moved round.

Head of Widening Participation, inclusive institution

[W]hen [the improving retention] funding was set up [in 2003/2004], it was established by top-slicing everybody's teaching funds.... Some institutions, [this institution] being one of them, ended up with a reduction in net funding and ... we expressed some concern about this. HEFCE's response was that any institution that received a net loss in funding would not be required to account for that expenditure on additional retention activity, so we simply passed that funding on as part of general teaching funding.

Head of Strategy, selective institution

## Summary

4.20 Although there is a high degree of variation in the total allocation received by different institutions, only a small number of institutional budgets for WP are comprised entirely of HEFCE funding; most supplement their allocation with income from other sources, such as fee income. Selective and specialist institutions are, on average, less reliant on the HEFCE allocation than small and inclusive institutions; the funding represents less than 25 per cent of the total budget for WP in most cases.

4.21 The majority of institutions of all types find it challenging to accurately apportion expenditure on specific activities to the individual strands of the HEFCE allocation. There are a number of reasons for this: institutions are not required to systematically account for expenditure against their WP allocation; institutions are encouraged to mainstream activities to ensure they became fully embedded in institutional practice; it is relatively commonplace for institutions to utilise resources from one income stream to supplement activities funded primarily through another and many do not differentiate clearly between HEFCE-funded WP activities and WP work funded through other sources; and it is not always possible to differentiate activities as 'widening access' or 'improving retention', as some initiatives are designed to serve both purposes. All these factors make activities and the related expenditure harder to track. Nevertheless, there is evidence that some institutions have developed systems and processes to monitor expenditure and others are currently putting mechanisms in place.

4.22 The net financial benefits derived from the introduction of the WP allocation are perceived to be limited in some institutional contexts when reductions in other areas of funding are taken into account. Nevertheless, the majority of staff recognise the importance of ring-fencing resources for WP. The allocation is perceived to have resulted in a range of



wider benefits for institutions (in addition to the benefits for the individual and the economy) including formalising and integrating WP into institutional strategies and approaches, as well as ensuring institutions remain focused on all aspects of the student lifecycle, irrespective of their individual institutional priorities for WP.



## 5| WP targeting and activities

5.1 This chapter examines the range and perceived effectiveness of HEFCE-funded activities that are being implemented by HE providers in England in order to improve access and retention among under-represented target groups, including disabled students. The analysis reveals:

- > The majority of institutions target students living in low participation neighbourhoods and from families with low socio-economic status, in addition to care leavers, state school pupils and first generation HE entrants.
- > The majority of institutions of all types engage with local schools to raise pupils' aspirations and enhance attainment.
- > There is a widespread perception that early and sustained intervention is the most effective intervention for widening access, along with activities that bring potential applicants into direct contact with the HE environment, such as summer schools.
- > Additional academic and pastoral support for students identified as being at risk of dropping out is widespread and perceived to be the most effective mechanism for improving retention; target groups include, but are not necessarily limited to, WP students.

### Defining WP target groups

5.2 WP presents institutions with two key challenges: defining and identifying those groups with the potential to benefit from HE but who are under-represented in the sector; and designing and implementing mechanisms capable of successfully engaging these groups and assuring their achievement and success. Although HEFCE does not seek to prescribe the target groups or the mechanisms for institutions, its guidance suggests that resources should be directed towards activities that engage and support those who come from lower socio-economic groups and who live in areas of relative deprivation where participation in HE is low.<sup>18</sup>

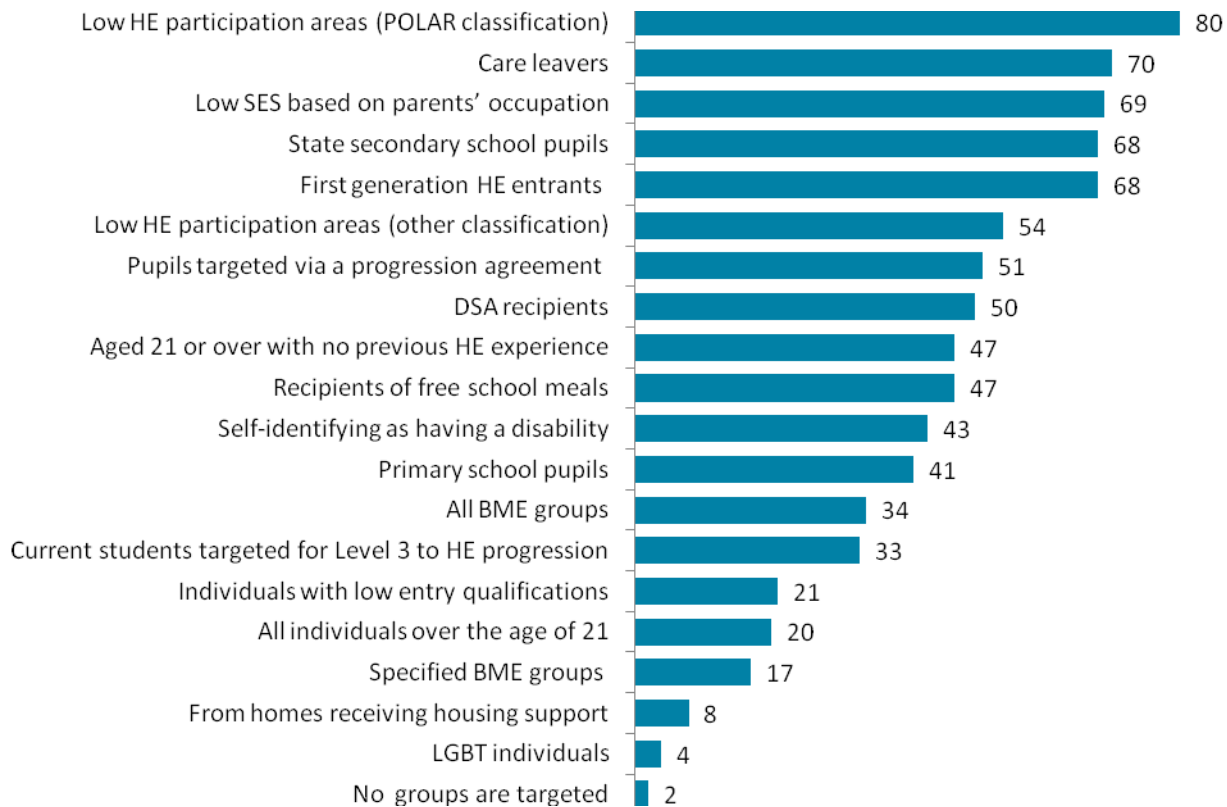
5.3 The survey reveals that the groups identified by HEFCE as a basis for monitoring participation in HE are also the groups most frequently targeted by institutions of all types seeking to widen access to HE, in addition to care leavers and first generation entrants to HE. A total of 80 out of 104 respondents reported that their institution targeted individuals from low participation neighbourhoods measured using the classification method (POLAR) that

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<sup>18</sup> A FAQ from HEFCE on targeting can be found at: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/currentworktowidenparticipation/strategicassessments/faqsonoutreach/-group1>.

HEFCE use to allocate WP funding;<sup>19</sup> a further 69 target individuals with low socio-economic status (SES) based on parents' occupational classification and 68 target state secondary school pupils (Figure 5.1).<sup>20</sup>

Figure 5.1: Groups used as a basis for targeting widening access activities



5.4 There is also evidence that a substantial minority of providers target groups that have been specifically identified as under-represented in that particular institutional context. These range from mature entrants with no previous HE experience (47 institutions), through black and minority ethnic (BME) groups (34) and individuals with low entry qualifications (21) to individuals from homes in receipt of housing support (8).

### Factors influencing approaches to targeting

5.5 Further analysis reveals that a range of factors influence institutional priorities for the targeting of WP groups and the activities subsequently delivered to widen access. These include the type of institution, the nature of the provision on offer and the demographic profile of the local population.

5.6 As we have noted in previous chapters, institutions of different types face different challenges in relation to widening access and, although there are some commonalities, the

<sup>19</sup> The POLAR (Participation of Local Areas) and the updated POLAR2 and POLAR3 classifications rank geographical areas according to their levels of higher education participation. Areas are categorised into five quintiles, from 1 (lowest participation) to 5 (highest). See <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/polar/>.

<sup>20</sup> These groups are similar to the groups reported in the 2009 WPSAs. See Thomas et al., *Review of Widening Participation Strategic Assessments*.

characteristics of the different institutions often influence the nature of the groups specifically targeted. Specialist institutions, for example, are often highly selective and typically offer a narrower curriculum focussing on specific subject areas or disciplines. A key challenge for specialist providers is often therefore addressing the under-representation of one gender in specific subjects, such as women in science and engineering subjects and men in primary education and dance:

Also, there are certain gender issues. Men [are] very under-represented in [arts] disciplines, so we have very long-term programmes to encourage male participation, particularly in Dance.

Head of Planning, specialist institution

5.7 A total of 34 respondents indicated that their institution targeted *all* BME groups. While increasing the representation of BME students may be a pressing issue in these institutions (for reasons of equality and diversity as well as WP), there is evidence that some BME groups are not under-represented in HE as a whole.<sup>21</sup> Many, particularly inclusive institutions, have highly diverse student populations; however, even in these institutions some minority groups remain under-represented. A total of 17 institutions reported that only specific BME groups were targeted at their institutions. As the following quote indicates, there is increasing recognition in this type of institution that BME students are not a homogeneous group and that services and activities need to be sensitive to the range of different barriers faced in order to successfully widen participation:

Different BME students have different experiences and face different barriers. So we started trying to un-pick it in terms of those that are UK born and bred, those that are living in the UK but English is their second language, those that are international students, but also looking at the different groups: if we look at Chinese cohorts or Indian cohorts or African, they're all quite different in terms of the barriers.

Pro-Vice Chancellor, inclusive institution

5.8 Evidence emerged in our interviews that institutions predominantly target their widening access activities on their local communities. The location of an institution and the characteristics of the local population can thus have a significant impact upon approaches to targeting. There are a number of reasons for local targeting, including the propensity of disadvantaged groups to study close to home and reluctance to relocate. However, this presents an additional challenge for institutions that are located in areas of high participation and/or low population density, and that are highly selective and/or highly specialised. There is evidence that some selective institutions are extending the geographical reach of their targeted activities, moving beyond the low SES families in the local region, in order to increase participation and meet their benchmarks.

I think the largest percentage of students we've ever had from the [region] where most of our widening participation activity takes place is about 24 per cent [but that's] 1 per cent of the young students ... when you look at the

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<sup>21</sup> See Tariq Modood, 'Ethnicity, Muslims and Higher Education Entry in Britain', *Teaching in Higher Education* 11, no. 2 (2006): 247–250.

whole [student] population. Our plans ... are to extend the reach geographically... [but] because the fees and the costs of going into HE will tend to militate against people travelling further from home ... it's going to be an uphill struggle, I think, to get many low participation neighbourhood students from Greater London to come to [region].

Director of Marketing, selective institution

5.9 A total of 54 survey respondents reported that they target individuals from low participation neighbourhoods using alternative classification methods. The interviews indicated that in many cases these alternatives are used alongside the POLAR classification method, although in some an alternative was given precedence. A small number of interviewees voiced concerns about reliance on the POLAR method, these concerns often being tied to specific characteristics of the institution's local population. Some interviewees based in rural areas and/or in areas of predominantly high HE participation, for example, felt that reliance on the POLAR classification alone for targeting purposes can mask pockets of deprivation and low participation that exist in these areas; one small institution reported that low income families living in rural communities were a particular concern for them. Alternative classifications and/or the use of additional measures are, therefore, employed by these institutions to ensure that they target these groups effectively.

### Targeted activities for widening access

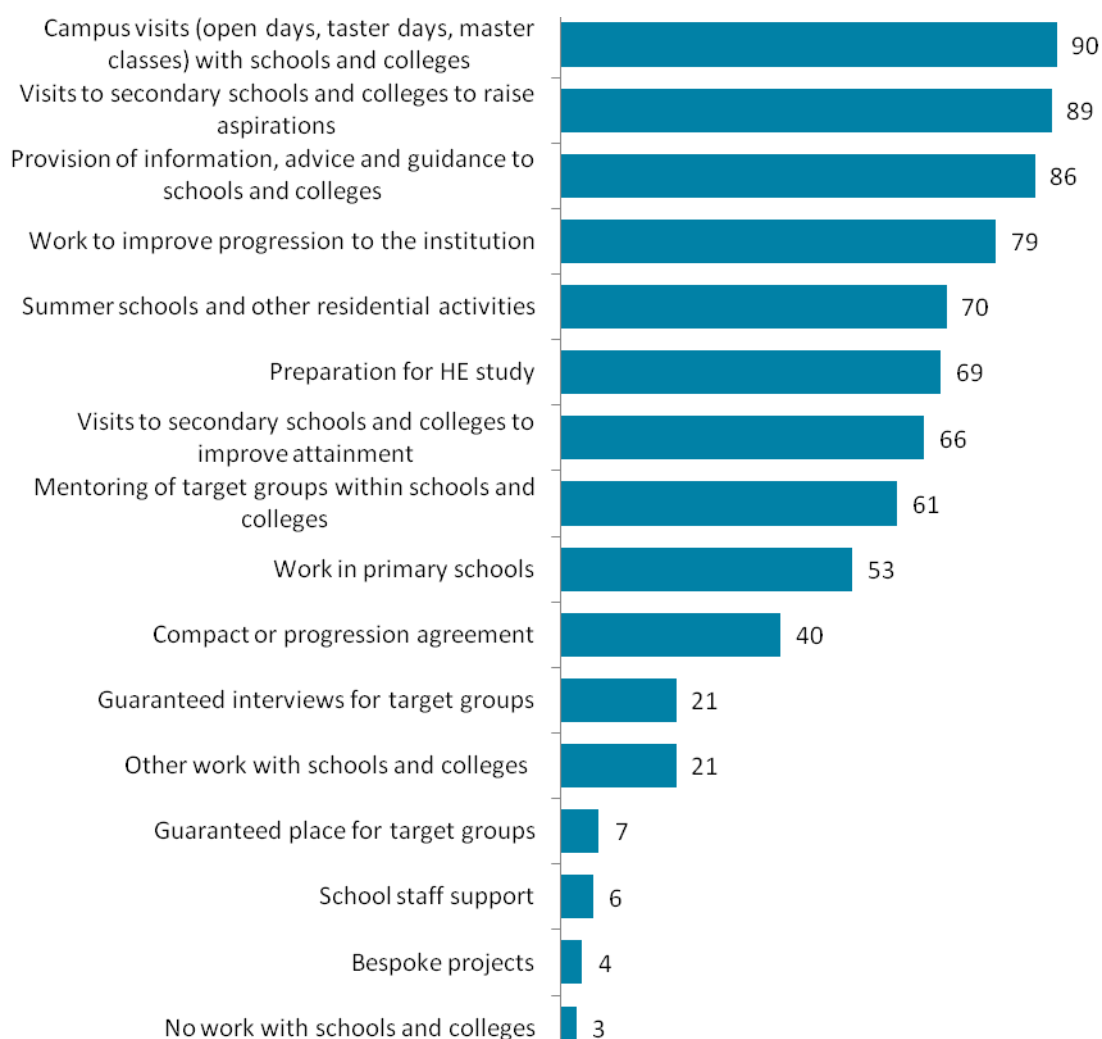
5.10 HEFCE funding supports activities ranging from the development of infrastructure and staff appointments, through outreach activities to curriculum development and student support. However, the extent and nature of these activities varies according to the particular challenges faced and the associated priorities set by the individual institutions, including key target groups.

5.11 The evidence suggests that institutions are engaged in a wide range of activities designed to widen access amongst specified target groups that are typically under-represented in HE as a whole and/or within a particular institutional context. There is evidence that institutions engage in activities with schools and colleges, community groups and employers in order to reach target groups and support widening participation.

### Work in schools

5.12 It is perhaps not surprising that, according to the survey, almost all institutions are engaged in some form of activity with schools and colleges; just three reported that they did not work with schools and colleges. Figure 5.2 shows that widening access activities are most frequently designed to raise aspirations and/or provide a taste of university life. Institutions commonly undertake outreach work to support progression (79) and attainment (66) and offer mentors to target groups (61). Most also host campus visits (90) and summer schools and other residential activities (70) (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2: Activities carried out using HEFCE widening access funding with schools and colleges (base = 98)



5.13 The evidence from the interviews suggests that selective and specialist institutions place a particular emphasis on supporting schools and colleges to improve the attainment levels of disadvantaged students in order to ensure they are able to meet the necessary entry requirements. One selective institution described how they targeted low performing schools, another explained that they target students who are on course to do well but not outstandingly in their GCSEs in order to raise their attainment and thereby widen their HE opportunities:

[W]e're looking for students who on their year six SATs are currently on track to get mostly Bs at GCSE. The thought is, if we've got a baseline of where they're due to come out, it's whether or not we can impact on those final grades that they're getting and hopefully help them to achieve some As which immediately opens up the kind of institutions that they can make applications for.

Head of Widening Participation, selective institution

5.14 Most institutions are engaged in discrete activities with schools and colleges, but for some these form part of a wider series of activities which provide a longer- term and sustained intervention throughout the student lifecycle. In some instances this includes the primary phase of education (53) although it is important to note that some of this work has been impacted by the cessation of Aimhigher. There are also examples of more formal collaborative and partnership arrangements including sponsorship of academies and involvement in school governance and staff development which are also helping to raise standards and student attainment:

We've been working with [name of school] intensely since 2009, giving support at all the key stages. They are improving, without question, and that, I hope, we have a small part to play in... we provide governance for the school. [...] We're providing this fellowship scheme where we partner up sixth form teachers with academic research experts in their subjects, and they're giving them that intense support to help them develop their own subject area, and, therefore, improve their own teaching..

Director of Marketing, inclusive institution

5.15 The majority of institutions recognise that early and sustained interventions such as these have a less tangible return for individual institutions and contribute further to the achievement of widening participation objectives more generally. As a result, some evidence has also emerged from the interviews of collaboration between HE providers in relation to the planning and delivery of activities. One selective institution described how they coordinate their widening access work with another local institution to avoid duplication of effort and maximise the impact of the available resources.

We liaise with our partner universities so we're not duplicating effort. So [institution name] for instance [target] look[ed] after children and, you know, we step back from doing that and instead put our efforts into working with students who have got carer responsibilities, precisely to get the maximum out of the available resources.

Director of Outreach, selective institution

### Work with voluntary, community and faith groups

5.16 A substantial minority of institutions seek to reach key target groups, and adults in particular, through engagement with voluntary, community and faith groups. Just over half of respondents (49) indicated that their institution provides information, advice and guidance to community organisations and approximately a third offer campus visits (37), outreach visits (36) and taster days (36) specifically targeted at adults in the community. Conversely, 26 institutions reported that they do not engage in any HEFCE-funded activities with adults in communities, voluntary and faith groups (Figure 5.3).



Figure 5.3: Activities carried out using HEFCE widening access funding with voluntary, community and faith groups (base = 97)



### Work with employers

5.17 Small and inclusive institutions that tend to offer more vocational courses are most likely to engage with employers in order to achieve widening access objectives. Just under half of all institutions that provided a response to the survey reported that they were engaged in awareness-raising work with employers and/or foundation degrees (43). A similar proportion also provided information, advice and guidance on HE for employers and their staff (38) and had put mechanisms in place to give accreditation for prior experiential learning (APEL) (39). Further analysis reveals that the majority of these institutions are small or inclusive; selective and specialist institutions most commonly report that they do not engage with employers in order to widen access (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4: Activities carried out using HEFCE widening access funding with employers, (base = 97)



5.18 The interviews reveal that APEL is just one of the ways that institutions are seeking to widen access amongst those groups without traditional entry qualifications. One small institution described how they had recently carried out a pilot project which involved WP students attending two days of activities to learn more about a particular subject and completing some assessed work. Those who passed the assessment (and a high proportion did) were given twenty UCAS points towards the entry requirements at the institution. There are also examples of selective institutions that review all applications and take account of contextual factors when making offers to students that meet their WP criteria. This enables institutions to make a more informed judgement about a student’s capability to study at the required level and to make adjustments to the entry requirements so that they do not act as a barrier for those who are unlikely to achieve the required level but have the potential to succeed.

### Perceptions of effectiveness

5.19 It is perhaps not surprising that the activities institutions most commonly engage in are perceived to be the most effective in terms of widening access. When asked to identify the three activities they perceived to be the most effective, survey respondents were most likely to report that those activities that expose WP students to the HE environment have most impact. Approximately half of the respondents who reported that their institution offers summer schools/residential activities and campus visits indicated that these types of activity were among the three most effective at widening access. By comparison, less than a third of those that offer visits to schools and colleges regard this activity as amongst the most effective and a fifth regard it as one of the three least effective.

5.20 These kinds of activity were regarded as effective because they give potential students a flavour of university life which helps to inspire and raise aspirations. As one respondent put it, ‘Summer schools can be a real “eye opener” for students and are very inspirational’. They also help to build confidence and ensure students feel more prepared when they actually start, which also contributes to retention (see below).

The summer school that we have ... involves a large amount of familiarisation – using the library and the computer clusters, finding their way around – such that when they do actually start university ... they're actually better prepared than all the others. That, in itself, is psychologically very important for [WP] students once they're actually here.

Director of Marketing and Student Recruitment, selective institution

5.21 However, both survey respondents and interviewees emphasised that while some activities may be more effective than others, what is most important is how different activities inter-relate. As one survey respondent argued, 'The development of a coherent, systematic programme of engagement to support progression to higher education is key'. In addition, interviewees proposed that it is the nature – rather than the type – of activity that is crucial to effectiveness. Targeted, sustained and intensive contact was regarded by several interviewees as much more effective than one-off activities (such as talks in schools), particularly if it begins at a relatively early stage of the student lifecycle.

[T]he most effective for us in terms of access are sustained engagement activities, so activities where they come to us for, say, a week's summer school, and then we keep in touch. Or maybe it's a year-long or a four year-long project where they're meeting us once a week for a period of time and we can actually build up a relationship. The least helpful, we find, are just school talks, going out to schools and giving a talk on university.

Head of Outreach, selective institution

5.22 Several interviewees perceived that targeted and sustained activities are particularly effective if they are introduced at a relatively early stage of the student lifecycle. Interestingly, however, only a very small number of survey respondents that indicated they undertook work in primary schools rated it as one of the three most effective mechanisms for widening access (4 from 53) and 11 respondents rated this as one of the least effective. This suggests that in the context of limited resources, institutions would be more likely to focus their efforts on students for whom decisions about HE are more imminent:

Work in primary schools may be the most effective and have a massive impact, but the cost involved and scatter-gun approach makes it very difficult to implement and track.

Survey respondent, selective institution

## Improving retention

5.23 There is little distinction between the groups that are defined as WP for the purposes of widening access and improving retention in the majority of institutions. However, there are far fewer targeted interventions specifically aimed at WP students in the majority of institutions. Most are concerned with retention rates overall and are embedded into core delivery. As a result, a substantial minority of survey respondents (19) indicated that no groups were specifically targeted for their institution's retention work; rather these institution adopt an inclusive approach which serves the needs of all students including those defined

as WP. This is most evidence in inclusive institutions where a substantial proportion of the student cohort is defined as WP:

[I]t would be a bit strange to have a service that was only aimed at this [WP] group, when this group is more than half of the student body.

Pro Vice Chancellor, inclusive institution

5.24 According to interviewees, this type of institution approaches the targeting of retention activities by identifying and tracking those students who are at risk of either dropping out or underachieving, which includes but is not necessarily limited to those defined as WP. The factors used to identify students at risk include: lower or unconventional entry qualifications; entering through clearing; learning difficulties such as dyslexia; poor attendance; and financial problems.

5.25 Yet even in selective institutions where there are smaller numbers of WP students, support services are rarely directed at specific target groups (other than disability services). The rationale for this is a desire to avoid stigmatising students and to treat everyone equally, while ensuring the needs of all students are met:

[W]e have an issue with singling out, sort of thing. You know, we can't really say, 'This is for working class students only', but we would be identifying the issues that would concern them.

Head of Outreach, selective institution

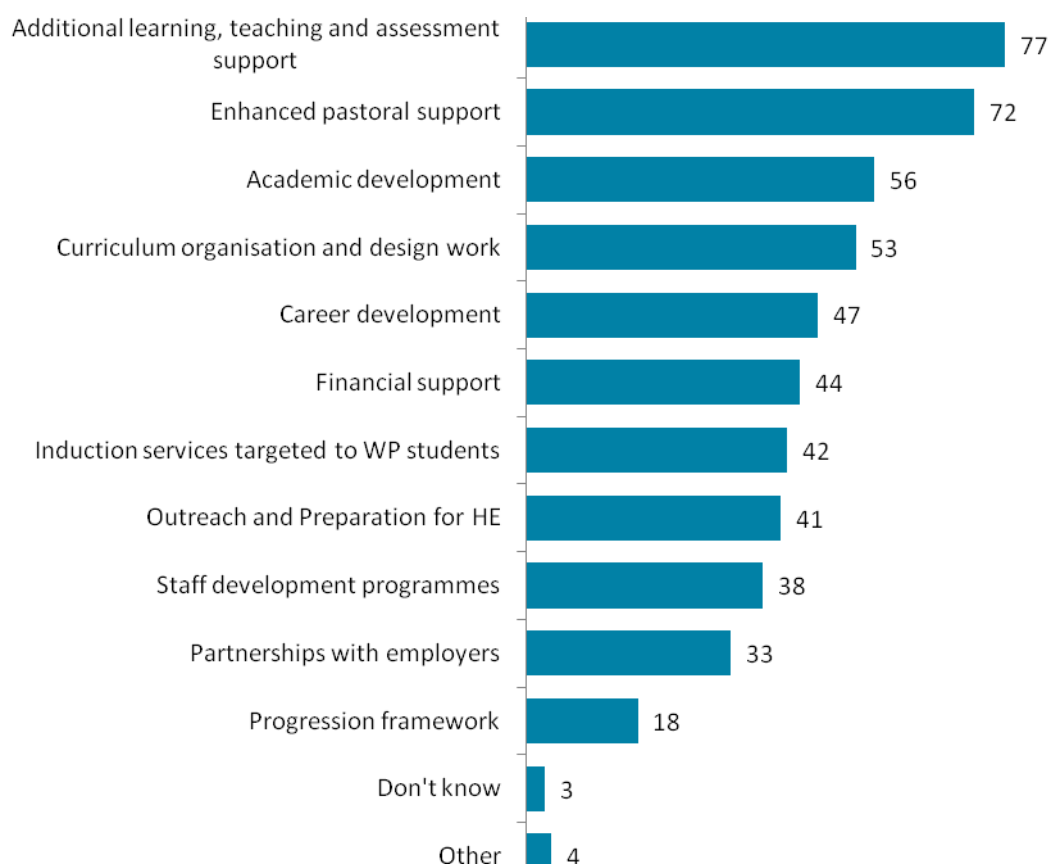
[S]ometimes when you identify a group that has a particular concern, sometimes the way to address that concern is best through addressing everybody.

Deputy Vice Chancellor, inclusive institution

## Targeted activities for improving retention

5.26 As Figure 5.5 shows, the vast majority of institutions report that they utilise the HEFCE WP allocation to support the provision of additional learning, teaching and assessment support (77) and enhanced pastoral support (72). Over half also offer support with academic development (56), have undertaken curriculum organisation and design work (53) and offer career development (47).

Figure 5.5: Activities carried out using HEFCE improving retention funding (base = 89)



5.27 Further analysis reveals some statistically significant differences between the activities of different types of institution. Inclusive institutions are more likely to engage in curriculum organisation and design work than selective institutions (26 out of 33 respondents from inclusive institutions indicated that this activity had been funded by the HEFCE allocation at their institution, compared with 8 from 28 selective institutions). A similar pattern was found in relation to staff development programmes, though in this instance it was not statistically significant.

5.28 Further evidence of the different approaches adopted by different types of institutions emerged from the interviews. According to interviewees, retention activities such as restricted class sizes, curriculum development and staff development are most commonly found in inclusive institutions where there is a focus on adapting the teaching and assessment styles to meet the needs of WP students. One of the interviewees from an inclusive institution described a particularly comprehensive change in their institution's curriculum framework, which now sits alongside a wide range of support services:

We have, since 2006, revised our curriculum framework.... We moved from short, fat twenty credit modules, to long, thin modules. One of the reasons for doing that, was that rather than suck new students in, and then six weeks later start to assess them summatively, we now have all year for them to do formative exercises, assessments, and get lots of feedback. We hope that all students would have done something by about week five and had feedback on it so that if they need to access learning support, in any way shape or

form, they know early. So the idea is early intervention increases progression.

Director of Learning and Teaching, inclusive institution

5.29 Interviewees from selective institutions indicated that greater emphasis was placed in this type of institution on early interventions designed to support students in advance of registration and/or in the early stages of their course, such as inductions and pre-attendance information. These differences are perhaps not surprising given that retention is less of a strategic priority in the majority of selective institutions (see Chapter 3).

### Perceptions of effectiveness

5.30 Additional academic along with pastoral support are perceived to be the most effective mechanisms for improving retention. Approximately two-thirds of institutions that offer additional learning, teaching and assessment support and/or enhanced pastoral support report that these are one of the three most effective activities for improving retention in their view. The academic and pastoral support provided prior to or shortly after entry into HE is perceived to be particularly effective because it ensures students arrive well prepared, knowing what to expect and understanding the financial and other commitments involved:

We do try and provide as much information as we can that is going to help them and give them a clear picture of what it will be like to be a student at [this institution].

Head of Admissions, specialist institution

5.31 The way in which the curriculum is organised and designed is also perceived to have a particularly positive effect on retention and success. Over two fifths of those who reported that their institution engaged in this form of activity indicated that it was one of the three most effective mechanisms for improving retention.

5.32 However, overall, respondents emphasised the value of integrating retention activities across all aspects of the learning experience, perceiving that retention is most effective when academic departments are directly involved.

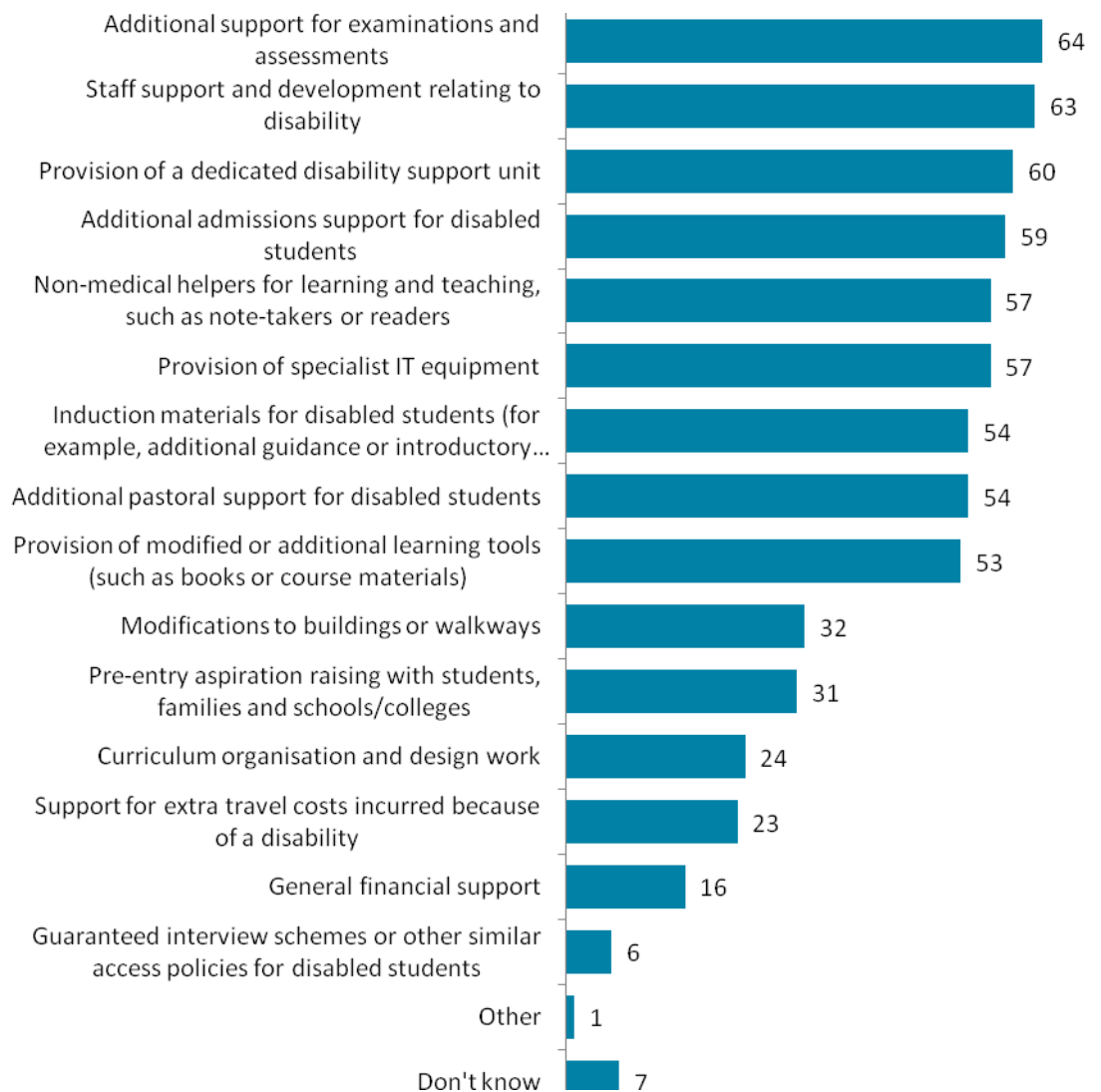
### Disability

5.33 All institutions included in the research that receive a disability allocation stated their commitment to ensuring students are not prevented from accessing HE because of their disability, even those that receive a limited amount of funding. According to the survey, a significant proportion of institutions (70 out of 104) seek to target their disability activities at students in receipt of DSA; however just under half of respondents (51) indicated that they also target students who self-identify as having a physical or mental disability, health condition or learning difficulty.

5.34 Figure 5.6 demonstrates that the HEFCE disability allocation supports a wide range of activities in the majority of institutions. Over three-fifths of survey respondents reported that they provide additional support for examinations and assessments (64); staff development (63); a dedicated disability support unit (60); additional admissions support (59); non-medical

helpers (57); specialist IT equipment (57); induction materials (54); additional pastoral support (54); and provision of modified or additional learning tools (53).

Figure 5.6: Activities carried out using HEFCE disability funding (base = 89)



5.35 The majority of these services are designed specifically for students with disabilities. However, like some wider retention work, there are a minority of activities that are not only targeted at students known to have a disability. The interviews revealed that diagnostic services are available to all students in at least some institutions, in addition to a range of other services – such as note takers or specialist IT equipment. For example, an interviewee from an inclusive institution reported that voice recognition software had recently been installed on all university computers for the benefit of all students.

5.36 The interviews also revealed that a range of systems, processes and procedures have been put in place in a number of institutions that underpin these activities and ensure students needs are identified and addressed. For example, a significant number of interviewees highlighted pre-entry processes that had been put in place to identify students'

support needs prior to joining the institution so that appropriate adjustments could be made and measures put in place. One small institution invites disabled students to visit the campus:

When we get applications from students and they've put on their applications that they have a disability, we offer an invitation to them to come to [this institution], meet our support team, in order to ensure that we have all the facilities and requirements needed for them to study with us.

Admissions Manager, small institution

5.37 The provision of services for disabled students has raised a wider strategic dilemma in some institutions.

Something that we grapple with from an outreach point of view is whether we try and make all our activities inclusive [or] run additional specific activities for students with disabilities, because there is, sort of, two schools of thought, isn't there?

Head of Outreach, selective institution

5.38 While some have developed a targeted approach focussing on the specific needs of the individual student, others are adopting an inclusive model which seeks to ensure that all aspects of the institutional offer are accessible to disabled students. As a result, a number of institutions are taking steps to increase and embed support for disabled students across all areas. In one instance, this involved the development of a disability network:

So we have a member of staff from all elements across the institution that sits on a disability network ... it's gone from being an individual department's responsibility to an institutional-wide approach.

Director of Marketing, inclusive institution

5.39 One institution has gone further and adopted the social model of disability<sup>22</sup> in which the burden of responsibility for any disadvantages faced by disabled students is placed with the institution. At this institution, disability is regarded as caused by the society in which we live and is not viewed as the 'fault' of an individual disabled person, or an inevitable consequence of their limitations. It is considered the product of the physical, organisational and attitudinal barriers present within society.

### Perceptions of effectiveness

5.40 A significant proportion of institutions reported that they had a dedicated disability support unit (60). Of these, over half (35) indicated that this was one of the three most effective ways for disability support. A similar proportion perceived that additional admissions support for disabled students (27 of 59 respondents) and pre-entry aspiration raising with disabled students (17 of 31) were also particularly effective, though the latter was less common.

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<sup>22</sup> For details see Mike Oliver, *The Individual and Social Models of Disability* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1990).



5.41 It is important to acknowledge, however, that overall effectiveness is difficult to assess because so much targeted activity is designed to meet the specific needs of only a small number of individuals. In addition, equality and diversity and WP work in this area often overlaps. Differentiating the contribution that the HEFCE allocation makes to initiating change from other policy and legal mechanisms, notably the Equality Act 2010, is, therefore, also challenging.

## Summary

5.42 Although HEFCE guidance heavily influences the targeting of WP activity, many WP practitioners have developed strategies designed to respond to local demographics and the subject profile of their institution. Overall, widening access activities tend to be more targeted than retention activities which, on the whole are embedded into the wider curriculum and support services. In the case of retention, as well as disability, institutions endeavour to strike a balance between targeting support at the groups that require it most and delivering an inclusive offer that ensures all students are treated equally, are supported to succeed and are not stigmatised, irrespective of their individual needs and circumstances.

5.43 Institutions are engaged in an extensive range of activities to support widening access, improve retention and disability. Current HEFCE funding supports standalone as well as mainstreamed activities, ranging from developments in infrastructure, staff appointments, outreach activities and curriculum development to student support. However, the extent and nature of these activities varies according to type of institution, their associated priorities and the characteristics of the local population.

5.44 Institutional outreach work tends to be locally focused. Those institutions seeking to reach out to disadvantaged students living outside their region face a number of additional challenges, not least because relocation often presents a barrier for WP target groups. Small and inclusive institutions that tend to offer more vocational courses are more likely to engage with employers in order to achieve widening access objectives than selective and specialist institutions.

5.45 Overall, the activities most commonly undertaken by the majority of institutions are perceived to be the most effective. These include: work with schools and colleges to raise aspirations; activities that expose prospective students to the HE environment; pre-entry as well as on-programme academic and pastoral support; and a dedicated disability support unit. However, there is widespread agreement that individual activities alone will not achieve WP objectives; the key to the effectiveness of current approaches is the establishment of a coherent programme of inter-related WP activities that incorporates access and retention and is sustained over the entire student lifecycle. There is also agreement that retention activities are most effective when they are integrated across all aspects of the learning experience, with academic departments directly involved.

5.46 It is important to note, however, that this assessment of effectiveness is largely based on staff perceptions. We examine the extent and nature of the existing evidence of impact in the following chapter.



## 6| Impact and evaluation of WP interventions

6.1 This chapter explores the impact that the HEFCE funding is perceived to have had on institutions, including the extent to which it has led to cultural change, changes in infrastructure and the implementation of activities to support disadvantaged learners and improve social mobility. It also examines the extent and nature of activities institutions have undertaken to monitor and evaluate impact, before concluding with a consideration of the possible effect that a reduction in, or the withdrawal of, the HEFCE WP allocation could have. The chapter reveals that:

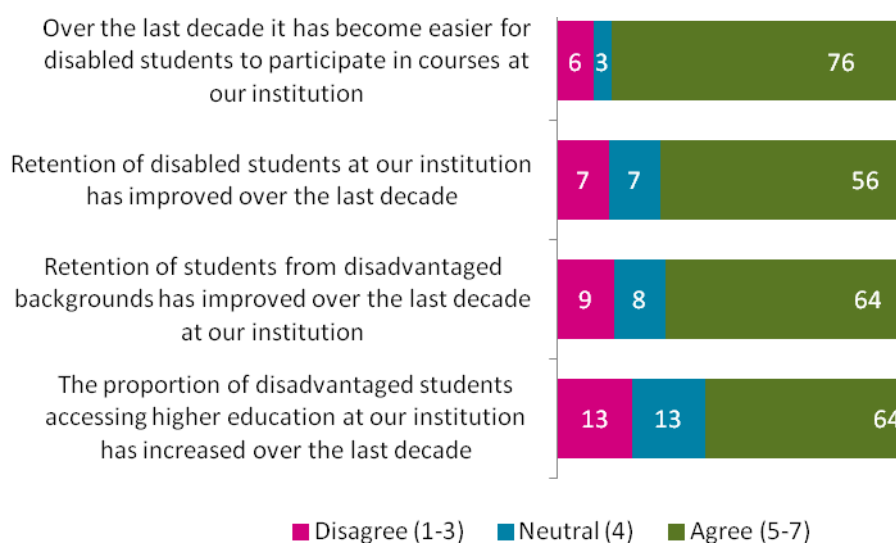
- > There was a widespread perception among participants that progress has been made in access, retention and disability provision.
- > This research found little evidence that impact is being systematically evaluated by institutions; while the majority of participants felt that HEFCE funding has had an impact on WP outcomes, few said they have been able to single out specific changes that the HEFCE allocation has engendered.
- > A significant amount of WP activity would be reduced or cease altogether without the HEFCE funding; in some institutions the withdrawal of HEFCE funding would also negatively affect non-WP activity.

### Perceptions of impact

#### Impact at an institutional level

6.2 There is widespread perception that access and retention have improved in the majority of institutions over the last decade. Figure 6.1 demonstrates that the majority of survey respondents agree with a series of statements about improvements in access and retention of disadvantaged groups.

Figure 6.1: Perceptions of change in HE participation



6.3 These perceptions were also reflected in the interviews, where participants frequently highlighted the progress they had made over recent years in either widening access, improving retention or attracting disabled students. The following comment from a specialist institution summarises the view held by a range of institutions:

In terms of our indicators, we've made significant progress.... If you look at, for example, lower socio-economic groups, which are obviously one of our targets, the percentage has pretty much doubled in the last five years. We were down around 15 per cent ... in 2005 ... and by 2010/11 that was up to 30.8 per cent.

Head of Planning, specialist institution

6.4 Interviewees from selective institutions tended to be more cautious about the progress that had been made in their institutions; average agreement with the statements on progress over the past decade tended to be lower for this group compared with respondents overall, though any differences are not statistically significant.

### Impact of the HEFCE allocation

6.5 The research explored the extent to which progress made over the last decade in relation to WP is seen to be attributable to the introduction of the HEFCE WP allocation. Overall, institutions perceive that the funding has had a positive impact. We noted in the previous chapters that the focus on WP in funding terms has helped to inform the development of a more strategic approach to WP in the majority of institutions, as well as providing a resource base from which to develop the necessary infrastructure, staffing and activities. Funding allocated to the discrete stages of the student lifecycle is also regarded as having ensured that institutions have remained focused on all aspects of WP, irrespective of their individual institutional priorities. In most cases, WP has become more embedded across institutions as a result of the funding and for many inclusive institutions it is regarded as core business. Finally, the allocation is perceived to have played an important role in facilitating

organisational and cultural change within institutions. Attitudes towards WP are believed to have shifted, particularly in selective institutions; most staff now recognise the relevance and importance of WP in their institutional context and role it fulfils in relation to wider social and economic objectives.

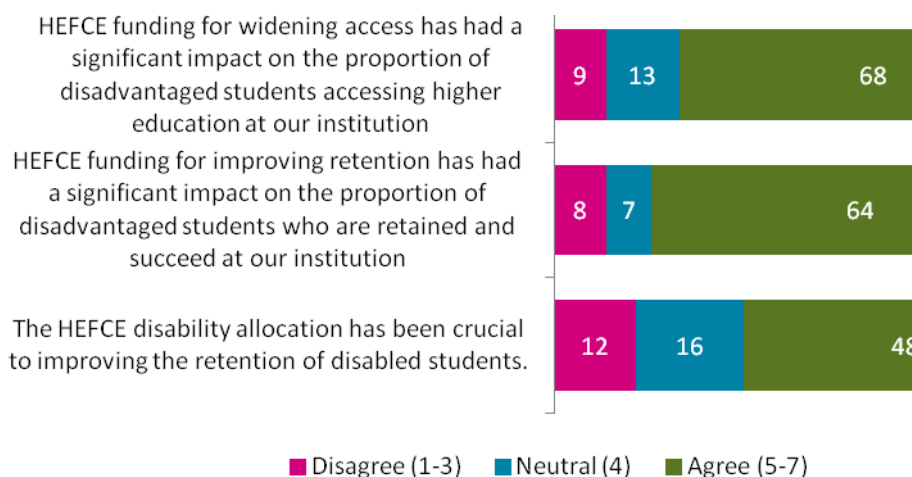
I think in terms of changing people’s mindsets, then I think ... [the WP allocation has] been really important.

Head of Higher Education, small FEC

6.6 During the last ten years application rates to HE for young people from all backgrounds have increased, with the largest increases being found amongst those from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>23</sup> The application rates of young people living in the most disadvantaged areas (as measured by rates of HE entry) increased proportionally by over 60 per cent between 2004 and 2012. Although application rates remain highly differentiated by background, the ratio of applications from individuals living in advantaged and disadvantaged areas has reduced over the course of this period, suggesting that there has undoubtedly been progress in relation to WP.<sup>24</sup>

6.7 These changes in participation rates nationally were reflected in the perceptions of individual staff about the progress made in relation to WP at their own institutions, and most regard the HEFCE funding as a factor in this change. When asked whether they agreed with a series of statements about the impact of the HEFCE funding on access and retention of disadvantaged students, respondents, on average, agreed that the funding has had a positive impact at their institution (mean scores between 5.2 and 5.42 on a 7-point scale) (Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2 Perceptions of the impact of HEFCE WP funding.



6.8 Institutional perceptions of impact were further explored during the interviews with staff. Most were in agreement that the HEFCE allocation has contributed to improvements in

<sup>23</sup> Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Trends in Young Participation in Higher Education: Core Results for England* (Bristol: HEFCE, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> UCAS Analysis and Research, *How Have Applications for Full-time Undergraduate Higher Education in the UK Changed in 2012?*, 6.

access and retention; some from predominantly inclusive and small institutions stressed that the funding and resulting activities had led directly to the outcomes achieved:

[W]e wouldn't be where we are now, with the participation rates that we have from [WP] students ... if that funding hadn't been there to allow some of the innovation and sustained activity to take place.

Director of Student Services, inclusive institution

In general our retention rates have been going up year on year in the last ten years. We have a Vice Principal who came in about six or seven years ago, introduced [WP programmes] for students.... It was a way of identifying students that we considered might have issues quite early on ... and the whole focus is on activities that take place in the first six weeks when students arrive.

Higher Education Manager, small FEC

6.9 A number of interviewees reported that they had witnessed an increase in applications from disabled students in particular. This was partly attributed to improvements in staff development and student support funded through the HEFCE allocation, and partly to the mainstreaming of activities through the development of more inclusive learning and teaching strategies. Rates of disability declaration in HE have traditionally been low, so such increases may be linked to increased declaration. Nevertheless, there is a perception that these improvements have enhanced the reputations of these institutions which has, in turn, contributed to an increase in applications from disadvantaged groups:

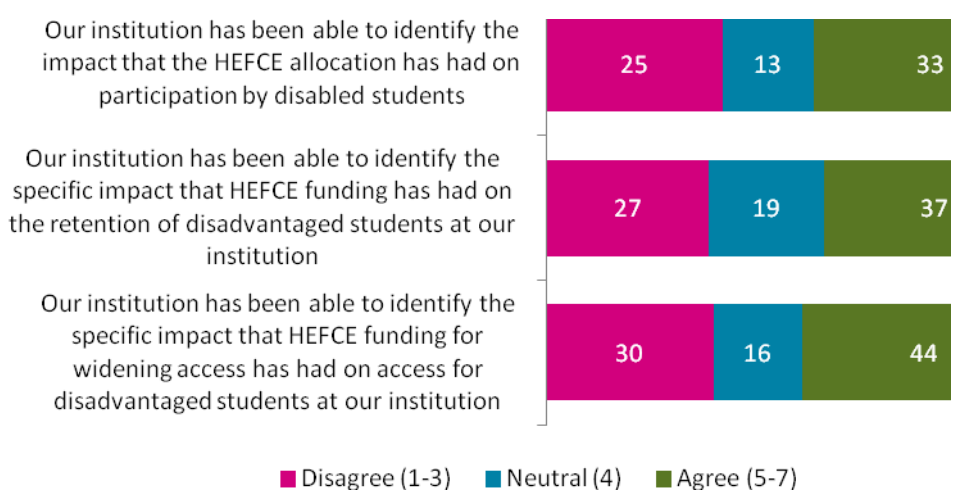
I certainly know that the numbers of students with declared disabilities have increased dramatically over the last five years and that may be in part because those students are aware that we have a reputation for being able to support those students effectively.

Pro-Vice Chancellor, inclusive institution

## Monitoring and evaluation of WP

6.10 Institutions are broadly in agreement that progress towards the achievement of WP objectives has been made and perceive that this is at least in part the result of the implementation of the WP allocation. However, further analysis reveals that approximately half of the institutions surveyed have not been able to identify the specific impact that the HEFCE allocation has had on widening access, improving retention and disability in their institution. Figure 6.3 shows that a substantial proportion of respondents disagree that their institution has been able to identify the impact that the HEFCE funding streams have had and, on average, express a neutral view about these statements (mean ratings are between 4.2 and 4.3).

Figure 6.3 Identification of the impact of individual funding streams



6.11 There are a number of reasons for this high level of uncertainty, including the multiplicity of factors that affect participation in HE and the difficulties disaggregating the HEFCE allocation from other sources of funding noted previously in this report. However, it is also evident that the extent to which the impact of the HEFCE allocation is monitored and evaluated at an institutional level is highly variable.

6.12 The majority of institutions that responded to the survey (88 out of 94) reported that they currently take steps to monitor performance and/or measure the impact of WP activities. However, further analysis suggests that while the routine recording and collection of data to measure the delivery of activities and progress towards objectives is common, in-depth evaluation involving research and analysis of data to assess the effectiveness and impact of activities appears to be less widespread.

### Monitoring of WP

6.13 Of the 88 survey respondents who reported that they monitored or measured the impact of their WP activities, 81 indicated that this involved monitoring WP student recruitment data. The interviews revealed that monitoring of recruitment focuses on similar groups to those targeted by WP activity, and employs key indicators to evaluate institutional performance. Under-represented groups are identified with three main HESA performance indicators: state school education, National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) markers (focusing on categories 4 to 7, the lowest groups), and geographical areas of low participation using the POLAR system and its successors, POLAR2 and POLAR3. These indicators in particular are used by many institutions to compare themselves against HESA-calculated benchmarks and other institutions. Other indicators used include age (over 21), ethnicity, previous HE experience and disability. Performance against these indicators is then used to inform targets and priorities for future institutional WP activity.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Reliance on and limitations of HESA performance indicators is discussed in Thomas et al., *Review of Widening Participation Strategic Assessments*.

6.14 Some interviewees highlighted the connections between monitoring WP outcomes and wider equality and diversity strategies:

The other thing that I know we do a lot of as well is monitoring through our equality and diversity committee because that committee looks at minority ethnic groups in terms of access, progression, employability and also disability in terms of access and progression for students and for staff as well. There's a lot of emphasis on that in terms of making sure that we're not inadvertently or deliberately setting up barriers that prevent people from any particular group.

Director of Marketing, selective institution

6.15 The delivery of and participation in specific WP (primarily widening access) activities is also frequently monitored at an institutional level, with a view to learning from and improving what they do. Monitoring specifically enables institutions to improve their services by identifying presenting issues and informing discussions at a strategic and operational level. Monitoring take-up is also used to check that targeting is working effectively.

6.16 Finally, monitoring of retention data is also very common; 73 institutions out of 88 indicated that they were engaged in this form of activity. Monitoring of student performance in particular is widely used to ensure interventions are targeted at those students who are at risk of dropping out and requiring additional support.

## Evaluation of WP

6.17 Although 73 of 88 respondents indicated that some form of internal evaluation of WP activity is conducted within their institution, the interviews suggested that the nature of this evaluation varies considerably. In a number of institutions, evaluation amounts to assessing take-up and students' perceptions of specific WP activities:

[Names outreach activity], that's fully booked until this time next year, and that, for us is sort of, all the evaluation we felt was necessary, in that it's so popular, and it's on a two hour activity.

Head of Widening Participation, specialist institution

6.18 Although student feedback of this nature provides an effective measure of student satisfaction, it typically does not demonstrate impact. There were, though, some examples in the research of concerted efforts to measure changes effected by WP activities. Some interviewees referred to processes put in place to track students involved in WP activities – including, at one institution, tracking the progress and success of students involved in 'pre-study' courses against a comparator group. Another institution described their attempts to evaluate the immediate impact of outreach activities on attitudes and aspirations by conducting 'before-and-after' questionnaires:



Currently, one of our favourite ways of [evaluating our WP activities] is a pre-activity questionnaire, and then giving the same questionnaire at the end of whatever the activity is, and measure change, and make sure that, you know, the activities we're doing are actually of some value to the students.

Head of Admissions, specialist institution

6.19 There is also evidence that a minority of institutions have engaged external research agencies to evaluate aspects of their provision. A total of 16 predominantly selective institutions out of 88 that responded to the survey question indicated that their institution had commissioned an external, independent evaluation of their WP activity, for example:

We run [institution name] summer schools and other summer schools... [T]he subsequent impact of those has been tracked by independent studies, including a more recent one that did control for the predisposition effect. That was looking at their HE choices, so where they applied to, where they got offers, where they accepted offers, etc.

Head of Widening Participation, selective institution

6.20 Few institutions have, however, developed an evaluation framework to examine the impact and effectiveness of their overall WP strategy and approach, although several recognise the need to develop one in order to generate a better and more sophisticated understanding of which interventions and/or combination of interventions are most effective. Encouragingly, there is evidence that some institutions, prompted by HEFCE and OFFA,<sup>26</sup> are beginning to address this:

[W]e are cohesively looking, probably for the first time in a while, at actually doing a full evaluation of all our WP students. It has been prompted by, I think, HEFCE. HEFCE have been very encouraging in terms of evaluation plans. I'm not sure if the [WP] monitoring return ... always ... pulls all that out. I think it does, but I think they've been pushing institutions to think about evaluation, and evidence-based strategy, and I think that push is really important, because it is making us sit down and look at the data, and it ties in with other institutional priorities.

Head of Outreach, selective institution

## Key challenges

6.21 A key challenge in the development of an institutional (or national) evaluation framework for WP is establishing measures that are capable of disaggregating the individual impacts of discrete activities as well as the effect that the WP funding has had overall:

[It] becomes really difficult to disentangle what you've done. Obviously we collect lots of data in terms of success rates, achievements of persons who

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<sup>26</sup> In 2010 HEFCE issued guidance on developing evaluative approaches to WP activities and commitments. See: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2010/cl242010/> - d.en.62756.

are [targeted by WP measures], but it can often be difficult to disaggregate whether any of it is linked to a specific project.

Pro-Vice Chancellor, inclusive institution

6.22 In addition, it is important to recognise that the full extent of the impact is unlikely to be evident for some time. One way in which a small number of institutions have tried to address this is by tracking the progress of students involved in their WP activities. However, tracking students in this way involves additional costs and a sustained commitment on behalf of the institution and the student.

It's just the rigorous evaluation hasn't been put in place and it wasn't of a consistent quality. So we've put that in place but actually what we need the time for now is to gather results to let the kids go with these programmes and see where they do end up in two, three, four years' time. Obviously that requires a two, three, four year commitment in order to do that.

Head of Admissions, selective institution

[O]ne of the challenges we have is tracking the WP cohort over a long period of time. We're, at the moment, in the process of introducing a comprehensive CRM [customer relationship management] system. Once we've had engagement with, you know, a young person at some stage, then we'll be able to get them onto the database and follow their progress, otherwise until entry into higher education.

Head of Admissions, specialist institution

6.23 A final challenge in relation to the effective evaluation of WP is the difficulty of measuring the impact of widening access activities that seek to increase the number of disadvantaged entrants to HE generally rather than to recruit students to a specific institution. One way in which some institutions are addressing this issue is through regional partnerships. One of the institutions interviewed was involved in a new partnership, and two others had taken steps to initiate regional collaboration again:

We do track them if they can come to us. One of the things that we're having incredible difficulty with at the moment is tracking if they don't come to us, if they go to another university. We work in collaboration with other universities across our region, through a [regional partnership].... I and other people in my position have been urging through [the regional partnership] that we try and do something, at least, together, so that we can track and monitor students' progression. Even if it's not to our own universities, are they going on somewhere else? That is the hardest part of the work that we're doing at the moment – illustrating that they do.

Director of Marketing, small institution

## The impact of future funding changes

6.24 In this study one of the means used to encourage participants to consider the specific impact of HEFCE WP funding was to get them to consider hypothetical funding scenarios, and specifically future scenarios in which HEFCE WP funding is reduced or removed. This aspect of the research strongly suggested that a wide range of WP activity is dependent upon HEFCE funding and any reduction in the HEFCE allocation would have a disproportionate effect on the sector, with those institutions currently serving the largest numbers of WP students likely to be hit hardest.

6.25 The evidence suggests that small and inclusive institutions would be most severely affected by a reduction in funding because these groups are the most heavily reliant on the HEFCE allocation for their WP activities (even if the total allocation is relatively modest in financial terms) and because the HEFCE allocation represents a higher proportion of their total budget than in many selective and specialist institutions. These institutions report that a significant amount of WP activity would be reduced or cease altogether without the HEFCE funding and/or other activities would be negatively affected because resources would be diverted to sustain WP activities.

6.26 Interview participants referred to an extremely wide range of activities that would be affected, including the level of individual support offered to students, the range of outreach activities undertaken by institutions and the amount of support given to disabled students (although institutions would seek to continue to meet the statutory duties in this regard). Many institutions also observed that they could no longer fund some of their dedicated WP staff. A number of interviewees, especially those from inclusive and small institutions, made comments similar to the following:

[T]o be quite honest, I don't know what the college would do if it didn't have the money. You can't just bring students in and not support them. Like all colleges we are cash strapped, and the level of support that we give the students, we certainly couldn't do if we didn't have the money. Because we are pretty much to the bone, as I think most FE colleges are.

Higher Education Manager, small FEC

6.27 Research participants also suggested that a reduction in HEFCE WP funding could engender more fundamental changes. The interviews strongly suggested that the area of expenditure likely to be hit hardest would be outreach work designed to raise aspirations and awareness of the benefits of HE generally (which currently benefits the whole sector and contributes towards the achievement of wider WP and social mobility objectives). Areas of widening access work that appear to be particularly at risk are those that contribute least to the institution's core business, such as work with primary schools and in the earlier years of secondary schools. Some interviewees proposed that collaborative activity between institutions would also be put at risk. Interviewees suggested that their institution would be likely to focus on achieving OFFA targets:

My fear is that it would, as a necessity, become more mechanistic and more driven by the need to get students through our door. That would become the measure by which we evaluated it. So, that we would lose these things, like a

lot of the generic aspiration raising stuff. The stuff that is an investment in trying to get that participation up.

Pro-Vice Chancellor, inclusive institution

6.28 For this reason, some interviewees reported they would be likely to continue their more intensive partnership working only where an impact and benefits to their institution can be proven. Staff from one of the FECs interviewed, for example, suggested they would focus on enabling their own FE students to progress to HE rather than the work currently undertaken in the wider community.

6.29 This area of the research also highlighted the extent to which WP activity is deeply embedded in institutional operations – in all institution types, although especially in inclusive institutions. The majority of interviewees who discussed the effects of a reduction in HEFCE funding suggested that some WP activity would be continued because it is now so central to the ethos and core operations of institutions. This was suggested for all strands of WP activity, but for improving retention work in particular. As noted in Chapter 5, activity to support retention is, more than widening access activity, embedded into institutions, with fewer targeted activities. This, the interviewees proposed, makes it more likely to be a sustained feature, as does the fact that retention of students is crucial to maintaining fee income:

If it was taken away, I'm not sure that it would be seen as, 'This WP money has been taken away, so therefore we can't do this'. I think it is almost so embedded now, that it wouldn't be unpicked, and I think it would just be a case of [identifying] institutional priorities, and one of the institutional priorities is retention.

Head of Outreach, selective institution

6.30 Yet interviewees also proposed that, precisely because the WP funding is not always ring-fenced for specific WP activities, the withdrawal of the HEFCE WP funding is likely to impact on the quality or level of provision in areas not directly related to WP per se. Interviewees from one small institution, for example, proposed that cessation of the WP allocation would mean the ending of 24 hour library opening hours. Many of the interviewees proposed that core university functions and strategy would be affected:

I think it's a difficult question for us to answer in that sense. Although I think we would have to stand back from it, and try and understand, in a sense, what we can stop doing. I think, you know, the paradox is, when you don't actually separate it out, and you do actually mainstream it, it's difficult to identify a particular strand, no matter how painful it would be, that you can actually chop out. You almost have to go back to the point of saying, we probably have to rethink the whole or more or less of our academic strategy, learning, teaching, student experience and all of those things, to try and say, 'Well, we have these aspirations. We're going to have to look at how we're going to do that with less resource'.

Deputy Vice Chancellor, inclusive institution

6.31 A number of interviewees suggested that the institution would be likely to seek new ways of raising funds to continue WP activity. Interviewees referred to the possibility of increasing charity work and, more commonly, increasing fees, although they recognised the latter might have a negative impact on participation:

I'm not sure, but what we might have to do, you know, with the student fees, it might be a case that we'd have to put student fees up to replace that money.... [However] the thing that we're aware of is that increased fees might put off more students, all students, or more students, and those from debt-averse backgrounds.

Director of Student Support, inclusive institution

## Summary

6.32 There was a widespread perception among participants that progress has been made in access, retention, and disability provision. At the institutional level, respondents perceive that their activities are making a positive contribution towards WP objectives and in a number of cases this is reflected in improved performance against WP benchmarks. Research participants also suggested that the HEFCE WP allocation, in addition to facilitating greater acceptance of WP, has had a significant impact upon WP outcomes and has acted as a driver for rising national HE participation rates.

6.33 This research found little evidence that the impact of the WP allocation is being systematically evaluated by institutions. Monitoring of HESA data is widespread and feedback from participants on discrete WP activities is commonplace. Although a minority of institutions have engaged external research agencies to evaluate aspects of their provision, the majority do not appear to be carrying out more robust evaluations of longer term impact – despite the recent emphasis placed on this by HEFCE.

6.34 The need to enhance evaluative activity is recognised by a growing number of institutions. However, institutions are unsure about the best approach to take and wary of the additional costs incurred. Differentiating the impact of activities that increase participation in HE generally from those that impact on one specific institution presents an additional challenge.

6.35 Despite their lack of certainty about the impact of the WP allocation, participants were clear that the effect of a reduction in the HEFCE funding for WP would be widely felt. A significant amount of WP activity would be reduced or cease altogether without the HEFCE funding, especially in inclusive and small institutions that are more reliant upon the WP allocation to fund outreach and support. Where WP activity is embedded, WP activity may still be continued but it is likely that other areas of the institution that are not directly related to WP would be negatively affected.

6.36 It is likely that the removal of the WP allocation would trigger strategic debates to reassess WP priorities in all types of institution. The research suggested that WP activity that encourages access to specific institutions would be preserved, while activities that encourage participation in HE generally would be at risk.



## 7| Conclusions

7.1 HEFCE has been providing funding to HEIs and FECs specifically for WP for over a decade. This research aimed to build on the information collected through the joint monitoring process carried out by HEFCE and OFFA in order to develop a more in-depth understanding of how HEFCE WP funding is being used by HEIs and FECs and how that activity contributes to WP objectives. Specifically, the research looked at:

- > How HEIs and FECs have used the WP funding from HEFCE
- > What the funding has delivered
- > What evidence there is of the impact that the funding has had on institutional and wider WP objectives
- > What would no longer be delivered if funding were reduced or withdrawn, and the impact of this activity ceasing

7.2 In order to aid understanding and summarise the different challenges and priorities for WP in different types of institution we developed a typology of institutions as follows:

- > **Inclusive** institutions: Large, usually teaching-intensive institutions that recruit significant numbers of WP students.
- > **Selective** institutions: Large, usually research-intensive institutions that recruit high-attaining students.
- > **Specialist** or professional training institutes: Smaller HEIs and colleges that offer only a small range of courses, usually dedicated to a particular profession.
- > **Small** institutions: FECs, general colleges and small HEIs that often recruit locally and many of whose students are from disadvantaged groups.

### Key findings

7.3 The research found evidence that since the introduction of WP funding in 1999/2000, there has been a significant shift in organisational culture and attitudes towards WP in the majority of institutions. The nature of the change differs between institution types, in part because some institutions have a longer history of undertaking work to widen participation than others. However, all institution types in this research have developed their work in this area, with WP becoming more widely accepted.

7.4 There is widespread agreement that the HEFCE funding helped to ensure WP has become formalised and embedded within institutional strategies, including strategies for recruitment and engagement, teaching and learning, and student support. Many institutions have developed a dedicated WP strategy. When the WP allocation was first introduced, and before funding levels were raised in 2003/2004, the relatively small amount of funding

allocated helped to pilot specific activities aimed at WP, though now activity is more widespread and mainstream.

7.5 In 2011/2012 HEFCE WP funding supported a range of standalone as well as mainstreamed activities, ranging from developments in infrastructure, staff appointments, outreach activities, curriculum development and student support. The extent and nature of these activities varies according to the specific challenges faced and associated priorities set by the individual institutions, including key target groups.

7.6 Individual institutions target a wide range of under-represented groups, including, for example, those living in low participation neighbourhoods, those from lower SEGs and those from families with a low household income, along with mature entrants, care leavers, first generation HE entrants, entrants from BME groups and/or disabled entrants in some cases. Institutions generally use the classification (POLAR) that HEFCE use to allocate funding to identify low participation neighbourhoods. Though this is recognised as providing an easy and accessible method of targeting there was a perception among some institutions that it is too broad and may miss some small pockets of disadvantage while including individual households that are more advantaged.

7.7 Widening access activities are often focussed on under-represented groups living in the areas in close proximity to the institution. The characteristics of that locality and/or population can, therefore, influence the extent and nature of the impact of WP initiatives. Reaching out to disadvantaged students outside the local area can present challenges; this is particularly pertinent for selective institutions, which tend to recruit fewer students from the local area.

7.8 HEFCE has not sought to prescribe what groups or activities should be classified as WP although guidance has been issued. Most institutions value the ability to be able to set their own priorities in response to local needs. Indeed, this flexibility is one of the main reasons why the staff involved in this research indicated that their institution's priorities for WP fit with HEFCE's priorities. However, institutions also value guidance from national bodies such as HEFCE and OFFA on the targeting and monitoring of WP and most would also value further guidance relating to strategies and approaches for evaluating WP activity.

7.9 Institutions have been encouraged to mainstream WP and have not been required to directly account for the way in which their WP allocation is spent. Partly as a result, expenditure is difficult to track in many cases. This, coupled with the wide range of other factors that can influence access, retention and/or success in HE also means that evidencing impact and return on investment presents a challenge.

7.10 Many institutions implemented systems designed to track and monitor their WP activities in response to the introduction of the WPSA in 2009. However, there is more limited evidence that impact is being systematically evaluated, despite recent emphasis on this by HEFCE. Feedback from students on discrete activities is commonplace, as is the monitoring of HESA data. However, although a minority of institutions have engaged external research agencies to evaluate aspects of their provision, the majority do not appear to be carrying out more robust evaluations of longer term impact in order to develop a coherent understanding of 'what works and why'. Nevertheless, all institutions perceive that their activities are making a positive contribution towards WP objectives and in a number of cases this is reflected in



improved performance against WP benchmarks. The research also found indications of a growing recognition of the need to evaluate WP activity.

7.11 The HEFCE allocation as a proportion of the total budget for WP within institutions varies considerably and in the event that the WP allocation was reduced, or removed altogether, the effect would be felt disproportionately across the sector. The evidence suggests that small and inclusive institutions would be most severely affected by a reduction in funding as these groups are the most heavily reliant on the HEFCE allocation for their WP activities. These institutions report that a significant amount of WP activity would be reduced or cease altogether without the HEFCE funding. Participants from many of these institutions suggested that if HEFCE funding was removed resources would be diverted to sustain WP activities, resulting in a negative impact on other activities.

7.12 Conversely, in institutions where the HEFCE allocation represents only a small proportion of the total WP spend, a reduction is likely to have less dramatic consequences and is perceived to be less significant by staff in these institutions. Nevertheless, institutions of all types reported that any reduction in HEFCE funding would trigger strategic debates to reassess priorities. Early indications suggest that services for disabled students would be protected by many institutions (not least because of the statutory duties imposed on institutions) and that institutions would be most likely to re-focus their activities on recruitment and retention (which results in a more tangible return on the investment for the individual institutions). The area of expenditure likely to be hit hardest would be outreach work designed to raise aspirations and awareness of the benefits of HE generally (which currently benefits the whole sector and contributes towards the achievement of wider WP and social mobility objectives).

### Issues for consideration:

7.13 Although institutions value the flexibility afforded to them to tailor their WP approach and activities to local circumstances, the lack of consistency across the sector makes benchmarking difficult. In addition, the tracking and evaluation of the impact of WP activities presents an ongoing challenge, especially where activities are mainstreamed and mechanisms have not been put in place to account for the way in which specific streams of WP funding are spent. The introduction of an evaluation framework to enable institutions to systematically capture data and demonstrate the impact of their activities across all stages of the student lifecycle would help to resolve this; it would also help to facilitate institutional comparisons and the sharing of good practice. HEFCE are investigating the feasibility of introducing a monitoring and evaluation framework for WP, which may provide an opportunity to introduce a common set of metrics.

7.14 A key benefit of the current allocation arrangements is that the funding is specifically identified for WP activities (although what those activities comprise of is determined by individual institutions). There is a concern that if the WP allocation was to be absorbed into a generic institutional funding pot that activities would not be given the same level of priority. The three streams of WP funding (widening access, improving retention and disability) are commonly cross-subsidised within institutions and the boundaries between them often blurred. While having three specific streams signals to institutions the need to focus on all aspects of WP, the monitoring and evaluation framework could be used to ensure institutions demonstrate impact across all stages of the student lifecycle.

7.15 There is a belief that sustained interventions at key stages in a potential applicant's educational journey are most likely to raise aspirations and attainment and as a result support WP. However the perceived 'marketisation' of HE and increased competition between institutions could mitigate against the prioritisation of collaborative activities and activities that derive benefits for the wider sector such as early interventions in schools. These interventions are also the most reliant on HEFCE WP funding, and are likely to be the hardest hit by any alteration in the WP allocation. This suggests that the HEFCE WP allocation would need to be retained for collaborative WP activity and early interventions work to be maintained in future.

7.16 Institutions identified that recent reforms to HE policy had given rise to a number of tensions that may impact on efforts to effectively widen participation:

- > Although widespread speculation about the detrimental impact that higher level fees would have on applications from disadvantaged groups has not, so far, been borne out, the new fee structure (including associated loans and financial aid programmes) was perceived by participants to be adding an extra layer of complexity for students during the decision-making process. Interviewees in this study explained that correcting students' misconceptions about fees and their repayment now forms a significant part of institutional outreach work.
- > The debate about the effectiveness of reducing entry requirements for WP target groups continues. Some remain fiercely opposed to it because of the perceived impact on quality standards and retention and achievement rates. Yet there is emerging evidence that a modest reduction in grade requirements in response to contextual information about students, coupled with additional support and/or additional assessments of a student's capability, can support widening access without having a detrimental impact on completion and achievement rates. However, a number of interviewees included in this research suggested that the pressure to improve league table positions, along with recent reforms allowing institutions to compete for an unrestricted number of students with AAB grades (or equivalent) at A-Level,<sup>27</sup> may make these approaches less common.

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<sup>27</sup> From 2013/14, restrictions will also be lifted for ABB entrants.

## Appendix 1 | List of abbreviations

Below is a list of the abbreviations used in this report.

APEL: Accreditation for prior experiential learning

BME: Black and minority ethnic

CRM: Customer relationship management

DSA: Disabled Students' Allowance

FE: Further education

FEC: Further Education College

FTE: Full-time equivalent

GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education

HE: Higher education

HEFCE: Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEI: Higher Education Institution

HESA: Higher Education Statistics Agency

IWPSS: Interim Widening Participation Strategic Statement

NSP: National Scholarship Programme

NS-SEC: National Statistics Socio-economic Classification

OFFA: Office for Fair Access

POLAR: Participation of Local Areas

SAT: Standard Assessment Test (National Curriculum assessment)

SEG: Socio-economic group

SES: Socio-economic status

WP: Widening participation

